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Interventions for Ending Online Violence Against Women in Politics

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Acknowledgments

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About the National Democratic Institute

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983 as one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI launched the #NotTheCost campaign as a global call to action to stop violence against women in politics in 2016 and a renewed call in 2021. Since the campaign's launch, NDI has continued to lead programs to address the violence women in politics face (both online and offline) by raising awareness, collecting data, and building capacity among partners to mitigate the impact of abuse and hold perpetrators to account.



About Meedan (Contributor)

Meedan is a global technology not-for-profit that builds software and programmatic initiatives to strengthen journalism, digital literacy, and accessibility of information online and off. Meedan develops open-source tools for creating and sharing context on digital media through annotation, verification, archival, and translation. Meedan works with technologists, newsrooms, fact-checkers, public health professionals, NGOs and academic institutions on award-winning projects from election monitoring to pandemic response to human rights documentation. This work supports their vision of a more equitable internet.

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Foreword

In 2021, on the fifth anniversary of the global campaign to end violence against politically active women led by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), its board chair, the late Secretary Madeleine Albright, committed the Institute to work with others to address what she described as “tech’s solvable problem”: misogyny online. Secretary Albright understood that the internet provides unprecedented opportunities to support the cheap, safe, and amplified political engagement of women, girls, and other marginalized populations. However, as political discourse, mobilization, and activism have increasingly moved online, the digital space has become a toxic environment, failing to live up to the expectation that “the internet is for everyone.”

For a number of years, NDI has focused on supporting an open and inclusive internet as a necessary building block for democratic integrity and renewal, which requires the equal and active participation of women and girls in all their diversity in politics and public life. While online violence against women in politics breaches individual rights and inflicts personal harms, it is also a critical democracy issue for two reasons: First, its impact is to push women out of online political discourse and activity. Second, authoritarians and illiberal actors increasingly use online violence (including gendered disinformation) deliberately as a political tactic to silence the voice and undermine the agency of those women and girls who are intent on being politically active.

This publication aims to share a menu of solutions to online violence and gendered disinformation for governments, tech companies, and civil society that can be tailored to fit each country’s political and legal context. These solutions were developed through conversations with survivors in a series of regional roundtables in Pakistan, Brazil, Colombia, Ukraine, Georgia, Nigeria, and the Philippines and consultations with tech companies and experts in Silicon Valley, Washington, DC, and Brussels. They are survivor-centered and seek to shift the burden of ending online violence away from individual women to a more systemic response. NDI’s hope is that women, policymakers, tech platforms, activists, and researchers will form national coalitions to assess, advocate, and implement the relevant solutions to create the necessary momentum for action and address this challenge to democracy.

Sandra Pepera

Senior Associate and Director for Gender, Women, and Democracy

National Democratic Institute

Introduction

Online violence against women in politics (OVAW-P) poses a deepening challenge to democracy, serving as a key tool of illiberalism and democratic backsliding across the globe. OVAW-P encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion, and intimidation seeking to exclude women from politics simply because they are women. This online behavior seeks to achieve political outcomes: targeting individual women to harm them or drive them out of public life, while also sending a message that women in general should not be involved in politics. This online violence has a chilling effect on the political ambitions and engagement of women and girls, decreasing their presence and agency in politics and public life. Stopping gender-based attacks online is a solvable problem, and it is the fastest and clearest investment toward building an internet that enables everyone to be politically engaged.

Below is a list of interventions that technology platforms, governments, civil society organizations, and the media can take to make meaningful progress towards ending online violence against women in politics. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) selected these stakeholder groups to target, though others may also have a role to play in ending online violence against women. For the purposes of these interventions, women in politics and public life are all women-identifying people who seek to engage in public decision-making at any level of government and include activists, candidates, political party members, elected officials, members of governments, election management staff, and journalists.

Methodology

NDI consulted global experts on the topic and drew from the Institute's years of research and experience¹ on this issue to develop an initial draft of the proposed interventions. The interventions are consistent with NDI's Democratic Principles for the Information Space² and NDI's overall approach to allow democracy to thrive online. NDI then held a series of roundtables with 90 women in politics from seven countries across various regions to gather their feedback. The roundtables were led by local experts and organizations focusing on this issue, and participants included politicians, candidates, journalists, academic researchers, activists, and civil society representatives. Based on their feedback, some of the initial interventions were removed and new interventions were added or expanded upon.

Application

This list of ideas for ways to make progress on the issue is a starting point. It can be viewed as a menu of options from which to choose a series of interventions from each stakeholder group that is the best fit for a given country or context to create systemic change.

Though the list is detailed, it is not exhaustive. The list focuses primarily on the top concerns of women in politics for engaging safely online and includes some nuances of how to implement these interventions in a way that does not cause unintentional consequences or undue harm. Aside from these considerations, we hold back from detailing how to implement each intervention. This leaves room for technology companies, governments, civil society organizations, and the media to determine how to implement the interventions in a way that fits within their own internal structures and according to their local context.

Please note that:

- Not all interventions will apply to every country or context, and implementation should differ depending on the context.
- Some of these interventions are already being implemented by some technology companies, governments, or civil society groups, and others should learn from these examples.
- This list of interventions can also be useful for donors to reference to identify impactful interventions to fund.
- Many interventions can be implemented in coordination with the support of multiple stakeholder groups.

Inclusion

Some of the interventions are aimed at protecting women in politics broadly, while others are specific to certain subgroups (e.g., political candidates or journalists). Women in politics with intersectional marginalized identities face greater challenges and often fewer resources, so interventions should be implemented to ensure that they address these challenges and that their impact on these subgroups is assessed. This list of interventions is also meant to act as a starting point for the development of interventions directed at the online protection of other marginalized groups not included within "women in politics".

¹ "Ending Online Violence against Women in Politics," National Democratic Institute, n.d., <https://www.ndi.org/ending-online-violence-against-women-politics>.

² "Democratic Principles for the Information Space," National Democratic Institute: DemTech, n.d., <https://dem.tools/democratic-principles-information-space>.

I. Technology Platform Interventions

The overwhelming feedback that NDI received from the global roundtables was that technology platforms have “the most to do” in terms of implementing interventions to protect women in politics engaging on their platforms, which is evident by the number of interventions listed for this stakeholder group. Feedback from the roundtables was primarily directed at the technology platforms with the widest global reach, including Meta and Twitter. However, these interventions also apply to smaller or emerging platforms, as well as non-social media platforms.

1

Measure the prevalence of gendered abuse and share data through corporate transparency reports.

Understanding the scope of the problem when it comes to gendered abuse and harassment requires developing a way to see what the problem is and track any changes in trends or patterns over time. Hate speech content removals in transparency reports are one example of how measuring the prevalence and removal of hate speech has helped researchers and civil society advocates better understand the scope of the problem, but there is no consistency within or among platforms on how to define the problem, regularly track it, audit data collection, and transparently report it, despite its known prevalence.

To address this issue, technology platforms should consult local civil society organizations (CSOs) to develop a shared definition of online violence against women that is made public. Based on this shared definition, metrics measuring gendered abuse and harassment should be collaboratively developed and distributed to companies with the support of industry coalitions (e.g., the Trust and Safety Professional Association³) and published in public corporate transparency reports. Platforms should include data on the prevalence of and user engagement with content identified as gender-based hate speech, data on how user reports and escalations are addressed, and data from audits of gender-based hate speech user reports that have not been initially acted on. This data should include posts, direct messages, and comments that are reported and removed. Platforms can work with CSOs and researchers to help shape important reporting metrics and trends to identify. Platforms can also use this data to measure the impact of policies and products they implement to address this issue.

2

Contribute to and use a shared industry global lexicon repository on gender issues.

In order to better detect and identify gendered hate speech, abuse, and harassment, substantial work is required to build detection systems that consider all languages and local contexts. While a lot of work has been done in the English language, a key gap is data sets of words and phrases that can be used to build these systems in other languages. Hate speech terms that are flagged by users often receive a response from platforms that the language does *not* violate their terms of service or community standards; however, this is frequently due to content moderators' lack of understanding of the local language and context and gaps in content moderator handbooks, guidelines, and platform policies. This lexicon should additionally provide context to hate speech and strategies that users deploy to make them most harmful in particular localized contexts.

Establishing a shared industry resource or repository that collects and continually updates words and phrases to be used by companies to improve content moderation on gendered speech should address this need. These lexicons should be developed and frequently updated in consultation with local organizations who are familiar with the issues in their region. Technology companies should provide financial support to local organizations for their work to develop local lexicons and trauma support to organizations tasked with reviewing hate speech content to develop the lexicons. Trauma counseling should also be provided or subsidized for these partner organizations' staff who review hate speech content, particularly staff who identify as women. A system should also be established to regularly update the lexicons as well as be responsive to lexicon updates during political events, as the terms are constantly changing. This system should facilitate timely updates to algorithmic moderation systems.

³ “Advancing the Trust and Safety Profession through a Shared Community of Practice,” Trust and Safety Professional Association, n.d., <https://www.tspa.org>.

This will only partially address the issue of localizing content moderation, as there are more broader issues with the way content moderation systems are currently structured.

3 **Develop partnerships to address the amplification of false, non-consensual, or manipulated visual media of women-identifying leaders through fact-checking networks and image hashing services.**

Women in politics and public life are often targeted through misinformation campaigns that use false, compromising, or manipulated images or videos that go undetected and unmoderated by platforms.

Through creating and leveraging existing fact-checking programs, platforms should work with third-party fact-checking organizations to verify false or manipulated visual media (e.g., images, videos, and previews for articles). In addition, by developing partnerships with civil rights groups, platforms can address manipulated media that may not contain clearly fact-checkable claims but nonetheless amplify gender norms that increase discrimination and hate towards women. These partnerships allow platforms to more pro-actively act on this media (e.g., content takedowns, screens, labels, distribution reductions) and accurately automate detection for affected women. Platforms must (1) prioritize developing these partner programs if they are absent from their efforts; (2) subsidize these organizations to provide an increased capacity needed for higher volume and faster response time; (3) invest further in products and escalation pathways for identifying this media to address both the spread and amplification of violative or harmful media; (4) give women in politics and their authorized staff accelerated escalation access to support from existing fact-checking and civil rights partner programs; and (5) work with CSOs to ensure that these tools do not discriminate against or endanger marginalized groups, for example by removing a disproportionate number of consensual images posted by groups like sex workers, plus-sized models, or other marginalized groups.

In addition, technology platforms can join StopNCII.org⁴ and other image hashing⁵ services to identify and remove non-consensual intimate images and videos from their platforms. This tool has already been translated into Portuguese, and it is essential to have it translated into all languages used in online spaces.

⁴ "StopNCII.org," Stop Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse, n.d., <https://stopncii.org>.

⁵ Image hashing is the process of using a fingerprinting algorithm to create a unique key for an image to more easily find and identify the image across different platforms, without needing to store the image itself.

4 **Establish responsive national-level help desks for women in politics.**

Women in politics often report hate speech, death threats, and other forms of harassment to platforms that go unanswered. In fact, anecdotally, nearly every participant in the roundtables to develop these interventions had experienced this. This is partially due to a lack of local language and context, which is addressed in Intervention 2 regarding lexicons. However, the delayed response time from platforms can exacerbate harm and therefore needs to be addressed. Especially during election periods, responses to reports of online gendered abuse must be time-sensitive and acted upon in hours, not months.

Platforms should establish a national-level help desk of staff who are both platform specialists (who understand platform escalation channels) and localization specialists (who understand local language context) to escalate issues to the appropriate departments for resolution. The process by which platforms investigate and address these escalations should be transparent, and those who submit complaints should have a simple means of access to determine where in the escalation process their complaints are at any given time. These help desks should be available to women-identifying candidates, politicians, and their staff, as well as journalists and activists, to assist with escalating and addressing reports of online abuse within hours. This should also include assisting with verification (e.g., blue check mark) of political women, intervening when there is a coordinated campaign or attack, offering reputation defense assistance in response to misinformation, and addressing other related issues or concerns. While these help desks would be especially important in the lead-up to national elections, subnational and local elections should also be supported. Ideally, these help desks are available year-round to assist political women so that they can be free to conduct their work without harassment or abuse.

5

Provide research partners with sustained access to data on online violence against women.

In addition to Intervention 1 (sharing corporate transparency reports on gendered hate speech reporting and response data), research partners should have ongoing access to platform data to investigate gendered harassment and abuse. Research partners can use this data to monitor trends, investigate state-sponsored gendered disinformation, and observe emerging hate speech campaigns. Platforms should provide documentation of their metrics and data-collection methods to research partners.

In a number of geographic regions, new laws are being considered and implemented that also address the need for transparency and data access, including the EU's Digital Services Act.⁶ Platforms need to determine how they will comply with these new requirements while protecting users' privacy. Rather than technology platforms developing separate transparency policies for each country or region to comply with local laws, platforms should ensure that their global policies provide transparency and access that meets the standards of more comprehensive regulation from multinational regulatory bodies.

6

Support the creation of a system for survivors of online abuse to receive help in collecting evidence.

Some countries have laws and policies in place regarding OVAW-P. However, when an attack occurs, the survivors have the burden of collecting evidence of the attacks, such as screenshotting and cataloging the events. Sometimes, this is too overwhelming to handle without support, so survivors will remove or delete the abusive posts.

Platforms should establish a semiautomated system, using dedicated investigators and/or advocates, to assist with collecting detailed evidence on the attacks and remove this burden from survivors. At the request of survivors, these investigators should investigate claims and collect the evidence needed to help survivors present their case to the appropriate body (e.g., courts or law enforcement) in countries where there is an existing legal framework. Platforms should create or incorporate existing assistive technical

tools, such as automated flagging and protective measures that reduce the health impact of viewing abusive and hateful content as part of the investigation.

In countries where there is existing legislation, platforms should establish an advocate program where they sponsor community representatives to provide support to survivors as they navigate the legal process, as well as act as a liaison between the tech companies, investigators, survivors, and the legal system. This system would need to involve CSOs or community-level advocates to increase trust, ensure the safety of victims, and provide mental health support.

To ensure survivors' safety, technology companies should include a mechanism to anonymize reports.

7

Establish proactive systems to prevent, manage, and remove online hate speech and harassment against women that are updated regularly to respond to evolving threats, including using AI and engaging networks of fact-checking organizations.

Women-identifying elected officials and candidates often face unique challenges related to gendered harassment and abuse while running for and serving in office, which can have a negative impact on their effectiveness with regard to their constituencies, issues, and voters. Women, especially women from the Global South, have little resources or recourse for managing the torrent of online abuse. It is not reasonable to expect them to flag and escalate the sometimes hundreds of hateful or harmful posts, comments, or messages they receive a day.

These threats are constantly evolving, so solutions will need to constantly evolve to stay ahead. One potential way to address this challenge would be for platforms to further investigate the use of and implement products using machine learning to moderate and reduce exposure to gendered hate speech, harassment, and abuse in direct messages, posts, and the comment sections of their platforms. These products should be proactive and remove the burden from the targets of online abuse to manage the abuse. Other organizations, such as Block Party,⁷ have developed systems to filter abusive content. These systems should be integrated into

⁶ "The Digital Services Act Package," European Commission, 2022, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package>.

⁷ "Bye-bye, Twitter Trolls," Block Party, n.d., <https://www.blockpartyapp.com>.

the platforms, and platforms should also enable more third-party products like Block Party to be built, including investment in more comprehensive and accessible APIs. Examples of such products are a “spam folder” with customizable settings to filter hate speech and abuse so that targets can avoid the burden of viewing and managing harmful messages, and a tool to immediately flag death threats, as they are a direct safety concern. Platforms should have a standardized process to work with CSOs to ensure that these products are developed in a way that does not discriminate against any marginalized groups. Another example is a tool that can flag hate speech before a user posts it with a prompt that asks, for example, “This post contains potential hate speech, abuse, or harassment. Are you sure you want to post?” Other examples include batch reporting and a special reporting option for gender-based abuse so that the content can be escalated more appropriately.

8 **Develop a coordination mechanism for country-level escalation.**

In addition to Intervention 4, which addresses delayed response times to escalation requests for women in politics, this intervention identifies another proactive approach to address this concern.

Platforms should create a system of coordination at the country-level with CSOs and, depending on the political context, governments. The coordination mechanism should be based on trusted relationships between local CSOs and governments, giving them the ability to receive and escalate incidents of online gendered violence—including disinformation—that are likely to have an impact on political discourse or outcomes. The system should strive for transparency, a fast rate of resolution, and flexibility. Threats of political violence, especially against women in politics, must be urgently prioritized.

These mechanisms should increase localized capacity for escalation during major political events, including elections and controversial legislative decisions. This mechanism can also be proactive. Platforms, together with civil society and government partners, can monitor the political situation and report back to the appropriate teams at the platforms. The goal of a proactive approach would be to find opportunities to intervene and prevent online political violence before it occurs. For example, the mechanism can monitor harmful trending topics, hashtags, or memes and address them as they emerge and before they become viral.

This serves to provide greater local context for escalation issues, creates a formalized partnership program, and enables social media companies to be more knowledgeable and responsive to the regions they operate in. Overall, there needs to be greater investment in representatives for escalation and relationship building with targeted local organizations, governments, and platform teams.

To support CSO engagement in this space, platforms should develop a grant program established to compensate them for their work, expertise, and participation, and to provide trauma counseling.

9 **Conduct gender-focused human rights impact assessments on platforms.**

Social media platforms often make decisions based on metrics around increasing user engagement, and many do not have a comprehensive process for evaluating the negative impacts of their products on vulnerable people, including repeated human rights violations.

Human rights impact assessments (HRIAs) are tools companies use to evaluate risks related to their products’ impact on rights holders. Companies should take a central role in developing and standardizing gender-intentional human rights impact assessments for technology platforms with input from marginalized groups and the Global South, which should be available to the public and distributed to technology platforms through industry-focused coalitions. Ranking Digital Rights’ Corporate Accountability Index⁸ and methodology have provided a relevant framework for developing these assessments. HRIAs should be integrated into the development process for all new products and policies. Platforms should also conduct gender-intentional HRIAs of environments in new countries or regions where the company is planning to enter or introduce a new product to the market.

These HRIAs should include findings that can be reflected in public-facing transparency reports. This would also have the impact of supporting industry-wide best practices for human rights-centered product and policy development processes. Platforms should develop staff training and establish best practices for translating the outcomes of HRIAs into policy and product decisions. In addition, human rights assessment teams should commit to train staff on how to conduct gender-intentional analysis as part of their process in order to make HRIAs more comprehensive.

⁸ “The 2022 Big Tech Scorecard,” Ranking Digital Rights, 2022, <https://rankingdigitalrights.org/index2022/>.

10

Provide women politicians and their staff with resources to counter harassment.

Women politicians and their staff, particularly in Global South countries, are under-resourced when it comes to preparing for and responding to abuse on social media, in terms of both knowledge and resources. Ad hoc efforts to prepare for online smear campaigns and attacks by opponents should be bolstered with practical resources for how to respond to major threats, the steps staff can take to be proactive and continue to get their message out, and who to work with when additional research or information gathering is required. Technology companies should partner with NGOs to provide these services to women politicians and their staff and subsidize the costs of this work.

Platforms should also develop on-platform tools to support anti-abuse strategies that are localized and accessible to broader communities, including transparent and trackable reporting mechanisms, digital abuse documentation assistance, and in-product guidance to report and manage abuse for all levels of technical literacy.

11

Perform pre-election analysis, especially in countries with authoritarian environments where the context is characterized by “winner takes all” politics, low digital literacy, and a recognized prevalence of disinformation campaigns.

Opposition candidates often do not have a level playing field offline, and these inequities can be replicated or exacerbated online, especially in information ecosystems where there is low digital literacy, a risk of disinformation campaigns, and authoritarian leaders who use official accounts for political purposes. This is especially true at the subnational level.

Working in authoritarian contexts is difficult. Of course this is intentional, but it does not mean that these countries should be ignored. In fact, these countries should receive additional attention, resources, and analysis because online gendered violence thrives in these spaces. In authoritarian contexts where cooperation with the government on interventions, such as Intervention 4 (develop a coordination mechanism for country-level escalation), would not be feasible, platforms should work with local research partners and CSOs to conduct an assessment of the pre-election environment.

The assessment can be conducted in partnership with local researchers, independent fact-checking organizations, women’s groups, and CSOs in a timeframe that allows for the results to impact potential platform changes. The assessment should analyze the level of digital literacy and the overall information environment, align with the outputs of NGO human rights assessments of these regions, and include historical data on the representation of women in legislative bodies, with special attention to how this translates to online gendered abuse and disinformation. The assessment should produce meaningful, context-specific recommendations for technology platforms to provide a safe information space, especially in the context of elections.

12

Integrate digital literacy and citizenship tools into platforms to educate users on these topics while they engage with the platform.

Recipients of mis- and disinformation on platforms are seldom trained to evaluate its veracity or context and may subsequently contribute to the spread of harmful content through high-impact sharing mechanisms.

Platforms should build verification, digital literacy, and digital citizenship tools into the app. Facebook and Twitter, for example, have introduced features that create a barrier to reading and sharing misleading information while presenting content that provides fact-checks or context around that information, as well as prompts to users to read an article if they attempt to share the post without clicking the link to it. There is an additional opportunity to educate users about best practices for identifying false media at these intervention points.

II. Government and Policy Interventions

As mentioned above, not every intervention will apply in every country or context. It is especially important to consider the current political context, as some of the interventions for that stakeholder group may not be applicable or could be harmful if applied in authoritarian contexts. For example, policies meant to protect women in politics could be manipulated and used against them or be manipulated to censor freedom of expression. These interventions can be applied at a local, national, regional, or international level, depending on the appropriate context.

13

Include specific reporting requirements on OVAW-P and gendered disinformation in legislation addressing social media platforms' transparency.

Raising awareness about OVAW-P and gendered disinformation is dependent on accurate, holistic data about the prevalence of the phenomenon, as well as clear and transparent enforcement of platform policies and domestic laws that prohibit such harassment and abuse. Furthermore, policymakers responsible for responding to the phenomenon and legislating against it lack detailed data about the problem and the interventions that might best address it. As such, legislation addressing social media platforms' transparency, developed in consultation with CSOs and researchers, should compel platforms to report accurate, holistic data about malign online activities and their responses, with a special emphasis on efforts undertaken to protect marginalized groups, including women.

Metrics for reporting should be as consistent across platforms as possible, while taking into account each platform's unique infrastructure.⁹ Policymakers should require technology platforms to adhere to the Santa Clara Principles on Transparency and Accountability in Content Moderation¹⁰ and expand further into specific metrics for reporting on gendered and sexualized harassment and disinformation, including the amount of content proactively removed by the platform (including direct messages, posts, and comments); the number and type of user-generated reports received; the number of reports that resulted in action; information about the types and levels of responses; performance

metrics about on-platform mitigation techniques; descriptions of the support and training that staff members and content moderators receive to handle complaints; and descriptions of the personnel and expertise for responding to harassment complaints.

14

Adopt codes of conduct censuring gender-based abuse by any elected or appointed public official, by any electoral candidate, or by a member of the above's staff.

Similar standards should apply to all elected or appointed public officials, candidates, and political parties (at all levels of government) in their official behavior, both on- and offline. Public officials should lead by example, calling out gender-based abuse and harassment when they see it, as well as not engaging in it themselves. They should not share or employ gendered disinformation or gender-based slurs, or other forms of online violence against women. Nor should they encourage or facilitate attacks by others. If they do, they should be at risk of censure or other punishment based on the relevant body's rules. The relevant body should be some form of ethics commission or internal mechanism to investigate claims that is inter-partisan and women-led.

Governments should seek guidance from local gender-focused CSOs to develop standards appropriate to their context and to train officials and staff in the application of these standards. Appropriate procedures should be developed for reporting, investigating, and censoring those who break the standards.

⁹ Nina Jankowicz and Shannon Pierson, "Freedom and Fakes: A Comparative Exploration of Countering Disinformation and Protecting Free Expression," The Wilson Center, December 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/freedom-and-fakes-comparative-exploration-countering-disinformation-and-protecting-free>.

¹⁰ Access Now, et al., "The Santa Clara Principles on Transparency and Accountability in Content Moderation," 2021, <https://santaclaraprinciples.org/>.

15

Speakers, electoral management bodies (EMBs), and parliamentary leaders should implement a zero-tolerance policy for gendered, sexualized, racist, and other forms of hate speech and abuse on legislative pages, profiles, and platforms, as well as those of candidates.

Elected officials, candidates, and their staff are sometimes reluctant to report or remove content on their official social media pages, including posts, comments, and messages, that contains abuse, harassment, and disinformation against women in politics. However, allowing such content—often in violation of platforms’ terms of service—to stand unchallenged in perpetuity on official pages tacitly legitimizes this content and allows it to gain a greater audience. Harassment based on gender or characteristics specific to other marginalized communities should be viewed as distinct from legitimate political criticism.

To address this concern, individuals or groups in political positions, including elected officials, candidates, parties, parliamentary leaders, and EMBs, should implement a zero-tolerance policy against gendered, sexualized, racist and other forms of hate speech on their official social media accounts or websites. People, or staff managing these accounts, should take proactive steps to remove harmful content. To aid in this effort, the policy should be clearly defined and include a guidance resource on this issue to provide clarity on harmful content to remove.

In order to maintain transparency and ensure officials are not using this policy to remove legitimate speech (such as a criticizing comment that does not contain hate speech), it should be required to keep and release transparency logs on a quarterly basis, detailing systematic summaries of the anonymized comments and messages that were removed. In addition, this data should be reviewed regularly by an ethics committee that includes women in positions of leadership.

16

Through relevant bills addressing violence against women, or online safety more broadly, criminalize online violence against women and gendered disinformation that results in serious psychological, physical, or material harm.

Some countries have legal and regulatory frameworks in place to address OVAW-P, but many do not. These laws and policies can be used to provide legal protections for women-identifying individuals engaging in online spaces.

Bills addressing this issue should be based on clear cut definitions that should differentiate between online violence against women, online violence, and violence against women, recognizing the connections between these three phenomena and addressing them comprehensively. For example, electoral laws should have a definition of sexism, which should be prohibited during campaigns. The bills should be developed in consultation with CSOs and should be based on internationally recognized principles of free expression and definitions of gendered abuse. Establishing such a precedent has three follow-on effects: it compels social media platforms to prioritize and take more serious enforcement action against this behavior; it establishes consequences for those who engage in this behavior, both online and offline; and it shepherds the provision of the necessary resources in law enforcement to support targets of such behavior.

Policymakers should develop protocol and trainings for law enforcement officers to understand the risks and harms of online violence against women, interpret documentation of violence, and maintain trauma-informed sensitivity towards victims. They should also ensure appropriate implementation of these laws through strategic litigation and audits of adherence to internal protocols.

In tandem, governments should fund services and organizations to facilitate escalations (such as domestic violence NGOs) with social media platforms and to serve as a mediating mechanism for when individuals or communities may have a poor relationship with law enforcement (sex workers, immigrants, etc.)

17

Form a cross-party caucus to improve enforcement of new or existing OVAW-P legislation. Actively and regularly engage with platforms, CSOs, and the media about OVAW-P to raise awareness within society.

Many new laws and policies to regulate OVAW-P (Intervention 16) lack clear enforcement or are applied differently in different contexts. There are concerns these laws may be inconsistently applied from administration to administration, enforced with a partisan angle, and used to limit legitimate speech. There needs to be a way to improve enforcement and separate enforcement from politics.

To address this issue, governments should establish a nonpartisan group or caucus within any public body (legislature, council, ministry, etc.) committed to tackling OVAW-P and gendered disinformation. This caucus can review enforcement of OVAW-P legislation; track abuse faced by women-identifying members; interface with platforms; and communicate with CSOs, academic experts, media, and the general public to raise the general consciousness about the issue and available resources and to enhance implementation of existing legislation. This group should also help platform policymakers to identify overall trends in online abuse of women in politics and public life by streamlining the reporting process, rather than sending platforms intermittent reports from different offices and members of parliament. Men elected officials who are allies, as well as representatives from CSOs, should be included in the caucus. Similarly, regional or international iterations of such a caucus or a forum for communication among national ones should build solidarity across borders for what is intrinsically a transnational phenomenon.

18

Together with CSOs, work to establish global initiatives and bodies to tackle the threat of online gender-based violence.

Global engagement on ending OVAW-P serves to promote dialogue to address the issue and build relationships to develop multilateral solutions. This intervention should take many avenues. For example, it is important to prioritize gender analysis and participation in multilateral and multi-stakeholder action plans such as National Action Plans for Women, Peace, and Security and the Open Government Partnership; and in routine reporting to, for example, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). There should be a way to collate and cross-reference the various data sources in order to support global campaigns and initiatives.

III. Civil Society and Media Interventions

Civil society has a unique role as the mouthpiece for the communities they serve. Therefore, they have a role to play in supporting many of the interventions identified for government and technology platforms. While they should not bear the main responsibilities of these interventions, their experience and expertise should be transitioned into a supporting role while tech companies and governments lead and fund the implementation. Civil society organizations should share best practices, inform the design and implementation of interventions, elevate the issue, and advise on policies at all levels, including government and platform policies. CSOs should also support and elevate local perspectives, Global South voices, and marginalized groups to ensure that their needs and circumstances inform the creation of a social media environment that supports democracy.

19

Support informal networks of leaders seeking to address online harassment and violence.

Women find solidarity in peer groups where they can share their experiences and support each other. Existing networks should be bolstered and new ones created for people who identify as women to seek support and help. Free access to professional trauma-informed mental health services should be established and provided to members of these networks, as well as training on providing sustainable peer support. Awareness of these networks should be raised, especially in rural areas, both with the purpose of helping survivors understand their options and resources and with the purpose of raising awareness and understanding of the threat. Events and spaces dedicated to legitimizing and discussing mental health and trauma of online harassment, often absent in these groups, can break the continued silence around the significant and lasting impact their experiences have on their health.

20

Build advocacy campaigns around key issues related to OVAW-P.

CSOs should build advocacy campaigns around key issues related to OVAW-P, including gendered disinformation campaigns, personal safety online, and the chilling effect of OVAW-P on women's political participation—as well as the implications for democracy. Such

campaigns should be tailored to local needs and should include everything from raising awareness of the existence of the problem, to raising awareness of digital rights, to advocating for specific laws or policies. In many contexts, OVAW-P is still considered “the cost of doing business,” and these campaigns should challenge that narrative and provide education or resources for individuals or organizations to take action. CSOs should work with platforms to do this, and they should ensure that education is reaching rural areas with low digital literacy.

21

Ensure that local partners—especially those particularly vulnerable to OVAW-P—have bespoke points of contact at relevant social media platforms to whom they can reach out in moments of crisis.

Though local civil society organizations should not be responsible for developing or maintaining platforms' knowledge and awareness of the local context, trusted partnerships between a small number of CSOs and tech companies can be essential in crises when immediate action is needed and normal channels of communication are deluged. These trusted partnerships should also be used in complex cases where codified systems would be inefficient. Because trusted CSOs are demonstrating the prioritization of the issues escalated through this channel, it must ensure timely and effective responses.

22

News organizations and CSOs should provide support for their women-identifying employees and freelancers who become targets of online abuse and harassment.

When women working at news organizations or CSOs are the targets of online attacks, they need support from their organizations. Women-identifying journalists often do not report attacks, trying to avoid becoming the story and subjecting themselves to further attacks. Journalists identifying as women are also regularly attacked by governments, rivals, and critics in specifically gendered ways.

CSOs and news organizations should work with platforms to escalate attacks on woman-identifying employees and freelancers and provide resources to ensure their physical and mental safety. Clear and user-friendly structures for reporting, accessing resources, and escalating crises should be codified in the organizations and explained during on-boarding processes. Organizational leadership and management should be trained in trauma-informed best practices for supporting targeted staff and freelancers. Organizations should also codify these processes through internal policies.

23

Develop cross-sectoral alliances between civil society organizations addressing VAW-P and civic tech organizations, as well as the media.

Violence against women in politics CSOs are not always as informed as they need to be about the online component of the issue. Similarly, civic tech organizations often do not have an understanding of OVAW-P and gendered disinformation. Efforts should be made to form cross-sectoral alliances in order to increase the effectiveness of advocacy and action at the national and local levels. The focus of such an alliance should include an agreed, locally contextualized definition of online violence and gendered disinformation against women in politics and public life; raised awareness of the issue; assurance that politically active women affected by online violence have access to counseling services; and identification, capture, and analysis by civic tech organizations of instances of OVAW-P.

24

Train the media to act in a responsible way with regard to potential gendered disinformation and hate speech. Media should also be subject to shared codes of conduct.

The media (both online and offline) is a powerful tool for the amplification of gendered disinformation and hate speech. Media is incentivized to report on stories that generate attention, including gendered hate speech and disinformation, but doing so weakens the information environment. Media organizations, newsrooms, and journalists should be trained to engage in responsible fact-checking and receive confirmation before reporting on potentially dangerous stories. They should also be trained to prevent derailing political conversation by reporting on women's policies rather than rumors or even the fact that they have been subject to information attacks. Training should include information on how to report on women in politics and public life in a way that is gender-informed, and on regulating hate speech or abusive comments on articles. The media should maintain lines of communication with women commonly attacked so that if they do wish to speak out about this serious, political issue, they are supported and the means are available to them. All news organizations should sign on to shared codes of conduct concerning how they cover women in politics and how they act towards their own women-identifying reporters.

25

Place the issue on the agenda at regional meetings of international organizations that are addressing topics such as elections, governance, civil society, or violence against women.

Many regional meetings overlook the critical importance of addressing OVAW-P and its chilling effect on democracy. This is an example of a targeted advocacy approach to raise awareness of the issue and to influence regional discussions.

Women's regional networks should organize seminars on OVAW-P in the days leading up to regional conferences, raising awareness among women so that these perspectives might feed into subsequent regional deliberations.

26

Collaborate with political parties to maintain opt-in databases of self-reported and optionally anonymous abuse and reports filed by women-identifying employees and affiliates of CSOs and political parties.

There is a lack of data on reports of abuse filed by women-identifying employees and affiliates of CSOs and political parties. This information is critical not only for assessing threats, and if necessary, communicating data to law enforcement, but also for pressuring platforms to enforce their terms of service and protect women-identifying users.

Organizations should consider offering this service proactively to the women subject to disinformation campaigns in their organizations, recognizing that, while it is easy for large, established organizations like national newsrooms to provide this service, it may be a heavy lift for younger, smaller organizations in the activist space.



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