



White Paper

Canadian Women Leaders' Digital Defence Initiative

Authors:
Lucina Di Meco
Kristina Wilfore



Introduction

Women's rights are at the core of Canada's domestic and foreign policy today. Yet Canadian women politicians and journalists report being very concerned that online harms are having a chilling effect on women's political and civic engagement, curbing their ability to speak freely online for fear of threats and abuse. In addition, online harms are threatening to erode Canada's social fabric, civil discourse, liberal values and ultimately the strength and inclusivity of democratic institutions.

This isn't a Canadian problem alone. A growing body of research shows that, all over the world, women in politics and journalists are targets of vicious online attacks and gendered disinformation campaigns framing them as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, too emotional, or sexualized, often carried out with malign intent and coordination.

Developed in the context of the Canadian Women Leaders' Digital Defense Initiative, a program of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS), this paper aims to increase understanding of the root causes of gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics and journalists in Canada, and its impact on democratic participation.

As the Canadian government is set to introduce legislation to address online harms, the paper also outlines approaches and frameworks to create stronger social media standards, while also protecting fundamental freedoms.

Methodology

The following white paper is based on a review of academic literature, policy papers and mainstream media reports on online abuse and disinformation against women politicians and journalists in Canada and around the world. The paper also includes some of the main findings from the three digital roundtable discussions organized by the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS) throughout February, March and April 2021, and featuring:

- Alyse Hand, journalist, Global News
- Aphrodite Salas, Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, Concordia University
- Christine St Pierre, journalist and Member of the National Assembly for Acadie
- Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard, Senator (East Preston, Nova Scotia)
- Francine Pelletier, journalist and columnist, Le Devoir
- Heather McPherson, Member of Parliament (Edmonton-Strathcona)
- Kelly-Anne Roberts, journalist, NTV
- Lana Cuthbertson, Co-Founder and CEO, Areto Labs
- Laura Brown, journalist, CTV Atlantic (NB)
- Lenore Zann, Member of Parliament (Cumberland-Colchester, Nova Scotia)
- Lucina Di Meco, Co-Founder, She-Persisted
- Martine St-Victor, Founder and Communications Strategist, Milagro Public Relations Atelier
- Rima Elkouri, journalist and columnist, La Presse Western Canada
- Suzie Miron, Speaker, Montreal City Council, Councilor for the District of Tétreaultville
- Tamara Taggart, former journalist, news anchor and candidate (Vancouver Kingsway)
- Supriya Dwivedi, journalist and panelist on Power and Politics
- Lisa Raitt, former Canadian politician
- Marilou McPhedran, Canadian Senator
- Mercedes Stephenson, Global News' Ottawa Bureau Chief

Online abuse and disinformation against women in politics and journalism: understanding the problem and the platforms' response

Addressing online harms against women begins by understanding the digital ecosystem in which women are attacked and silenced, with tactics such as the dissemination of sexist narratives, direct, targeted threats of violence, harassment, and disinformation. The extent of this problem is hard to overestimate.

According to a recent analysis from the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), an average of 85% of the women interviewed all over the world experienced or witnessed online abuse – with higher incidence in the global south. Misinformation and defamation are reported as the most common tactics used to silence and deplatform women, with fake stories steeped in misogyny and portraying women as stupid, untrustworthy, and sexualized. In addition to fake stories – women are disproportionately targeted with fake images and videos. A stunning [96 percent of all existing deep fakes circulating online feature women](#) in acts of nonconsensual pornography.

Female politicians and political activists are, in this respect, easy and frequent targets. A [global survey](#) of women parliamentarians from the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 42 per cent of the respondents had seen extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them spread through social media, including photomontages showing them nude. [Online threats, harassment, fake stories and graphic sexual taunts](#) are frequently being used to delegitimize, depersonalize and ultimately dissuade women from being politically active, [with the most vicious attacks aimed at women of color and religious minorities](#).

In addition, women in politics are most often targets of coordinated [gendered disinformation](#) campaigns, spreading deceptive or inaccurate information that follows storylines that draw on misogyny and gender stereotypes. [A deep program of disinformation and harassment](#) was actively at work against Vice President Elect Kamala Harris throughout the 2020 election cycle, including attacks on her criminal justice record and claims she used sex to gain prominence and power. She was not alone.

A recent study from [Demos](#) and the [EU Disinfo Lab](#) unveiled a vast network of actors, at work to delegitimize women politically, by weaponizing sexist narratives in Europe. Similar tactics have been reported many other countries, where women politicians' morality and dignity have been tainted by fake stories and disinformation campaigns, and this pattern tends to be even more pronounced for women political leaders from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups, or for those who speak out on feminist issues.

Journalists face very similar challenges. A comprehensive global survey of 901 journalists from 125 countries implemented from the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that most of the women interviewed experienced disinformation-based attacks, which in 41% of cases “appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns”.

The implications are far reaching.

As a result of the abuse they experience or witness online, young women report [being discouraged from seeking leadership roles](#), limiting their freedom of expression, exercising [self-censorship](#) or totally disengaging from social media, resulting in [a chilling effect of freedom of expression](#) for women, including journalists, and particularly minority women. For women who can't afford to disengage because communicating online is part of their job – like women in politics and journalists - the psychological toll on them and their families is incommensurable.

More broadly, gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics are increasingly being used with [covert political, economic or social motives](#), to challenge women's rights and democracy, and thus should be “seen as a [national security threat](#), and understood and addressed for their detrimental effect to civil rights and democratic institutions as a whole.

In the face of this growing problem, most researchers, activists, and users agree that major social media platforms are not doing enough to curb the large volumes of harmful content that are still proliferating online.

While companies have in fact general- terms of services and codes of conduct that ban hate speech, harassment and the promotion of violence, their implementation has so far been very unsatisfying, due to [inadequate and unclear content moderation systems that](#) rely on 'notice and take down models', as reports of abuse are handled reactively on a case by case basis. The ongoing move to more [automated content moderation](#) - explained by many social media companies as a way to address hate speech - is also unlikely to significantly improve things, as these tools have been proven to be often [biased](#) and ineffective.

In order to respond to concerns from civil society and government, in the last year, [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) -introduced some features designed to increase friction and possibly encourage users to think twice before posting abusive content. These are however small experiments, and it is very hard to evaluate their impact, without broader access to the algorithms that underline them, or more clarity of the extent to which they were used. Even if these tools were to be proven effective for their intended purpose, they would leave unaddressed much of the abusive content against women leaders, often carried out [with malign intent and creatively designed to avoid automatic detection](#).

Another high profile attempt from a social media company to address its shortcomings in content moderation has been the establishment last year of Facebook's [Oversight Board, a](#) body appointed by the company with the goal of making decisions on singular content moderation cases, while also creating "jurisprudence" around which types of content should be deemed acceptable by the platform. Many have however [criticized this move](#), questioned the independence and autonomy of this body (which is founded and funded by Facebook), and pointed to the fact that Facebook has a history of outsourcing accountability to avoid enacting real change, as the Oversight Board is not a "Supreme Court", [therefore their rulings are not precedent setting and the Board has no legal or enforcement authority](#).

Online harms against women politicians in Canada: understanding the problem and policy proposals to address it

Recent literature of online harms against women in politics in Canada reveals a troubling landscape, as gendered abuse, and disinformation efforts against women in politics are pervasive on social media, and often perceived by the targets as an almost unavoidable reality of doing politics.

According to Amalia Wagner's 2020 study: "[Tolerating the trolls? Gendered perceptions of online harassment of politicians in Canada](#)", drawing upon interviews with 101 people from diverse genders, racial/ethnic identities, sexual orientations, and partisan affiliations, social media has a gendered impact on political participation in Canada. Online abuse makes women feel that politics is a very hostile working environment and even when it fails to deter many of them from engaging in politics, "it can affect their ability to do, or willingness to stay, in the job". The study also highlights how "women politicians might refrain from espousing feminist views because of the strong possibility of an online backlash from gender trolls, while other women who want to pursue feminist policy aims might opt out of electoral politics to avoid the online harassment that women politicians experience." The abuse is particularly pervasive for women who have achieved a high status in politics, [as they are more likely to receive uncivil messages than their male counterparts on social media](#). For women and visible minority candidates the racism and sexism they face online [are particularly damaging](#), as they echo the hostility, the dismissiveness, or the fears of violence that women, racial

minorities, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ candidates have faced online. These groups' freedom of speech is in fact curtailed within the status quo, as misinformation and hate are weaponized to silence them.

In an interview [with the magazine Elle](#) in January 2021, Michelle Rempel Garner, Conservative MP for Calgary Nose Hill said that “sexism is a political strategy” in Canadian politics. “The issue of sexism—and harassment— is used for political gain as opposed to [addressing it with] actual policy action.”

Most notably, Canadian environment’s minister Catherine McKenna was the target of [a massive online campaign](#) of gendered abuse which referred to her as “climate Barbie”, and included sexualized insults and threats against her family, to the point that Ms. McKenna was assigned extra protection and a security detail - measures that are quite exceptional in the Canadian political context.

Trends and impact of online abuse against women in politics and journalism in Canada

The four digital roundtables organized by the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (MIGS) in the context of the Canadian Women Leaders’ Digital Defense Initiative outlined a very concerning picture of online abuse against women in politics in Canada, further exacerbated by the increasing reliance of social media as the main and sometimes only way elected leaders communicate with their constituency during the pandemic.

Firstly, all the participants taking part in the digital roundtables reported witnessing and experiencing a growing amount of gendered online abuse and disinformation, aimed at threatening and de-humanizing them, and undermining their credibility. These attacks, described as “very traumatic” and “painful” by Member of Parliament Lenore Zann, take a devastating toll on the mental health and wellbeing of the women targeted and their families. Supriya Dwivedi, a journalist, talked about receiving online rape and death threats, as well as insults against her young children, while the journalist Laura Brown reported concerns that online trolls would find out where she lived and attack her at home. Tamara Taggart, former journalist and federal parliament candidate, said she was the target of relentless “gaslighting” and politically motivated trolling, often led by her political opponents, which included attacks calling her a “retard breeder” on social media – a hurtful and inhuman reference to her son’s disability. Things can be even worse for women from ethnic minorities who are targeted by content that’s both racist and sexist, as highlighted by Canadian senator Wanda Thomas Bernard and journalists Rima Elkouri and Supriya Dwivedi.

Secondly, all the panelists reported a deep sense of loneliness when having to decide how to deal with online attacks and threats, as most of them did not have formal channels of information and support by their political parties or social media companies. As a result, most women felt uncertain of their options for reporting violence, abuse and defamation, deeply frustrated by the near impossibility of holding perpetrators accountable and concerned that raising visibility on this issue will make the attacks worse, have them labeled as weak or harm their political credibility, as reported by Senator Marilou McPhedran. Lana Cuthbertson, founder and chief executive officer, Areto Lab, stressed the importance of generating more data on online abuse and disinformation against women in politics, as a first step towards creating further awareness on the pervasiveness and negative consequences of online harms targeting women in politics.

“I would never ever, ever subject myself to that again”.

Thirdly, all the women interviewed through the webinar series expressed concerns regarding the prevalence of online abuse and disinformation against women as a strong disincentive and obstacle for women to consider a political career. While online presence is recognized as essential for their work – and possibly even more so for women politicians from smaller parties, as remarked by Heather McPherson, Member of Parliament - all the panelists talked about the almost unbearable toll that being on social media represents for women who are public figures. According to Lana Cuthbertson, online vitriol already is “the number one reason women didn’t want to run” and Christine Saint-Pierre, a journalist and politician from Quebec, also reported that, had she been a young woman considering politics today - she might have

hesitated, given the vitriol on social media. For journalist Tamara Taggart, the cost of online abuse is simply too high to bear, as she said: “I would never ever, ever subject myself to that again. It has damaged my mental health. It has made me fear for the safety of my family. It has made me fear for my safety,”

Finally, all panelists expressed concerns for the political nature of the attacks that they received, both in terms of their motives and outcomes. Several of the female politicians reported in fact that much of the online attacks (especially in Western Canada) were driven by political opponents. This lack of civility from political leaders in turn encourages their supporters to adopt similar tactics, and further use online harassment against women in politics as a tool to silence political opposition. The panelists also noted that pervasive online abuse and disinformation against women in politics impacts on the entire political and social system, eroding democratic institutions, freedom of expression and social cohesion. According to Marilou McPhedran, Canadian senator, gender-based attacks against women in politics must be seen as efforts to undermine democracy and dealt with accordingly. According to the journalist Rima Elkouri, online attacks against women can’t be solely understood as the fruit of society’s underlining misogyny: they aren’t “accidents” or “isolated cases”, but part of a “larger “movement” that seeks to challenge liberal values and feminism, and many of the women interviewed reported receiving particularly cruel attacks when speaking about feminism, women’s rights, racism and immigration.

Further, as reported by the UN Women, online violence has spread under the shadow pandemic with a disproportional amount of attacks aimed at women in the form of sexual harassment, stalking, sex trolling, “zoom-bombing” with unsolicited pornographic videos displayed while women were participating in online social events. Christine St Pierre, journalist and Quebec Liberal Party Member of the National Assembly for Acadie, reported being attacked line for tweeting a picture of herself getting the vaccine and several of the journalists mentioned that themes such as environment, race and COVID attract more unsavory comments.

The policy debate on online harms and regulations in Canada.

In the context of Canada, there is wide agreement that online harms need to be addressed and mitigated, and growing demand for the government to step in and establish standards that can further protect citizens. Introduction of federal legislation to address online harms on social media is imminent, and the debate around the framework of the law is still ongoing.

The [Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression](#), a body composed of seven eminent Canadians, including a Former Chief Justice of the Supreme court of Canada, recommends “a citizen-centric approach” that places responsibility for hateful and harmful content firmly on the shoulders of platforms and its creators. They advocate for the establishment by parliament of a statutory Duty to Act Responsibly on platforms, inspired by the “duty of care” proposed by the UK, as well as the creation of a regulator representing the public interest - with the authority to oversee content moderation guidelines, and review public risk assessment reports from platforms. These changes would be paired with an independent, stakeholder-based social media council to provide an institutional forum to address medium-term policy issues.

“They can’t see platforming hate as profitable”.

From the perspective of [Evan Balford, executive director of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network](#), a non-profit that monitors hate groups in the country, the government should consider fining social media companies so that “they can’t see platforming hate as profitable”. In a [statement](#) signed by over thirty organizations, civil society organizations are demanding that “any solution must include fines significant enough that there is a financial impetus for platforms to behave responsibly as opposed to serve as a pay-to-play system”, taking as a model the German Network Enforce Act.

Vivek Krishnamurthy, a Professor of Law at the University of Ottawa, [recommends](#) instead that Canadian policy-makers, rather than seeking to enforce laws aimed at social media companies single-handedly, “work with other rights-respecting democracies to develop a multilateral approach to addressing harmful online content”, grounded in the international human rights standards and principles.

To better understand the context and implications of the proposals highlighted above - and their efficacy in tackling online abuse and disinformation against women in politics and journalism - it’s useful to understand the drivers, from a product design standpoint, of online abuse, and briefly outline the main approaches and legislative frameworks currently under development to address online harms.

Establishing new social media standards and practices to address online harms against women in politics.

While sexist attitudes are integral to understanding gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics, social norms per se don’t explain how attacks against women in politics have become so pervasive. It is the algorithmic preferences and business models that incentivize fake and outrageous content, at the expense of social cohesion and inclusivity, that allow attacks to be weaponized.

“Misogynistic content in particular is designed to tap into emotionally loaded implicit bias against women in power.”

For this reason, while some point to the importance of media literacy to build public immunity against misogyny and promote critical thinking, it’s unclear that it can represent a viable solution to most of the disinformation and hate that are proliferating online. According to cognitive scientist [Stephan Lewandowsky](#): “This approach assumes that public misperceptions are due to a lack of knowledge and that the solution is more information - in science communication, it’s known as the information deficit model. But that model is wrong: people don’t process information as simply as a hard drive downloading data.”

Misogynistic content in particular is designed to tap into emotionally loaded implicit bias against women in power. It’s unlikely that fact-checking and media literacy will have much impact on altering this type of content, or its emotional effects on people.

In order to address gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics, it’s instead essential to understand the incentive structure that allows for this type of content to thrive and devise regulatory mechanisms for social media platforms that establish better standards for consumers.

Amplifying misogyny for profit? Social media platforms’ business model.

As of today, most social media companies increase engagement on content by featuring information that is the hardest to look away from - sensational, provocative, outrageous. Platforms use deep learning algorithms designed to [prioritize](#) disseminating content with greater engagement potential - regardless of whether it is truthful, or irrespective to harm or social impact.

Inflammatory posts and sensationalistic images and language are therefore more likely to generate algorithmically increased engagement, that, in turn, augments advertising revenue through the collection of more user behavior data. Revenue grows even further when already outrageous and sensationalistic posts get further amplified by coordinated campaigns - whether they are carried out by authentic or inauthentic actors.

In a [letter to Facebook](#) signed by 100 women legislators from 30 countries, US Congresswoman Jackie Speier wrote to the company: “Stop the amplification of gendered disinformation on your platform. Much of the most hateful content directed at women on Facebook is amplified by your algorithms which reward extreme and dangerous points of view with greater reach and visibility creating a fertile breeding ground for bias to grow.”

According to the [Digital Policy Lab](#), an intergovernmental working group focused on charting the regulatory and policy path forward to address disinformation and other forms of online harm: “These business models have increasingly dictated the success or failure of certain content, and been shown to favor sensationalist or contentious posts, first to increase traffic and user engagement and in turn to maximize ad revenue. Over time, such a dynamic has contributed to an increase of hate, extremism, terrorism and disinformation online that is harming society and democracy writ large.”

Regulatory frameworks to address online harms through fines and “duty of care.”

Even while recognizing private companies’ purview to determine their own business model, governments can create regulatory frameworks that set the ground for better social media standards.

There are no shortages of ideas worth exploring that would use existing liability frameworks to increase incentives for protections. The Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund, based in Toronto, developed 14 recommendations for consideration in the new report [“Deplatforming Misogyny”](#) for federal legal reform and complementary actions to address harms in Canada through the lens of digital platform liability and accountability.

In Germany, the 2018 [Network Enforcement Act](#) requires social media companies to take timely action on illegal content shared after it has been flagged by users, and failure to comply can lead to fines of up to 20 Million Euros. The law also requires companies to do audits every two years, showing their efforts to reduce hate speech on their platform, with clear figures on the number of complaints received, and the actions taken. Similar laws have been proposed in France and Austria. This approach has come under criticism from human rights groups [concerned](#) that these types of regulations focusing on “illegal” content might represent dangerous precedents for authoritarian countries with legal frameworks that don’t protect freedom of expression, as they might be used as tools to undermine political opposition and freedom of speech. The assumption that authoritarian regimes aren’t already [benefiting from existing irresponsible practices](#) of digital platforms requires further scrutiny, while balancing the need to think holistically about the information ecosystem in liberal and illiberal democracies that these concerns raise.

In addition to being dangerous in non-democratic contexts, this framework is also criticized for failing to address a very large quantity of online abuse- including much of the abuse and disinformation against women in politics and journalists - which might not fall under the “illegal content” category.

For example, the above-mentioned online campaign against Canadian environment’s minister Catherine McKenna referring to her as “climate Barbie” would not be addressed within this framework, as it does not constitute illegal action, even though such a campaign greatly harmed Ms. McKenna’s credibility, and brought against her such levels of hate, that she required special protection services to protect her life.

Other regulatory frameworks that have been proposed focus on establishing a “duty of care” for social media companies with respect to the harm that is caused by their services, demanding greater transparency from platforms, which would need to demonstrate that their policies, processes and systems are designed and implemented taking into account the potential harms that could occur as a result of their services, even when such services aren’t per se against the law. For example, the UK’s [Online Harm White Paper](#) demands from large social media companies a statutory “duty of care” requiring them to take action against content or activity that “cause[s] significant physical or psychological harm to individuals. Similarly, the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#) envisages the creation of due diligence obligations for platforms’ content moderation activities, as well as an obligation for social media companies to conduct risk assessments at least once a year on the systemic risks stemming from the functioning and use of their services, not only as referred to the dissemination of illegal content, but also to the intentional manipulation of their services (e.g. through the creation of fake accounts or bots), as well as any negative impact their services might have on the exercise of fundamental rights - including the prohibition of discrimination.

These frameworks are grounded on the assumption that, instead of focusing on what is to be designated as illegal or legal content, regulators should instead channel reform conversation to the more relevant category of harmful “lawful but awful” content - which includes the large majority of gendered disinformation attacks and online abuse against women in politics and journalism. As some have noted, [free speech is not the same as free reach](#). While users may have in fact the right to say something inflammatory, false, and offensive online, that doesn’t imply that companies should be able to amplify certain narratives disproportionately and artificially through algorithmic preferences. This is not about silencing distasteful opinions, ultimately, these frameworks of harm recognize that social media platforms are not neutral disseminators of information, but curate content to serve their commercial interests, and therefore must assume greater responsibility for the harms they amplify and spread.

“Transparency obligations are ever more urgent.”

While the frameworks outlined above do not specifically address gendered disinformation and online hate against women in politics, their transparency requirements provide meaningful entry points to feminist researchers and civil society organizations specialized in this area to better understand the extent and the forms of online harms against women politicians and candidates, and, together with policymakers, build pressure on social media companies to address them.

In the face of new [evidence](#) that Facebook internal guidelines have allowed some authoritarian world leaders to use social media to “deceive the public or harass opponents” despite being alerted to evidence of the wrongdoing, such transparency obligations are ever more urgent. In this respect, regulators must incentivize companies to open up the black box of how amplification and artificial distortion happens on their platforms, and trust-worthy, independent researchers should be given greater access to the platforms’ data in order to support evaluating online abuses and recommend innovations and solutions.

Algorithmic Impact Assessments (AIA) frameworks, like [the one adopted by Canada’s Treasury Board’s Directive](#) in December 2018 to better understand and mitigate the risks associated with automated decision-making systems, can, for example, bring attention to design and deployment decisions that might have been overlooked. Canada’s AIA tool, for example, asks a lot of questions pertaining to the why, what, and how a system will be built in order to avoid pitfalls, and provide appropriate governance, oversight and reporting, and audit requirements. While [many questions remain to be answered regarding the implementation of AIA tools](#), the framework represents a valuable model and an example for the types of actions that regulators might want to consider introducing, when it comes to establishing new standards for social media platforms.

Increasing transparency must also translate into enabling researchers to understand metrics of gendered and sexualized harassment and disinformation, including the number of cases that have been reported, who were their perpetrators, and how they were addressed. Such information is essential to understand and evaluate the breadth and magnitude of

the investments that social media companies have been making to address this issue (including the number of people working on content moderation, their cultural competency, their position and power within the companies, and their influence on larger decisions, for example the design of income-generating algorithmic preferences), as well as identify areas for improvement.

Creating practices that address online harms against women in politics: the role of political parties and traditional media

While establishing new and better standards to deal with social media harms is essential to tackle online abuse and disinformation, political parties and traditional media have a central role to play in fostering a less toxic environment for women in politics.

As some of the participants in the digital roundtables explained, many of the attacks that women in politics and journalists receive are coming from political competitors. As outlined in the [#ShePersisted report](#): “Parties must ensure that their internal culture doesn’t breed or tolerate sexist behaviors and language, adopting codes of conduct regarding the use of language on social and traditional media and severely punishing sexist and harassing language coming from their members”.

Political parties should also consider providing tailored training to women candidates and political aspirants on how to engage on social media in a way that’s both effective and safe, taking into consideration safety issues and double binds, as well as the newest research in this area. In this respect, it’s important to point out that while most women restrict their online activity as a result of social media’s toxicity, silence doesn’t grant protection, as the First Lady of Namibia Monica Geingos stated in [a powerful video](#) released this year on International Women’s Day : “When there was a clear social media campaign of anonymous WhatsApp messages specifically targeting me in the most disgusting ways, and I was told not to respond but to ignore and I did. But it was a mistake, your silence will not protect you, the insults just got worse, and the lies became a lot”.

“Traditional media also plays an important role in shaping societal attitudes on the desirability of women’s leadership.”

When it comes to women in politics in particular, calling out sexism often pays off. A recent study from the [Barbara Lee Foundation](#) in the United States finds in fact that “voters view a woman candidate’s responses to sexism as a demonstration of her leadership and electability – not something that weakens the perception of her electability.”

Traditional media also plays an important role in shaping societal attitudes on the desirability of women’s leadership. [A 2014 study](#) of the media coverage of women candidates in Canada found that women are generally described according to four roles: “sex object, mother, pet, and iron maiden”, perpetuating tired stereotypes that are at odds with women’s ability to be perceived as authoritative political leaders. While things have hopefully, at least to some extent, improved, some of the participants in the digital roundtables felt that traditional media often disseminates and replicates the patterns of harassment and disinformation present on social media.

In April of this year, a collective of thirty-five public figures (including current and former legislators, artists and civil society leaders) launched [an awareness campaign](#) against what they refer to as media bullying in Quebec. They denounced disinformation, hateful, abusive, defamatory and/or discriminatory remarks in some Quebec media outlets. Through this campaign, the collective hopes to encourage media outlets to change their practices.

Other countries have tried to tackle this problem in different ways. In Finland, officials, editors, and others in the media ecosystem have established a “Media Pool organization” that aims to provide support and redress to journalists, activists, and other victims of state-sponsored harassment.

In the United States, various initiatives have been implemented to sensitize journalists on how to identify and avoid unintentional sexist and racist bias or disinformation when interviewing, writing about, or moderating content about women and people of color, as outlined in the [media toolkit](#) developed by the US-based nonprofit [Ultraviolet](#), and others in this field.

Policies aimed at leveling the playing field and promoting fair and equal coverage for female and male politicians on the news and monitor media output for sexist content can also prove useful, and similar regulations have been adopted in [Iceland and Sweden](#).

Conclusions and recommendations

All over the world, women in politics, particularly those of color, have been experiencing relentless, overwhelming volumes of online abuse, threats, and vicious gendered disinformation campaigns, framing them as untrustworthy, unintelligent, too emotional, or sexual. These types of online abuses against women are growing, amplified by algorithmic preferences that reward fake, outrageous, and obscene stories, and a business model that profits from engagement at all costs.

In Canada, online abuse against women in politics - often made worse by political party members and traditional media - has become so prevalent and toxic that it's driving women out of the political career and seriously threatening civic discourse, social cohesion and the strength of democratic institutions.

Despite the endemic nature of this problem, most social media companies are still approaching content moderation through “[notice and take down models](#)” or by doubling down on automation - both measures that have proven to be inadequate in addressing large scale harms. The reduction of online abuse and disinformation against women in politics is not likely to happen by deleting content one post at the time, but by understanding and correcting how algorithmic preferences have grown to become a serious threat to democracy, allowing online attacks against women in politics and journalism to scale and become sources of revenue for social media companies.

When it comes to creating the building blocks toward an enabling environment for addressing gender in equality, Canada stands as an example, exemplified by a prime minister and government who proudly proclaim themselves as feminists. Women's rights are recognized as human rights. These rights are at the core of Canada's domestic and foreign policy. It is within this context that Canada is well positioned to design an approach to address gendered disinformation that also protects fundamental freedoms, setting therefore an example for other countries grappling with these same issues. In the face of private companies' inability or unwillingness to truly address this problem, it's important that countries with a strong democratic tradition like Canada devise regulatory frameworks that demand greater transparency, accountability and better risk assessments from social media platforms with respect to their modus operandi, and the devastating harms caused by the content that's placed on their platforms, including when such content isn't per se against the law.

As the Canadian government is about to unveil a new federal legislation to address online harms, policymakers must ensure that the new law takes into account the realities and concerns of Canadian women in politics and journalists and

addresses the types of harms that they are systematically targeted with. Failing to do so won't only limit the law's effectiveness to protect women - it also will make it less able to defend Canada's democracy.

About the authors

Lucina Di Meo

Lucina is a gender equality expert, recognized by Apolitical in 2021 as one of the 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy. Throughout her career, Lucina has worked with a wide range of international actors promoting women's rights in the Global South, including Vital Voices, The Wilson Center, International IDEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and the United Nations.

Her research, #ShePersisted. Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World, represents the baseline for the #ShePersisted Global Initiative, investigating the relationship between women in politics and social media in 30 countries, and was featured on Time Magazine, The Washington Post, Politico, El Pais and Voice of America, among others. Lucina has written on gendered disinformation and social media harms for The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, The Council of Foreign Relations, and The National Endowment for Democracy, among others. Lucina currently serves as Senior Director for Gender Equality at Room to Read, a global nonprofit working to end gender inequality through education; co-founder of The Gender Breakfast, a network of 150+ gender professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Advisory Board Member of FundHer, an organization working to elect progressive women to State legislatures.

Kristina Wilfore

Kristina works with political leaders and NGOs around the world to help improve the quality of campaigns and elections and bring new voices into politics. Kristina is a specialist in responding to the threat of disinformation and building transatlantic networks to weaken its impact, with on the ground experience in over 27 countries. Kristina currently serves as Senior Advisor of Disinformation Strategies at the Strategic Victory Fund; Adjunct professor with The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs; Producer and Host of Fatima's Hand, a podcast featuring women fighting for gender equality, and serves on the United States Institute for Peace Civil Society Working Group.

In 2020, Kristina co-founded The Women's Disinformation Defense Project. Comprised of some of the most influential women's political groups, including UltraViolet, Planned Parenthood, NARAL, Emily's List, Women's March, Colors of Change. The Women's Disinformation Project was the first disinformation monitoring, coordination and response table for women ever, aimed at holding platforms accountable, and providing clear, coordinated talking points and message content for journalists and women's organizations responding to gendered disinformation attacks.