

A DIGITAL SOCIAL CONTRACT THAT SAFEGUARDS DEMOCRACIES AND PROMOTES WOMEN'S RIGHTS IS URGENTLY NEEDED

Globally, women leaders online face relentless abuse, threats, and gendered disinformation campaigns, enabled by the lack of regulation on social media platforms causing women to become discouraged from entering public leadership and allowing anti-democratic regimes to silence critics and undermine women's political participation. In Turkey, proposed social media reform allowing government regulation based on poorly defined definitions of disinformation coupled with the backsliding of women's rights movements are providing a breeding ground for gendered disinformation. A small window has opened to show the responsibility of platforms for not acting sooner to address the harms their products cause on women, and democracy. We must take advantage of this moment by highlighting what the evidence demonstrates, shaping the global conversation on online harms against women.

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Globally, women leaders online face relentless abuse, threats, and gendered disinformation campaigns, enabled by the lack of regulation on social media platforms. As a result, women are becoming discouraged from entering public leadership and anti-democratic regimes are utilizing this deplatforming tactic as a tool to silence critics and undermine women's political participation.

Experts in studying the field of information pollution and its impact on democracy are worried that this phenomenon is quickly becoming the norm.¹ Across Europe to the Middle East and Latin America, women politicians' morality and dignity have been tainted by fake stories and disinformation campaigns in order to derail their candidacy as well as undermine women's political participation more broadly, while taking a swipe at curtailing progress toward gender equality.

Recently proposed social media regulations from the Turkish government would exacerbate this problem exponentially. Currently, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development (AKP) party is drafting a law covering online disinformation. While details of the proposal remain closed to the public, the bill has been said to include proposals to make "disinformation" and "misinformation" an offense punishable with prison sentences of up to five years for the dissemination of fake news and up to two years for online insults.² While reform to social media platforms is necessary, government regulation in this manner acts to silence political opposition and could exacerbate the issue of gendered disinformation in Turkey.

How Gender Bias Impacts the Campaigns of Women Politicians

Globally, women in politics are disproportionately targeted by gendered disinformation campaigns that feature fake stories and threats to undermine women candidates, often accompanied by humiliating and sexually charged images. The goal of these attacks is to frame female politicians as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, unqualified, and uncontrollable of their emotions to hold office or participate in democratic politics. Once in office, the same kind of content is organized online to derail their agenda and attack their character. Building on sexist narratives and characterized by malignant intent and coordination, gendered disinformation both distorts public understanding of female politicians' track records and discourages women from seeking political careers.³

¹ Emma Goldberg, "Fake Nudes and Real Threats: How Online Abuse Holds Back Women in Politics," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/03/us/disinformation-online-attacks-female-politicians.html>

² IPS Communication Foundation – *Bianet*. "Turkey: One to Five Years in Prison for Spreading 'Fake News' on Social Media?" *IFEX*, 17 August 2021. <https://ifex.org/turkey-one-to-five-years-in-prison-for-spreading-fake-news-on-social-media/>.

³ Nina Jankowicz, Jillian Hunchak, Alexandra Pavliuc, Celia Davies, Shannon Pierson, and Zoë Kaufmann, *Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online*, (Washington, D.C: Wilson Center, 2021), p. 1.

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To better understand gendered disinformation and work toward meaningful solutions to weaken its impact, one must first appreciate how pervasive sexism in politics is, and how it is manifested during campaigns and throughout the period in which women hold public office. Bias against women leaders, exploited through gendered disinformation campaigns, can take the following forms:

- **Attacks on qualifications and competence.** To be competitive as a candidate, women must prove they are qualified for public office by providing more evidence than men about their expertise, whereas the qualifications of men are assumed.
- **Appearance based attacks.** No matter the level of office, women in politics are subjected to more undue criticism of their appearance, voice and clothing in comparison to men, which has a direct impact on perceptions of their experience with the subtext that women are not as fit for office.
- **Higher standards for likability.** On top of demonstrating competence, women face a higher threshold to be liked by voters. Evidence has shown that voters will support a male candidate they do not like but believe is qualified, whereas they will not support women who are considered unlikable.
- **Double bind around family responsibilities.** Women in the public eye are also scrutinized and judged more harshly when it comes to family responsibilities. Voters recognize a double standard exists for mothers, but research shows they actively and consciously participate in it.
- **Sexualized attacks meant to humiliate and demean.** Sexualized attacks are a constant backdrop to disinformation aimed at women, with memes and graphics accusing women of “sleeping their way to the top” or being sexually promiscuous. Image-based attacks typically play on both bias in society and are sexual in nature, relying on sexist tropes that women are weak and incompetent.

These pre-existing biases provide the threat surface in which gendered disinformation campaigns are organized and amplified. They build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership and women as weaker and less qualified.⁴

Gendered disinformation undermines women's credibility, poses obstacles to their electoral success, and ultimately represents a significant reason why many women abandon political careers. On some occasions, hate and online threats fueled by gendered disinformation campaigns are followed by physical violence. Even in the milder cases, the abuse can cause psychological harm and waste significant energy and time.

Pushing women out of the political arena is often only the first step of a broader, dangerous strategy to erode democracy and human rights. According to the U.N. Human Rights Council, the erosion of women's human rights "is a litmus test for the human rights standards of the whole of society," and this tech-enabled backlash against women's rights has broader ramifications for global peace and security.⁵

The Role of Digital Technology

Sexist narratives on the campaign trail are sadly nothing new. Yet what is new is that digital technology has made it much easier for gendered disinformation campaigns to be organized and amplified, and cheaply financed, reaching millions of people and changing the course of history. Social media platforms provide powerful, bad actors with all the tools they need to undermine women and democracy - the ability to grow an audience on and offline, a virtual megaphone to take their attacks to scale, deception to hide the origins of campaigns attacking women and fake large public interest, fundraising tools to finance efforts, organizing tools to reach the easily radicalized hordes online. Using cross-channel repetition, coordinated sharing, and simulated artificial topic momentum, attacks on women can easily be scaled up. The way digital media platforms are designed does not merely reflect the sexism and bias against women in politics that are pre-existing in society - it increases it.

Amal Clooney recently highlighted the online attacks and trolling that women journalists get while simply trying to do their job in a conversation about Philippine journalist Maria Ressa's recent Nobel Peace Prize win.⁶ Attacks against women journalists or politicians are made significantly worse online because hateful content directed at women is amplified by algorithms which reward extreme and dangerous points of view

⁴ Barbara Lee Family Foundation, *Politics is Personal: Keys to Likeability and Electability for Women*, (Cambridge, MA: Barbara Lee Family Foundation, 2016).

⁵ United Nations General Assembly: Human Rights Council Rep, *Report of the Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice* (2018).

⁶ Fareed Zakaria, "On GPS: Nobel Peace Prize Winner Maria Ressa - CNN Video," *CNN - Cable News Network*, 10 October 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2021/10/10/exp-gps-1010-clooney-and-ressa-on-ressas-nobel-win.cnn>

with greater reach and visibility, creating a fertile breeding ground for bias to grow. This aspect of the problem was recently emphasized in the Facebook Files from the Wall Street Journal,⁷ whistleblower Frances Haugen's testimony,⁸ and whistleblower Sophie Zhang's account which demonstrated the ways in which Facebook prioritizes profit over protecting both users on their platforms and democratic systems.⁹

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Therefore, while sexist attitudes are integral to understanding violent extremism and political violence, social norms per se don't explain how attacks against women in politics have been weaponized for political gain. Cynically coordinated campaigns by illiberal actors are able to take advantage of algorithmic designs and business models that incentivize fake and outrageous content.

These attacks against women in politics are more pronounced for female political leaders from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups, and for those who speak out on feminist issues. One recent study involving 13 female politicians across three countries and six social media platforms found that nine of them had been targets of gendered disinformation narratives.¹⁰ A majority of the 88 female politicians and experts interviewed for the 2019 report *#ShePersisted*. *Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World* reported being extremely concerned about the pervasiveness of gender-based abuse and disinformation in the digital space. They described it as a barrier for women who want to engage in politics and a serious disincentive for young women to consider a political career.¹¹

⁷ Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-facebook-files-11631713039>.

⁸ “Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen Testifies Before Senate Commerce Committee,” YouTube. C-Span, 5 October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnpVQnv5Cw>.

⁹ Julia Carrie Wong, “How Facebook Let Fake Engagement Distort Global Politics: A Whistleblower's Account,” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 12 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/12/facebook-fake-engagement-whistleblower-sophie-zhang>.

¹⁰ Jankowicz et al, *Malign Creativity* (2021).

¹¹ Lucina Di Meo, *#ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World*, (Washington, D.C: The Wilson Center, 2019), p. 1–58.

While digital companies adopt 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.

Online Abuse and Disinformation against Women in Turkey

At a 2014 women’s rights summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed the crowd by exclaiming that men and women are not in fact equal, stating that women have a defined position in Islam religion as primarily mothers. Certain other work, he claimed, goes against women’s “delicate nature” since “their characters, habits, and physiques are different from men.” This is a stark contrast to the progressive agenda for gender equality shepherded in soon after the founding of the Turkish Republic where women were given greater educational opportunities, equal inheritance rights, political rights and more.

In March of 2021, as a major rebuke of progress toward gender equality, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pulled Turkey out of the Istanbul Convention,¹² a legally binding treaty established in 2011 to combat violence against women, initially signed by the 45 Council of Europe member countries and the EU as a bloc, with Turkey as the first country to ratify the convention. Disingenuously, President Erdogan complained that the Convention threatens the sanctity of marriage, while using disinformation to intentionally confuse gender with sexuality, claiming that the principle purpose of the treaty is the “normalization” of homosexuality.¹³

Turkey is not the only country using this dangerous, misogynistic rhetoric to backslide women’s rights. A strong ultra-conservative, anti-women, homophobic and transphobic movement¹⁴ is growing all across Europe, fueled by disinformation campaigns on the precepts of the Istanbul Convention.

¹² “Turkey: Women across the World Demand Reversal of Decision to Quit Gender-Based Violence Treaty.” *Amnesty International*, 17 August 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/05/turkey-women-across-the-world-demand-reversal-of-decision-to-quit-genderbased-violence-treaty/>

¹³ Daniel Bellut. “Bizarre Reasoning aside, Erdogan’s Exit from Istanbul Convention Is Unconstitutional.” *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/bizarre-reasoning-aside-erdogans-exit-from-istanbul-convention-is-unconstitutional/a-56964581>

¹⁴ Maïa de La Baume, “How the Istanbul Convention Became a Symbol of Europe’s Cultural Wars.” *POLITICO*, 12 April 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/istanbul-convention-europe-violence-against-women/>

These campaigns emphasize three common misconceptions, amplified since Turkey's withdrawal from the treaty.¹⁵ First they focus on how changes to traditional practices which are discriminatory towards women could interfere with customs. Second, they frame the treaty's understanding of gender as "socially constructed," challenging the understanding of gender as binary present in many of the countries' constitutions. Finally, they question how the Convention challenges the traditional role of the family by redefining "domestic violence," "gender," and "violence against women."

Sadly, the backsliding of women's rights, minority rights and democratic processes in Turkey doesn't end with pulling out of the Istanbul Convention. Freedom House gives Turkey a press freedom ranking of "not free," with a score of only 34 out of 100, citing the blocking of websites and new regulations of digital platforms this year.¹⁶ Additionally, in the last year 30,000 people were investigated and 5,000 were sentenced for what they shared on social media,¹⁷ indicating a criminalization of dissent and a governmental goal of silencing opposition online.

With the newly proposed legislation, broadly phrased definitions of what constitutes "disinformation" and insults allow for subjective persecution of critical reporting and opposition to the government. The large number of investigations already conducted into social media users acts as an indicator of how the law would be applied. Regulation from this angle is extremely problematic, allowing greater government restriction on who has a voice in digital political conversation and silencing opposition, which has disproportionately come from women. As Freedom House research associate Cathryn Grothe explains, this proposed law is indicative of a "continued trend of the degradation of internet freedom" in Turkey.¹⁸

The impact of gendered disinformation on the degradation of internet freedom goes well beyond Turkey. Former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic of Croatia became subject to a gendered disinformation campaign that attempted to undermine her credibility by painting her as a hyper-sexualized figure. In this instance, tabloids ran pictures of another woman in a bikini and falsely claimed it was her. The photo's subject was later identified as Coco Austin, the partner of American rapper Ice-T — but, at this point, the damage to Ms. Grabar-Kitarovic's reputation was already done. In

¹⁵ Annika Vollmer, "The Istanbul Convention: A Framework in Crisis?" *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2021. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/istanbul-convention-framework-crisis>

¹⁶ "Turkey: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report." *Freedom House*, 2021. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2021>

¹⁷ Hilmi Hacaloglu and Umut Colak. "Media Groups Voice Concern about Turkey's Planned Social Media Law." *VOA*. Media Groups Voice Concern about Turkey's Planned Social Media Law, 29 September 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/a/media-groups-voice-concern-about-turkey-s-planned-social-media-law-/6249826.html>

¹⁸ Andrew Wilks, "Turkey's Plans for New Social Media Restrictions Threaten Five Years in Prison for Spreading Fake News." *Al-Monitor*, 19 August 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/turkeys-plans-new-social-media-restrictions-threaten-five-years-prison-spreading>

Kosovo, the election of Vjosa Osmani, the second woman president, was followed by a widely shared tweet from another politician claiming she was in a polygamous relationship.¹⁹ While users have suggested the tweet was improperly translated, the sentiment was still picked up as news by media outlets.²⁰ Currently in Azerbaijan, video recordings are getting released including details about the personal lives of women leaders and activists,²¹ one of the tactics of gendered disinformation used to force women out of the public sphere. Last year, the attacks escalated resulting in an Azerbaijani activist who attempted suicide after being harassed online.²²

A lack of regulation on social media platforms has resulted in relentless abuse, threats, and gendered disinformation campaigns targeted at women leaders online globally. As a result, women are becoming discouraged from entering public leadership and their voices are being silenced online. There is a small window that has opened up showing the responsibility of platforms for not acting sooner to address the harms their products cause on women, and democracy. We must take advantage of this moment by highlighting what the actual evidence demonstrates, shape the global conversation on online harms against women, linking them to the broader democracy agenda. For that to happen, we must ensure women's leadership in designing a new digital social contract between tech companies, governments, and citizens.

Advancing Women's Movements and Tackling Gendered Disinformation in Turkey

As part of a multi-pronged strategy to address gender-based violence in Turkey, it is important to create a political discourse around the importance of women's leadership, and the obstacles to achieving it. The SES Equality, Justice, and Women Platform is a platform doing just that - pushing for the establishment of gender equality and justice in Turkey, aiming to protect women's leadership and make it visible across the country. Since 2018, the group has compiled and shared local and global news from influential women's movements in order to challenge the notion of women's leadership, as well as created original content that demonstrates the demand from Turkish civil society and political leaders for a more equitable system

¹⁹ Mike Sonko, Twitter Post. 5 April 2021. <https://twitter.com/MikeSonko/status/1379061961091059714>

²⁰ "Uproar after Mike Sonko Reveals Little Known Details of Kosovo's President Elect, Mrs Vjosa Osmani." - *Opera News*, 2021. <https://ke.opera.news/ke/en/entertainment/2db547ee12a22fd28a9781278bd42daf> <https://ke.opera.news/ke/en/entertainment/2db547ee12a22fd28a9781278bd42daf>.

²¹ "#Notthecost: Stopping Violence against Women in Politics," *National Democratic Institute*, 24 September 2018. <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>

²² "Azerbaijani Woman Attempts to Take Her Own Life after Outcry over 'Vagina Poster,'" *OC Media*, 11 March 2020. <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-woman-attempts-to-take-her-own-life-after-outcry-over-vagina-poster>

for women to lead, and compete fairly online in order for their voices to be heard.²³ Efforts like this are essential within Turkey in order to build upon existing women's movements and provide counters to gendered disinformation online.

Unless forced by public outcry or legislation, digital platforms will not act as women's advocates, but regulating social media through the government is not the solution and would severely restrict democratic discourse in Turkey. Allowing opposition voices to safely exist online is a pillar of democracy and open societies. A freer social media environment in this sense allows groundwork to be laid for the establishment of specific protections against online hate against women.

Globally, there is growing interest to address gendered disinformation and online harms against women in politics, and this issue is increasingly being looked at in the context of upcoming bills in the European Parliament, as shown by the recent #WomenTooDSA campaign, which prompted European legislators to include a risk assessment for the "right to gender equality" in the discussions around the pivotal Digital Services Act.²⁴ Similar conversations are happening around the UK's Online Safety Bill.

It is important to be aware of the options available for those interested in legislation in Turkey to curtail disinformation in a disingenuous and dangerous manner as there are a number of solutions which would allow for more transparency and accountability of digital platforms while safeguarding freedom online. There is a small window that has opened up revealing the responsibility of platforms for not taking action sooner to address the harms their products cause to women and democracy. We must take advantage of this moment by highlighting what the actual evidence demonstrates, shape the global conversation on online harms against women, linking them to the broader democracy agenda. For that to happen, we must make sure that women leaders and activists are deeply involved in the conversations on establishing new internet and social media standards and regulations, and that their unique perspectives are reflected in transnational dialogue about efforts to curtail disinformation. Similar to the way women play a crucial role in peace negotiations, women's leadership is key in the development of an online world that works for everyone in the defense of democratic processes and the protection of women's leadership in Turkey.

²³ "SES Equality, Justice, Women Platform - SES Eşitlik Ve Dayanışma Derneği," *SES*, 30 April 2021. <https://sesdernegi.org/en/1487-2/>

²⁴ "Tackling Gender Based Online Violence in the Digital Services Act," YouTube. #ShePersisted Global, 28 September 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NEQNoSx6Jw