

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

PATTERNS, IMPACTS, AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES



AUTHOR: DR. LORETTA HANDRABURA

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For more on gender-based disinformation generally, including practical tools to spot and combat gender-based disinformation, please have a look at the sister publication, the *Gender Disinformation Handbook*, available here:

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/print-publications/gender-disinformation-handbook>

INSTITUTE FOR WAR & PEACE REPORTING



iwpr.net

IWPR Moldova

Mediacor building,
Alexei Mateevici 60 str.,
MD-2009,
Chişinău

IWPR United Kingdom

48 Gray's Inn Road,
London WC1X 8LT
Tel +44 (0)20 7831 1030

IWPR United States

1156 15th Street NW Suite 505,
Washington, DC 20005
Tel +1 202 393 5641

IWPR Netherlands

Almaatsweg 7,
7856 TJ Benneveld,
Netherlands
iwpr-nl@iwpr.net

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Loretta Handrabura is a PhD in Philology, Associate Professor, researcher, and former public official from the Republic of Moldova. She worked in academia at the Ion Creangă State Pedagogical University in Chişinău and served as Deputy Minister of Education from 2009 to 2015, contributing to reforms in the education sector and the development of educational policies. From 2015 to 2016, she served as Minister of Youth and Sport. Throughout her career, she has been involved in initiatives related to education, gender studies, and public policy, and is a strong advocate for gender equality, collaborating with national and international organisations to promote women's rights and social inclusion. She has also conducted research and analytical work on gender-based disinformation, focusing on how disinformation narratives target women in public life and affect their participation in politics and public discourse.

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We would like to thank everyone who agreed to speak with us for this handbook, including those who preferred to remain anonymous.

This handbook contains some discussions of gender-based violence, sexism, homophobia, and strong language. While this is not detailed or graphic, it may not be suitable for all audiences, and in particular younger children.

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Writer:
Dr Loretta Handrabura

Editor:
Monica Ellena

Coordinators:
Mariana Aricova
and Tatiana Chebac

Designer:
Humblebee Design

Translator:
Evelina Gorobet

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FOREWORD

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova (hereafter Moldova) has made notable progress in strengthening women's political representation. The growing presence of women in Parliament, government, and local public administration reflects both the impact of gender equality legislation and broader shifts in political culture and societal expectations.

As women's engagement in public life has become more visible, so too have the targeted forms of informational pressure they face. In the digital sphere, attacks targeting women's identity, legitimacy, or personal lives can be rapidly amplified, shaping public perceptions, influencing the political climate, and affecting their willingness to participate in public life.

Gender-based disinformation (GBD) extends beyond challenges related to media and online communication; it poses a direct threat to the quality of democratic participation. When public debate shifts from policy ideas to identity-based delegitimation, electoral competition becomes uneven and trust in democratic institutions risks being eroded.



This guide, developed at the initiative of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) with the support of the Government of the United Kingdom, draws on monitoring data, international research, and Moldova-specific studies conducted between 2023 and 2025, alongside regional comparative analyses.

Rather than duplicating existing studies, the publication builds on already documented evidence to identify intended outcomes, persistent gaps, and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. Conceived as a complementary analytical resource addressing a specific and evolving phenomenon, the guide:

- Consolidates recent evidence without duplicating existing reports;
- Applies a results-oriented approach to the analysis of gender-based disinformation;
- Offers a shared framework to inform dialogue among policymakers, media, and civil society;
- Remains accessible to non-specialist audiences.

The aim of this publication is to help strengthen a resilient information ecosystem, ensuring that democratic participation does not depend on individuals enduring abuse or disproportionate informational attacks. Achieving sustainable progress demands sustained coordination, accountability, and long-term commitment from all relevant stakeholders. In a functioning democracy, inclusion is not merely a principle, but a prerequisite for legitimacy.



RELATIVELY LITTLE ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO THE WAY IN WHICH MISOGYNY ALSO INTERSECTS WITH MISINFORMATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE ONLINE WORLD.

LUCINA DI MECO AND KRISTINA WILFORE

[HTTPS://WWW.BROOKINGS.EDU/ARTICLES/GENDERED-DISINFORMATION-IS-A-NATIONAL-SECURITY-PROBLEM/](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE



The purpose of this guide is to facilitate the use of existing evidence on gender-based disinformation in order to strengthen a fair and resilient information environment. It aims to support the transition from documenting the phenomenon to implementing coordinated and sustainable responses.

TARGET AUDIENCE

This publication is intended for:

- Public institutions and electoral authorities;
- Political actors and parties;
- Media professionals;
- Civil society organisations;
- International partners working to strengthen democratic resilience.

A RESULTS-BASED APPROACH



This publication adopts a results-based approach. Rather than merely describing challenges, it identifies three targeted changes:

- Enhanced protection for women against gender-based digital attacks;
- Reduced influence of gender-based disinformation on public opinion;
- Conditions that enable political participation free from disproportionate informational pressures.

These outcomes shape the structure of the guide and provide a framework for measuring progress.



STRUCTURE OF THE GUIDE



The guide is structured progressively, enabling readers to move from understanding the phenomenon of gender-based disinformation to identifying practical solutions and applying them. It begins with an analysis of the political and information landscape in Moldova, followed by a conceptual clarification of gender-based disinformation. Subsequent sections examine how the phenomenon operates, its documented patterns, and its impact on democratic participation. The final sections translate this analysis into a results-oriented framework and practical responses tailored to relevant stakeholders.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT



The analytical sections examine the consequences of gender-based disinformation at three interconnected levels:

- Individual — psychological pressure and self-censorship;
- Political — distorted electoral competition;
- Societal — the normalisation of misogyny and discrimination, and the erosion of trust.

This structure helps readers understand the systemic nature of the phenomenon.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES



The guide provides an actionable framework for:

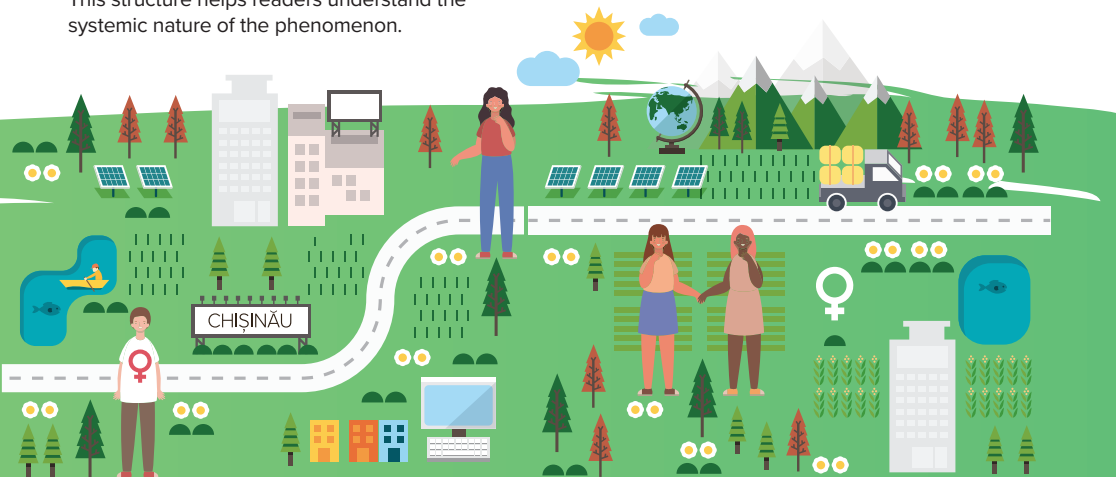
- Public Institutions;
- Media Organisations;
- Civil Society Actors;
- Women engaged in public life.

The section on practical responses translates analysis into clear and actionable guidance.

Practical Applications of the Guide

The guide can be navigated based on professional interests and intervention needs through:

- Understanding the mechanisms: introductory and analytical sections provide definitions and conceptual explanations;
- Assessing democratic impacts: the dedicated impacts section synthesises documented effects;
- Identifying concrete actions: the roles and responsibilities section outlines applicable responses.



I. WHY ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION MATTERS IN MOLDOVA

Gender-based disinformation has become an increasingly significant issue for the public sphere and democratic processes in Moldova, particularly amid recent transformations in the country's political and information environment. It is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it emerges at the intersection of intensified political competition, marked by the growing involvement of women, societal polarisation, and persistent gender norms that continue to shape perceptions of women's roles in public life.

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND ELECTORAL CYCLES



In recent years, Moldova has experienced successive electoral cycles, including local elections in 2023, presidential elections in 2024, and parliamentary elections in 2025. These cycles have been characterised by heightened political competition and a pronounced geopolitical dimension. In such contexts, political actors and their affiliates have increasingly relied on digital spaces to influence public opinion, mobilize supporters, and discredit opponents.

International research demonstrates that electoral periods create favourable conditions for the intensification of disinformation campaigns, including those exploiting gender dynamics. In Moldova, monitoring and election analysis reports indicate that these practices often take the form of disproportionately targeted attacks against women active in politics, public administration, media, and civil society—particularly those with high public visibility.

THE INFORMATION AND DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT



Digital platforms have significantly lowered the cost of producing and disseminating information, enabling the rapid circulation of manipulative content. Within this ecosystem, gender-based disinformation takes diverse forms, ranging from explicitly false content to insinuating or stereotypical messages that may not directly challenge facts but instead undermine women's credibility, competence, and legitimacy in the public sphere.

Such content typically relies on:

- ✓ Pre-existing gender stereotypes;
- ✓ Traditional social norms regarding the roles of women and men;
- ✓ Differentiated expectations concerning women's public behaviour in public life.



Figure 1. Key characteristics of the information environment in Moldova

GENDER NORMS AND POWER RELATIONS



Although Moldova's legal framework promotes gender equality¹, social and cultural norms continue to influence how women's political participation

is perceived. As women become increasingly visible in public life, both in greater numbers and as distinct voices, they are often assessed not only on professional performance but also on their conformity to traditional gender roles. This dynamic exposes them to a heightened risk of personalized attacks.



Figure 2. GBD strategies exploiting power asymmetries

Such narratives do not emerge spontaneously. They are embedded in existing social structures, making them easily recognisable to audiences and, consequently, more effective as tools of manipulation.

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION AS A RECURRING POLITICAL TACTIC



The significance of this phenomenon lies not only in its impact on the individuals directly targeted, but also in its broader consequences

for the quality of the democratic process. When gender-based disinformation becomes a routine instrument of political competition, it discourages women's participation, narrows the diversity of voices in the public sphere, and normalises forms of symbolic exclusion.



Figure 3. Converging drivers of GBD as a recurring tactic in Moldova

II. GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION: CONCEPT AND DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

Gender-based disinformation represents a specific form of informational manipulation involving the intentional production and dissemination of false or misleading content that exploits gender. It leverages stereotypes, social norms, and structural inequalities **to undermine women’s legitimacy, credibility, and authority** in public life. Unlike other forms of disinformation, it primarily **targets the individual’s gender identity** rather than their policy positions or political ideas.

According to the Organisation for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), informational violence and abuse directed against women in politics include “acts or behaviours intended to intimidate, discredit, or silence women based on their gender.”² In this context, gender-based disinformation can be understood as an informational component of this broader continuum of violence.

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION VERSUS GENERAL POLITICAL DISINFORMATION



While gender-based disinformation often emerges in political contexts, it is distinctly differentiated from general political disinformation (GPD) by its **focus, intent, and impact**.

General Political Disinformation	Gender-Based Disinformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Typically targets policy positions, electoral platforms, government decisions, or ideologies; Influences opinions and electoral behaviour through persuasion or deception. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not focus on the substantive ideas promoted by an individual; Targets character, morality, personal life, or “fitness” for leadership roles; Relies on pre-existing gender expectations and stereotypes.

Figure 4. Differences Between GPD and GBD

The **#ShePersisted** initiative illustrates that gender-based attacks aim to de-legitimise **women’s right to political participation rather than contest their policy positions**. These attacks exploit gender stereotypes and misogynistic narratives to silence them in public discourse.³



IDENTITY, LEGITIMACY, AND INTIMIDATION



A defining feature of gender-based disinformation is that its objective is **not to persuade** but to **symbolically exclude**. Academic literature

emphasises that such attacks are oriented toward reducing visibility and participation rather than changing public opinion.

Political scientist Mona Lena Krook notes that violence and abuse against women in politics function as a control mechanism, designed to delineate who is allowed to participate and under what conditions.⁴ Within this framework, gender-based disinformation becomes an effective tool of intimidation because it exploits existing social vulnerabilities. Such content is often sexualized, moralising, and framed through irony, insinuation, or personal opinion. This makes it difficult to sanction and contributes to its normalisation in the public sphere.



SEX IS WHAT WE ARE BORN LIKE - BIOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION, WHILE GENDER IS HOW THE PERSON IDENTIFIES HIM/HERSELF.

**SVETLANA IGNATIUC,
FINANCE SECTOR, MOLDOVA**

THE DISTINCT IMPACT OF GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION



The impact of gender-based disinformation differs qualitatively from other forms of disinformation. While general political disinformation can be countered by fact-checking, gender-based disinformation affects **identity dimensions** that cannot be “disproved” by presenting accurate information.

According to UN Women, gender-based attacks “have disproportionate effects on women’s participation, contributing to self-censorship, psychological stress, and withdrawal from public life.”⁵

Thus, gender-based disinformation should be understood not merely as an issue of information quality issue but as **a factor that directly affects the democratic inclusion of all citizens.**

Key Clarifications

For the purposes of this guide:

- **Legitimate political critique**, including harsh criticism, is **not equivalent** to gender-based disinformation.
- The essential distinction lies in the **object of attack**: policies and ideas versus identity and legitimacy.
- The **intent to intimidate and silence** is a key criterion for distinguishing gender-based disinformation.

This distinction is essential for understanding the phenomenon and for developing appropriate responses tailored to the Moldovan context.

III. HOW GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION OPERATES

Gender-based disinformation functions through a combination of **informational tactics** and **social triggers** that exploit gender norms, emotions, and the amplification dynamics of digital platforms. In practice, it functions as an ecosystem: initial content (often created in niche online spaces) is repackaged, amplified, and disseminated to broader audiences through high-visibility accounts, co-ordinated networks, and algorithmic mechanisms.

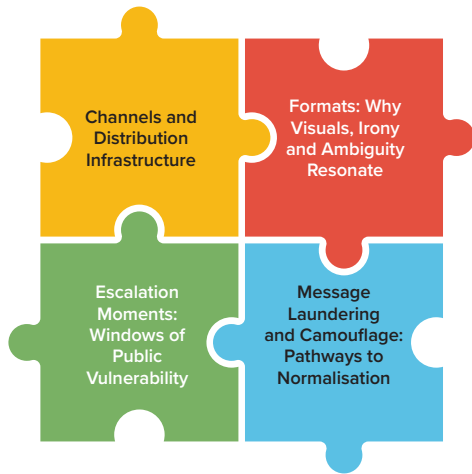


Figure 5. Mechanisms of Gender-Based Disinformation Operations

CHANNELS AND DISTRIBUTION INFRASTRUCTURE



- In the contemporary digital environment, distribution occurs through a mix of:
- Major social platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, X);
 - Semi-closed channels (e.g., Telegram) and thematic communities;
 - Partisan websites and “republishing ecosystems” that recycle and amplify narratives.

A key feature of this environment is the adaptability of perpetrators, who adjust their use of channels in response to moderation constraints and “reach opportunities” (structural pathways that enable messages to reach large user bases). Comparative analyses of electoral campaigns in France and the United States demonstrate the simultaneous use of mainstream platforms and messaging channels for narrative distribution and storage, including communities that facilitate cross-platform dissemination.⁶

FORMATS: WHY VISUALS, IRONY, AND AMBIGUITY RESONATE



Gender-based disinformation spreads efficiently via **low-production-cost, high-virality formats**, including memes, captioned images, GIFs, short video clips, collages, and decontextualised screenshots. These formats compress messages into easily shareable “signals,” often laced with humour or sarcasm, which lower the barriers to sharing.

In Claire Wardle’s Information Disorder glossary, memes (in their modern sense) are described as “captioned photos or GIFs...,” with the most effective often being humorous or critical, making them potent vehicles of disinformation.⁷ Ambiguity (e.g., “just joking,” “just asking questions”) further complicates institutional responses and reduces the likelihood of swift sanctioning.



I WAS SIMPLY ATTACKED BY A TROLL FARM... HUNDREDS OF MESSAGES IN A VERY SHORT TIME.

ANGELA CUTASEVICI, MP

ESCALATION MOMENTS: WINDOWS OF PUBLIC VULNERABILITY



Intensification recurrently occurs during periods of heightened visibility and political competition, when public attention and symbolic stakes are at their highest. Two vulnerability “windows” are particularly relevant:

a) Electoral and pre-electoral periods

Research from the Centre for Information Resilience shows that during elections, gender-discreditation campaigns target not only candidates but also women involved in election administration, thereby eroding electoral trust in the electoral process. As the report notes, “gender-based disinformation undermines voters’ access to reliable information and confidence in elections”.⁸ The same research indicates that such attacks may discourage women from aspiring to similar public roles.

b) Visibility-boosting events and public controversies involving women (e.g., appointments, promotions, of high-profile public initiatives).

Research by the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy⁹ highlights the importance of identifying “flashpoints” and controversies surrounding women in public life in order to track misogynistic mobilisation in real time. This analytical approach is relevant to the Moldovan context, where appointments and electoral periods sharply increase visibility and, consequently, exposure to attacks.

MESSAGE LAUNDERING AND CAMOUFLAGE: PATHWAYS TO NORMALISATION



A common mechanism is **message laundering**, whereby abusive narratives are introduced via ostensibly legitimate contexts (such as humour, satire, lifestyle content), and subsequently redistributed by high-impact accounts. Influencer communities may embed hostile narratives within seemingly apolitical posts (e.g., nutrition or lifestyle content), facilitating gradual exposure to harmful content.¹⁰

European Union (EU) documents explicitly identify gender-based disinformation as a gender-specific online risk, highlighting common narratives that portray women journalists, candidates, or activists as “unqualified” or lacking intelligence/experience.¹¹



GENDERED DISINFORMATION IS AN EARLY WARNING OF EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND BACKSLIDING OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS. IT IS ALSO A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT.

LUCINA DI MECO, CO-FOUNDER OF #SHEPERSISTED

WHY GENDERED, EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES SPREAD EFFECTIVELY

Their efficacy stems from a combination of three key factors:

(1) Exploiting “ready-made” stereotypes.

Gender-based narratives align with pre-existing cultural patterns relating to women’s “fitness”, morality, and social roles. This alignment reduces the need for factual evidence while amplifying emotional responses and reinforcing social assumptions.

(2) Algorithmic rewards for sensational, divisive content.

The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy notes that platform algorithms boost sensational and misleading content in order to maximise user engagement.¹² As a result, emotional and polarising messages often gain a structural advantage in the distribution, regardless of their factual accuracy.

(3) Acceleration through digital infrastructure.

The International Media Support observes that digital infrastructure has created “new tools to increase the scale, omnipresence, and speed” of online violence, including gender-based disinformation. Rather than merely “mirroring” offline misogyny, digital environments can intensify and accelerate it.¹³

As a result, gender-based disinformation thrives when it:

1. Targets high-visibility moments (elections, controversies, appointments, or promotions);
2. Employs viral, highly shareable formats (memes, short videos, collages, insinuations);
3. Circulates through mixed networks (mainstream platforms and semi-closed channels, including “manosphere” groups);
4. Activates emotional triggers and gender stereotypes while benefiting from algorithmic amplification;
5. Camouflages as “jokes,” “satire,” or “opinions,” making it harder to challenge or sanctions.



IV. RECURRING PATTERNS IN MOLDOVA AND GAPS BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Monitoring conducted in 2024 and 2025 in Moldova points to a clear conclusion: gender-marked disinformation and informational violence are not marginal phenomena but recurrent delegitimisation tactics, rapidly activated during key political moments, such as elections, appointments, or crises, and amplified by polarised media and digital ecosystems. In practice, these attacks operate on dual levels:

- (1) Undermining the individual, targeting identity, morality, and perceived “respectability”;
- (2) Reactivating stereotypes about women’s roles, transforming political competition into cultural confrontation.

DISPROPORTIONATE TARGETING AND INTIMIDATION EFFECTS



Monitoring conducted by Moldovan think tank and rights group WatchDog.MD states that “women remain targets of defamation and discrimination,

especially when promoted to public positions”.¹⁴ Gender-based disinformation reinforces stereotypes that erode women’s legitimacy in public roles. The report documents narratives such as “women are unworthy of certain public positions,” accompanied by derogatory labels, such as “hysterical” applied to women in office. This framing shift debate from public decisions and toward personal attributes such as “temperament” or perceived leadership “fitness.”

Illustrative interviews, including one featured in this guide from Moldova.org, confirm this dynamic. Anastasia Nikita, athlete and former MP, described entering politics as “the nightmare of my life,” marked by sexist labelling and personal denigration: “There are sexist and very ugly labels, and you don’t even know how to respond.”¹⁵ These statements illustrate the mechanism of identity-based delegitimisation identified in monitoring over the past three years.

INTENSIFICATION DURING ELECTORAL PERIODS AND “ESCALATION MOMENTS”



A consistent pattern identified in monitoring is the escalation of gender-based attacks during electoral campaigns. WatchDog.MD reports that during both the 2023 and 2024 monitoring periods,¹⁶ the issue of LGBTQI+ rights was instrumentalised in electoral discourse and framed as a “social peril”, thus illustrating how identity-based narratives can be mobilized during moment of heightened political competition.

Testimonies from women in public life corroborate this trend. Nina Cereteu, mayor of Drochia and former MP, described the atmosphere during the 2025 campaign: “The last campaign felt harsher toward women, especially online, with stigmatisation, aggression and overt sexism.” Similarly, MP Angela Cutasevici reported coordinated digital attacks: “I was simply attacked by a troll farm... hundreds of messages in a very short time.” These accounts point to organised digital amplification, particularly during periods of electoral competition.

According to Cristina Pereteatcu, State Secretary at the Ministry of Energy, women in public life are often subjected to heightened scrutiny during campaigns. “During electoral periods, standards seem to double for women,” she notes. “Competence is questioned much more quickly, and the discussion frequently shifts from results to appearance or age.” Such patterns suggest that these attacks are not isolated incidents but reflect a broader political culture in which female authority continues to be assessed through stereotypical lenses.

From a media perspective, journalist Victoria Dodon highlights the speed at which such narratives circulate online. “In campaigns, sexist narratives spread faster on platforms like Facebook, Telegram or TikTok. Attacks are coordinated and often focus on women’s personal lives or physical appearance rather than their political positions.” She also emphasises that artificial amplification can create the illusion of widespread public consensus.

During the 2025 elections, Mariana Dimcenco, President of the Strășeni district, experienced what she calls a “parallel campaign”. “It wasn’t just a competition of ideas or programmes,” she explains. “Alongside it ran a campaign targeting my credibility as a woman—my family, my age and my role as a mother.” Such attacks affect not only the individuals targeted but also send a discouraging signal to other women considering entering political life.¹⁷

PERSISTENT MEDIA IMBALANCES



Monitoring conducted by the Independent Journalism Center (IJC) during the 2024 presidential campaign found that men were cited or featured

significantly more often in the analysed media materials: approximately 54.5% men compared with about 29% women. These figures are relevant because a media space dominated by male voices reduces symbolic counterweights and available expertise when gender-marked attacks occur.

In small communities, reputational impact is amplified. Svetlana Petreanu, President of a District Electoral Council, described how online attacks spilled over into everyday interactions: “When I entered shops, everyone stared [at me] strangely... whispering behind my back.”¹⁹ Digital disinformation thus becomes an instrument of direct social pressure.

UNDER-REPORTING AND EVIDENCE - RESPONSE GAPS



A study conducted by the Council of Europe in 2024 on the digital dimension of violence against women in Moldova highlighted the lack of harmonised

data and the need for coordinated policies to better understand the scale of the phenomenon.²⁰ Experiences shared by women in public office also reveal the limits of institutional response. Svetlana Petreanu described difficulties encountered in court during the 2025 parliamentary elections: “The entire burden of proof fell on me... while the perpetrator sat comfortably.”²¹ Such reversals of the burden of proof contribute to under-reporting and discourage victims from seeking legal redress.

REGIONAL CONTRAST: ROMANIA AND UKRAINE



Moldova’s patterns mirror broader regional trends. In Romania, monitoring conducted by Expert Forum and the FILIA Centre highlights the intensification of sexist attacks during electoral campaigns and the use of social networks to delegitimise female candidates through references to personal lives and morality.

In Ukraine, analyses by Detector Media and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) document coordinated online campaigns targeting women in public life, often exploiting traditional stereotypes to undermine their authority. Moldova therefore fits into a wider regional pattern where political polarisation and digital dynamics amplify pre-existing gender inequalities.

Key findings

The available quantitative and qualitative evidence points to four recurring realities:

- Disproportionate targeting of women in public life;
- Intensification during electoral periods;
- Persistent gender imbalances in media representation;
- Gaps between the scale of the phenomenon and institutional response capacity.

These findings underscore the need for a coherent framework for identification, reporting, and intervention, tailored to the target groups addressed in this guide.

V. IMPACTS OF GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION ON DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Gender-based disinformation generates effects that extend far beyond the experiences of individual targets. International evidence and Moldova-specific findings reveal impacts across three interconnected levels: individual, political, and societal. Taken together, these effects phenomenon constitute a **systemic risk to democratic processes**.

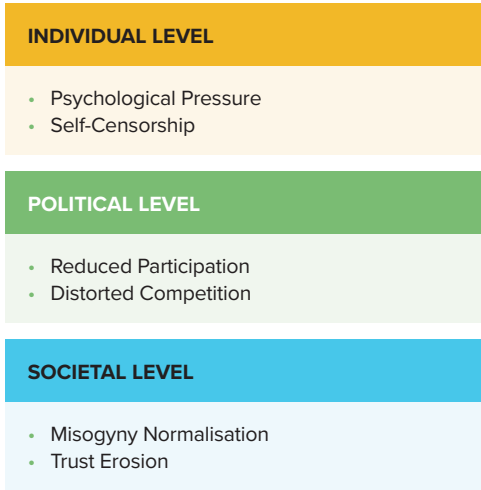


Figure 6. The consequences of gender-based disinformation across levels

In summary, gender-based disinformation should not be understood merely as a form of harassment in online and public spaces. At the individual level, it produces self-censorship and withdrawal. At the political level, it distorts competition and reduces participation. At the societal level, it normalizes misogyny and erodes trust in institutions.

For these reasons, gender-based disinformation must be analysed and addressed as a **systemic democratic risk** that affect the functioning of pluralism and the quality of political representation, rather than as an isolated problem affecting only individual public figures.



INDIVIDUAL LEVEL: PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE AND SELF-CENSORSHIP



At the individual level, the most common effects include:

- Stress and anxiety;
- Temporary withdrawal from online spaces;
- Avoidance of public exposure;
- Self-censorship.

In Moldova, testimonies from interviewees, including those collected in the first national study on violence against women in politics conducted by UN Women,²² directly reflect this psychological pressure. Respondents describe sleepless nights, temporary withdrawal from online spaces, and difficulties managing public stigmatisation. In this context, self-censorship often becomes an individual coping strategy, but with broader consequences for democratic pluralism.



POLITICAL LEVEL: REDUCED PARTICIPATION AND DISTORTED COMPETITION



At the political level, gender-based disinformation affects:

- Women's willingness to run for office;
- The fairness of electoral competition;
- Proportional representation.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) emphasises that violence and intimidation against women in politics “discourage participation and undermine the integrity of democratic processes.”²³

Similarly, regional analysis by the European Commission shows that online intimidation can lead women candidates to reduce their public engagement or withdraw from political activity, thereby affecting the fairness of democratic competition.²⁴

Monitoring in Romania and Ukraine by Expert Forum and Detector Media reveals comparable dynamics: coordinated online campaigns distort electoral competition by focusing on personal attacks rather than policy debate. Political competition thus becomes unequal not only in terms of resources but also through the systematic exploitation of gender vulnerabilities.



SOCIETAL LEVEL: MISOGYNY NORMALISATION AND TRUST EROSION



At the societal level, the impacts are more diffuse but equally significant.

Recurrent and unsanctioned sexist attacks contribute to:

- The normalisation of misogyny;
- The reinforcement of gender stereotypes;
- The erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

The 2024 Council of Europe study emphasises the need for coordinated policies to understand and prevent normalisation.²⁵ Academic literature further suggests that when attacks on women are perceived as simply “part of the political game”, symbolic exclusion becomes banalised. Political scientist Mona Lena Krook argues that such violence is not merely a reaction to political conflict but a strategy to preserve existing power hierarchies.²⁶ Over time, these dynamics weaken public trust in democratic fairness and undermine representational diversity.

In summary, gender-based disinformation should not be understood merely as a form of harassment in online and public spaces. At the individual level, it produces self-censorship and withdrawal. At the political level, it distorts competition and reduces participation. At the societal level, it normalizes misogyny and erodes trust in institutions.

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VI. RESULTS FRAMEWORK: PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

The analysis presented above shows that gender-based disinformation produces cumulative effects on individuals, political processes, and the broader democratic climate. To move beyond fragmented and reactive responses, this guide proposes a results-based framework oriented toward systemic change. It identifies three desired outcomes that must be pursued simultaneously.

OUTCOME 1: ENHANCED PROTECTION FOR WOMEN AGAINST GENDERED DIGITAL ATTACKS



The first outcome aims to strengthen effective protection for women in public life against:

- Coordinated online harassment;
- Denigration campaigns;
- The manipulative use of images or personal information;
- Digital intimidation.

Protection should not be understood exclusively as a criminal response, but as a support ecosystem that includes:

- Clear reporting mechanisms;
- Consistent enforcement of existing legislation;
- Rapid procedures for removing abusive content;
- Accessible psychological and legal assistance.

The OSCE emphasises that combating violence against women in politics requires “integrated measures combining prevention, protection, and accountability.”²⁷ Predictable and functional support systems reduce self-censorship and signal that digital attacks cannot be tolerated and normalized as “part of the political game.”

OUTCOME 2: DIMINISHED INFLUENCE OF GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION ON PUBLIC OPINION



The second outcome seeks to reduce the influence of sexist and manipulative narratives on perceptions through:

- Strengthened media, informational, and digital literacy;
- Greater editorial accountability in media organisations;
- Rapid fact-checking interventions;
- Increased transparency regarding the sources and amplification of online content.

Analyses by UN Women show that stereotype-based narratives often gain traction through repetition and normalisation. Reducing the influence of gender-based disinformation does not imply restricting freedom of expression; rather, it means fostering an information environment in which manipulative content does not benefit from disproportionate amplification. Achieving this outcome requires coordinated action by digital platforms, media actors, and civil society.

OUTCOME 3: ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION WITHOUT DISPROPORTIONATE INFORMATIONAL PRESSURES



The third outcome concerns the democratic climate as a whole.

The objective is not only to reduce attacks, but to create an environment

in which women:

- Can run for office without fear of systematic denigration;
- Hold public office without recurrent targeting;
- Are not exposed to disproportionate reputational or psychological costs.

Addressing gender-based disinformation therefore contributes to:

- Fairer political competition;
- Stronger representative pluralism;
- Increased trust in democratic processes.



**WITHOUT EFFECTIVE
PROTECTION,
WOMEN RESORT TO
SELF-CENSORSHIP.**

**WITHOUT CURBING
MANIPULATIVE
NARRATIVES'
INFLUENCE,
STIGMATISATION
PERSISTS.**

**WITHOUT A FAIR CLIMATE,
PARTICIPATION REMAINS
DISPROPORTIONATELY
DISCOURAGED.**

Figure 7. Interdependence of the three outcomes

VII. PRACTICAL RESPONSES: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Achieving the three identified outcomes — enhanced protection, reduced influence of gender-based disinformation, and equitable participation conditions — requires coordinated actions across different stakeholder groups. As a systemic phenomenon, gender-based disinformation calls for responses that are distributed, coherent, and sustainable.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Public authorities play a key role in establishing and enforcing the legal, procedural, and institutional frameworks needed to deter attacks and protect those targeted.

Priority Actions

Consistent clarification and application of existing legal frameworks²⁸

- Ensure uniform interpretation of legal provisions relating to harassment, hate speech, and defamation;
- Clearly distinguish between legitimate political critique and personal attacks targeting identity and dignity.

Functional reporting and intervention mechanisms

- Establish accessible procedures for reporting online harassment;
- Define clear timelines for reviewing cases;
- Ensure transparent communication regarding case handling and outcome.

Systematic data collection

- Monitor and document reported incidents;
- Publish periodic aggregated data on digital political violence.

Strengthened institutional capacity

- Provide training for police, prosecutors, and electoral authorities on gender-based disinformation specifics of gender-based disinformation;
- Strengthen cooperation with digital platforms in addressing illegal content.



THE OBJECTIVE IS NOT EXCESSIVE EXPANSION OF SANCTIONS, BUT ENSURING THE PREDICTABILITY AND CONSISTENCY OF EXISTING FRAMEWORK ENFORCEMENT.

MASS MEDIA

The media play a central role in shaping how narratives are framed, amplified, and internalised by the public.

Priority actions

Avoid uncritical amplification of sexist or manipulative content

- Verify source before relaying viral claims;
- Avoid sensationalist headlines that focus on women's personal lives rather than their public roles.

Promote balanced representation

- Increase the visibility for female experts and sources;
- Conduct internal monitoring of gender imbalances in source citation.

Adopt clear editorial standards on personal attacks.

- Distinguish legitimate public interest from unnecessary exposure of private life;
- Avoid normalising sexist labelling under the pretext of reporting “controversies”.

Collaborate with fact-checking initiatives

- Respond rapidly to false narratives;
- Provide public explanations of manipulation mechanisms and disinformation tactics.



**A RESPONSIBLE MEDIA
ENVIRONMENT
SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCES
THE AMPLIFICATION
OF GENDERED
DISINFORMATION.**

WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE



Women active in politics or public office cannot—and should not—bear sole responsibility for countering gendered disinformation. Nevertheless, certain

preventive and resilience-building practices may help reduce vulnerability.

Priority actions

Online exposure management strategies

- Maintain clear boundaries between professional and personal life;
- Use available comment moderation tools and privacy settings.

Systematic incident documentation and reporting

- Preserve evidence of abusive content;
- Use official reporting mechanisms and legal channels, when appropriate.

Cross-partisan cooperation and solidarity

- Publicly condemn sexist attacks regardless of political affiliation;
- Share best practices for managing pressure.

Building personal and institutional resilience

- Ensure access to psychological support;
- Promote mentoring and peer-support networks.

Towards coordinated responses

Responses to gender-based disinformation should therefore be:

- Proportional;
- Coordinated;
- Results-oriented;
- Sustainable over time.

Enhanced protection, reduced influence of manipulative narratives, and equitable conditions for participation cannot be achieved through single measures or by a single actor. They require gradual shifts in social norms, institutional practices, and political culture.



PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMBATING GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION LIES WITH INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIETY. STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUAL RESILIENCE CAN ALSO HELP REDUCE INTIMIDATION EFFECTS.

CIVIL SOCIETY



Civil society organisations play a vital role in monitoring the phenomenon, promoting public awareness, and supporting victims.

Priority actions

Ensure continuous monitoring and periodic analysis

- Identify recurring patterns and coordinated campaigns;
- Document periods of heightened risk, such as election campaigns or high-level appointments.

Advance media, digital, and civic literacy

- Clarify the distinction between legitimate criticism and gender-based attacks;
- Promote critical thinking skills among young people and local communities.

Provide direct support to those targeted

- Offer legal assistance and psychological counselling;
- Facilitate solidarity networks among women in public life.

Engage in structured institutional dialogue

- Contribute to strengthening regulatory frameworks;
- Facilitate cooperation among public authorities, media actors, and digital platforms.



**CIVIL SOCIETY PLAYS A KEY ROLE
IN KEEPING THE PHENOMENON
VISIBLE AND PREVENTING ITS
NORMALISATION.**

VIII. FROM MEDIA LITERACY TO AWARENESS AND LONG-TERM RESILIENCE

The analysis and recommendations presented thus far demonstrate that gendered disinformation exposes structural vulnerabilities in both the information ecosystem and political culture. Sustainable progress cannot be achieved through isolated or ad hoc responses. It requires systemic, forward-looking transformation grounded in prevention, accountability, and institutional coherence.

Shifting from Reaction to Prevention

Most current responses to gender-based disinformation remain reactive: post-attack interventions, delayed clarifications, or inconsistent sanctions. While necessary, these measures fail to disrupt the mechanisms that enable the phenomenon to proliferate.

Meaningful progress requires a proactive shift toward:

- Early detection of recurring patterns;
- Coordinated interventions before escalation;
- Clear, predictable and reliable protection mechanisms;
- Shared accountability among all stakeholders, including media actors and political institutions.

Prevention also requires acknowledging that gendered disinformation draws on entrenched stereotypes and social biases. Addressing it therefore demands cultural as well as informational interventions.

FROM MEDIA AND ELECTORAL LITERACY TO CRITICAL AWARENESS



Media, information, digital, and electoral literacy provide foundational tools, yet prove insufficient in isolation. Technical knowledge of manipulation tactics does not necessarily protect individuals from their impact when social norms that legitimise misogyny remain unchallenged.

Sustainable progress therefore depends on cultivating:

- The critical evaluation of emotional and polarising content;
- Clear distinctions between legitimate political critique and gender-based attacks;
- Recognition of stereotypes as deliberate tools of manipulation;
- A culture of accountability in public discourse.

Awareness must move beyond technical literacy toward the internalisation of democratic norms—respect, pluralism, and accountability in public expression.

Building Individual and Institutional Resilience

Resilience should not be narrowly understood as an individual's ability to endure abuse. Expecting women in public life to simply "toughen up" against abuse shifts systemic responsibility onto those who are targeted.

Democratic resilience requires structural support, including:

- Institutions that respond consistently, predictably, and impartially;
- Media actors that refuse to amplify harmful stereotypes;
- Communities that actively reject degrading and gender-based discourse;
- Political parties that adopt and enforce clear internal standards of conduct.

In a healthy democracy, participation should not depend on an individual's capacity to endure abuse.

EQUALITY
EQUALITY
EQUALITY
EQUALITY
EQUALITY
EQUALITY



ENSURING COORDINATION AND POLITICAL WILL



No single entity can tackle this challenge alone. Without coordination, efforts remain fragmented, and responsibilities become blurred.

Effective and sustainable progress requires:

- Structured cooperation among public authorities, digital platforms, civil society, and media actors;
- Alignment of standards for moderating and sanctioning abusive content;
- Systematic integration of the gender dimension into information security and democratic governance strategies;
- Explicit and sustained political commitment to addressing digital violence in practice, not only rhetorically.

Political will remains the linchpin. Absent it, legal frameworks stay aspirational, and selective enforcement sustains impunity.



**WE ASKED OURSELVES
WHAT HAPPENS IF 50% OF
THE POPULATION
DOESN'T FEEL SAFE TO
ENGAGE IN A POLITICAL
CAREER BECAUSE OF
WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM
ONLINE? WHAT TYPE OF
DEMOCRACY DO
WE THEN HAVE?**

LUCINA DI MECO, CO-FOUNDER
OF #SHEPERSISTED

ADVANCING SYSTEMIC REFORM IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT



Systemic change involves revising the rules, incentives, and practices that facilitate the amplification of polarising and sexist content. This includes:

- Greater transparency regarding online recommendation algorithms;
- Mechanisms for algorithmic accountability;
- Robust editorial guidelines on gender representation;
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of impacts.

Authentic democratic participation thrives in public spheres where political competition is grounded in ideas, policy alternatives, and performance — not identity-based delegitimisation.

Gender-based disinformation therefore serves as a litmus test of democratic maturity. Addressing it effectively requires:

- Moving beyond isolated and reactive responses;
- Fortifying multi-stakeholder coordination;
- Securing clear and sustained political commitment;
- Investing in a participatory, representative democratic culture and institutional resilience.

Women's political engagement must never be contingent on their ability to withstand stigmatisation, intimidation, or disproportionate informational pressures. Robust democracies actively protect pluralism, ensuring that political competition unfolds within the boundaries of mutual respect, fairness, and public accountability.



OUR ALGORITHMS EXPLOIT THE HUMAN BRAIN'S ATTRACTION TO DIVISIVENESS.

FACEBOOK INTERNAL PRESENTATION
REPORTED IN WALL STREET JOURNAL, 2018

IX. CONCLUSIONS

Gender-based disinformation is neither an inevitable byproduct of political competition nor an insurmountable challenge. It is a recognisable, documented, and preventable phenomenon. The Republic of Moldova possesses the knowledge and tools needed to address and counter it effectively. The next step lies in strengthening implementation and coordination, ensuring that democratic participation is grounded in merit and ideas, not conditioned by the need to tolerate gender-based pressure and stigmatisation simply for being a woman.

The following conclusions emerge:

1. GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION IS A DEMOCRATIC ISSUE, NOT AN INDIVIDUAL ONE



The analysis presented in this guide demonstrates that gender-based disinformation:

- Disproportionately targets women in public life;
- Intensifies during electoral periods;
- Exploits pre-existing gender stereotypes;
- Generates cumulative effects on democratic participation and representation.

Its impacts extend beyond the individuals directly targeted. Through self-censorship, withdrawal, or deterrence, it reshapes the conditions of political competition and affects the quality of representation. Gender-based disinformation erodes democratic inclusion by hindering equitable access to participation and public legitimacy.

2. MOLDOVA HAS SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE AT HAND



Monitoring conducted by civil society, media reporting, and international research reveal consistent patterns:

- Identity-based delegitimation centred on gender rather than policy debate;
- Coordinated digital amplification;
- Persistent representational imbalances;
- Gaps in reporting and enforcement mechanisms.

The phenomenon is neither hypothetical nor marginal. The available evidence is substantial and well documented.





GENDER DISINFORMATION CAN PERPETUATE HARMFUL STEREOTYPES, REINFORCE VICTIM-BLAMING NARRATIVES, AND CONTRIBUTE TO A CULTURE OF SILENCE AND SHAME AROUND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

ANA GHERCIU, DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, MOLDOVA.ORG

3. TOOLS EXIST — THE CHALLENGE IS IMPLEMENTATION AND COORDINATION



Moldova already possesses:

- Legal frameworks addressing hate speech, sexism, and online harassment;
- Functional electoral institutions;
- Media monitoring mechanisms;
- Active civil society expertise;
- Relevant international partnerships.

The core challenge is therefore not a lack of tools, but:

- Consistent application;
- Cross-actor coordination;
- Integration of the gender dimensions into information security policies and democratic governance policies.

4. DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION MUST NOT BE CONTINGENT ON ABUSE TOLERANCE



A robust democratic environment ensures:

- Political competition grounded in ideas and policies;
- Public critique bounded by accountability;
- The rejection of identity based attacks as instruments of political competition.

Normalising gender-based attacks weakens pluralism and undermines public trust in democratic institutions. Countering gender-based disinformation is thus integral to democratic consolidation.



A. GLOSSARY

Disinformation

- False or misleading information that is created and disseminated with the intention of causing harm, manipulating public opinion, or influencing political, social, or economic processes.

Digital Amplification

- The increased visibility and dissemination of content through coordinated sharing, networked distribution, or algorithmic recommendation systems on digital platforms.

Digital Violence

- Acts of harassment, intimidation, threats, or abuse carried out through digital technologies and online platforms. Digital violence may include behaviours such as online harassment, coordinated attacks, the dissemination of abusive content, or the non-consensual sharing of personal information.

Gender-Based Disinformation

- A form of disinformation that exploits gender stereotypes, norms, and social biases to de-legitimise, intimidate, or silence women in public life. Such narratives often target identity, credibility, or morality rather than policy positions.

Gender-Based Violence in Politics (GBViP)

- Violence, harassment, or intimidation directed at individuals in political or public life because of their gender, with the aim of discouraging or restricting their political participation. It may take physical, psychological, sexual, economic, or digital forms.

Gender Ideology

- A term frequently used in a derogatory or politicised manner to portray efforts toward gender equality as an ideological agenda. In many contexts, it is employed in disinformation narratives to frame gender equality initiatives as external interference or as part of an alleged international feminist conspiracy.

Gender Stereotypes

- Generalised and often rigid assumptions about the attributes, characteristics, and roles considered appropriate for women and men. These stereotypes—for example, portraying women as primarily nurturing or men as sole breadwinners—can limit individual opportunities, reinforce inequality, and influence career choices, mental health, and personal development.

Misogyny

- Deep-rooted prejudice, hostility, or contempt toward women. Misogyny functions as a social mechanism that reinforces gender hierarchies and legitimises discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, or forms of violence against women.

Self-Censorship

- The voluntary limitation or withholding of expression by individuals due to fear of harassment, intimidation, social stigma, or other forms of retaliation.

B. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This publication draws on:

- Monitoring conducted in the Republic of Moldova (2023–2025);
- Media analyses and electoral monitoring reports;
- National and international research on violence against women in politics;
- Public testimonies from women engaged in political life;
- Relevant European and national normative frameworks.

The analysis adopts a descriptive and systemic approach. Rather than attributing individual responsibility, it focuses on identifying recurring patterns and the structural conditions that enable the proliferation of gender-based disinformation. To support the prevention and response effects, the guide proposes a results-oriented framework accompanied by practical recommendations that outline the respective assigning clear responsibilities to institutions, media, civil society, and public women.

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**WOMEN ARE TOLD TO
'STAY SAFE', TO PROTECT
THEMSELVES ONLINE.
THE TRUTH IS, THEY CAN'T**

**LUCINA DI MECO, CO-FOUNDER
OF #SHEPERSISTED**

NOTES

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iwpr.net

IWPR Moldova

Mediacor building,
Alexei Mateevici 60 str.,
MD-2009,
Chişinău

IWPR United Kingdom

48 Gray's Inn Road,
London WC1X 8LT
Tel +44 (0)20 7831 1030

IWPR United States

1156 15th Street NW Suite 505,
Washington, DC 20005
Tel +1 202 393 5641

IWPR Netherlands

Almaatsweg 7,
7856 TJ Benneveld,
Netherlands
iwpr-nl@iwpr.net

