

# Applying a Gender Lens to the Study of Misinformation and Disinformation

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## Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on gender-based misinformation and disinformation. It explores three cases where unverified claims, false content, and hate speech were used to attack women, including women in visible positions, to manipulate public opinion and create polarization. The first two cases originate from Bulgaria and Italy, while the third one focuses on conspiracy theories and falsehoods circulating before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions we seek to answer are how misinformation and disinformation employ gender and gender-related concepts and stereotypes and how we can uncover, debunk, and counter such narratives by applying a gender lens. To answer these questions, we analyzed articles published online and identified as containing harmful, misleading, and/or untruthful information by fact-checkers, researchers, and organizations studying disinformation. The analysis is supported by insights from seven semi-structured interviews with experts on disinformation and gendered disinformation, conducted in 2023. Based on the case studies explored, we propose a non-exhaustive list of questions, which those who study and analyze hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation may use to uncover any gender-related aspects.

**Keywords:** gendered disinformation, disinformation, women, stereotypes, gender lens

## Introduction<sup>1</sup> / Uvod

We are observing an increased interest in phenomena widely known as gender-based misinformation and disinformation. When directly manifested, these involve

<sup>1</sup> The paper explores topics related to misinformation, disinformation, and gender-based violence and violence against women. It may include references to or summaries of accounts, stories, and narratives that could be categorized and described as offensive derisive language, harmful narratives, (online) hate speech, cyberbullying, cyber harassment, false information, disinformation, etc. The researcher is approaching these topics with caution and sensitivity and tries to explore the above-mentioned topics from a scientific perspective. The author condemns all forms of gender-based violence, violence against women, and abuse, both online and offline, and considers misinformation, disinformation, and the spread of offensive, untruthful, or harmful language highly malicious phenomena. The reference to specific cases is intended for analytical and illustrative purposes only, as the author's main goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of these phenomena and to efforts to counter them and eliminate their negative impact.

the forthright spread of speculative, false, and often offensive information against women, especially those in visible positions. This is done to humiliate them, cause psychological and emotional harm, and silence them. Indirectly, gender-based disinformation could be employed by malevolent or illiberal actors, who seek to undermine efforts to foster gender equality or combat gender-based violence through laws, policies, and strategies. Another example are the exceptionally harmful anti-vaccine narratives, which linked vaccines to infertility or abortion, thus exposing many women to COVID-19 and other diseases.

The main aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing body of literature that analyzes incidents of gender-based misinformation and disinformation. This will be done through examining three cases where unverified and unsubstantiated claims and false content were utilized to attack women, manipulate public opinion, create discontent and polarization. Thus, the questions we seek to answer are how misinformation and disinformation employ gender and gender-related concepts and stereotypes and how can we uncover, debunk, and counter such narratives by applying a gender lens.

We also explore how disinformation and misinformation spreaders might employ hate speech, stereotypes, and biases to evoke specific sentiments or achieve concrete objectives. The need for greater involvement of gender and intersectionality experts in disinformation-related research and policymaking is highlighted. The paper concludes that investigating gendered disinformation can shed more light on the producers and forms of disinformation and the contexts in which it thrives. Studying these phenomena is essential for strengthening democracy, increasing women's visibility, and building certain groups' resilience to disinformation.

## Concepts and definitions / Pojmovi i definicije

Experts, legislators, and policymakers tend to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. The Report of the independent High-level Group on fake news and online disinformation defines the first as "misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognize it as such" (2018: 10), while disinformation is said to encompass "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (Ibid. 11). Similarly, seeking terminological clarity, Pamment (2020: 2) advises against referring to the spread of misinformation as a campaign because it is not coordinated and has no intent to mislead, although its effects can be harmful. Building on previous attempts to explain disinformation, he suggests defining it as the "creation, presentation, and dissemination of "verifiably false content" for "economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (Ibid. 3). Hence, this study recognizes that disinformation's main components are deceitful content, intentional and organized dissemination for political, economic, or financial benefit, and/or infliction of harm.

The growing body of research on misinformation and disinformation is also informing legislative and policy action in the European Union (EU). The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022) has been open for signature by relevant industry actors that commit to self-regulation to achieve transparency of political

advertising, empower users, researchers, and the fact-checking community, ensure measures to prevent monetization through disinformation, and reinforce the Code's monitoring framework. The binding Digital Services Act (2022) requires companies to introduce functioning control systems to tackle the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content. Bringing together a multitude of relevant actors – fact-checkers, researchers, and media and media literacy experts – the European Digital Media Observatory analyzes disinformation, conducts investigations, and publishes reports and regular fact-checking briefs drawing on the experiences and efforts of EU member states. The European External Action Service and EU member states are taking steps to counter disinformation and foreign interference through strategic communication, raising public awareness on the matter, and increasing the digital literacy citizens of all ages.

Although we have based this study mainly on examples from EU member states, we need to mention a telling recent development from the United States (US). In 2022, the Department of Homeland Security announced the launch of a Disinformation Governance Board to curb this malicious phenomenon; however, shortly after, the Board was suspended, and its designated head, Nina Jankowicz, a recognized expert on disinformation, resigned (Bond, 2022). In the weeks leading to her decision, Jankowicz was subjected to vicious sexualized and gendered attacks that included doxing, encouragement to commit suicide, and death threats against her and her family (Ibid.)

Gender-based disinformation<sup>2</sup> is an emerging topic of interest for researchers and practitioners working to counter not only disinformation but also gender-based violence, especially in the digital world. Lucina Di Meo (2020: 4) has defined gendered disinformation as the “spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women”. Jankowicz et al. (2021: 1) conceptualize it as “a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination”. Importantly, Kristina Wilfore adds that “gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases” which perpetuate a view of women as untrustworthy, unqualified, unintelligent, and unlikable (Di Meo, 2023:7). Similarly to the broader phenomena they derive from, gendered misinformation and disinformation play on people's fears, anxieties, and disappointments and create narratives infused with harmful stereotypes that could provoke these and similar emotions.

Sessa (2020) provides several interesting examples of gendered disinformation based on misogynistic views, among which is the false claim that the celebrations of International Women's Day caused the rapid spread of COVID-19 in early 2020. This illustrates well how false information may exploit people's uncertainty, a climate of panic, and fear from the new disease on one side and existing bias against the feminist movement on the other, to undermine a celebration of women's rights and

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, gender-based disinformation and gendered disinformation are used interchangeably.

calls for equality. More recently, after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, disinformation researchers alerted about the spread of falsified stories about how Ukrainian women considered themselves prettier than Polish women and were stealing the latter's husbands after coming to Poland (Mierzynska, 2022). Versions of this narrative circulated in other Central and Eastern Europe countries and are another example of how untruths (stories about stolen husbands), combined with stereotypical representations (of Eastern European women as promiscuous and devious), could be employed to serve a more significant objective (to persuade the society to oppose support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees). While in Nina Jankowicz's case we see direct personal attacks in the form of false content and hurtful messages, the narrative about the March 8 celebrations shows how gendered disinformation can be utilized to the detriment of ideas and entire social movements.

Some authors suggest that gendered disinformation could be state-aligned, meaning that "actors who are part of a state, or whose behaviour or interests align with those of a state, engage in gendered disinformation to promote political outcomes" (Judson et al., 2020: 7). Importantly, this disinformation is not necessarily disseminated through in coordinated way by the government, as it could also be spread by informal networks that try to protect the government from critique (Ibid.) Hence, the purpose of such disinformation could be to undermine the credibility of a government, take on political and economic opponents, or target issues of social importance (with respect to which the person under attack has expressed a strong stance).

The malicious campaigns, driven mainly by untruths, against both the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) and politicians and activists who supported it, are a case of intentional planting of discord and undermining efforts to tackle violence against women and domestic violence. Sessa (2020) rightly observes that in many EU countries (mostly CEE), the Istanbul Convention was misrepresented – using disinformation tactics – as a product of social engineering and a tool for ushering in the corrupt 'gender ideology.' Importantly, Krizsán and Roggeband (2021: 237) elaborate on the link between the vilification of the Istanbul Convention and the democratic erosion in four countries and argue that the politicization of gender and the Convention both hampered policy efforts to protect women from violence and limited the democratic space available to women.

Studies like these highlight the importance of further exploration of how disinformation could be gendered and how this phenomenon fits into the larger picture of democratic backsliding and attempts to restrict freedom, women's rights, and gender equality.

## Methodology / Metodologija

We investigated three case studies where, potentially, (gendered) misinformation or disinformation was used. The first two cases originated from Bulgaria and Italy, respectively, while the third case focused on conspiracy theories and falsehoods circulating before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The three case studies were explored by means of desk research and an in-depth analysis of primary sources, including journal articles, books, research

reports, and media articles on misinformation and disinformation in the EU. We also collected materials on gendered disinformation and hate speech directed at women in visible positions. After that, discourse analysis on content related to the three cases was performed. Thus, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the language used to construct concrete narratives and portray the women discussed in a very specific way.

The articles we analyzed were published online on information sites identified as containing harmful, misleading, and/or untruthful information by fact-checkers, researchers, and organizations studying disinformation. We are not providing links to the original websites to avoid disseminating unfounded claims, gossip, falsehoods, or harmful narratives. Instead, where possible, we will provide links to reports from independent fact-checkers, journalists, and researchers that debunk the disinformation or condemn the offensive language of the stories. The approach to the selection of articles for each case study is described in the respective sub-chapter.

Our analysis was supported by insights from seven semi-structured interviews with experts studying disinformation and gendered disinformation, conducted in 2023. The interviews were anonymized and, where necessary, the background and expertise of the participants were presented through generic descriptions introduced by [square brackets].<sup>3</sup> Table 1 shows a list of the anonymized interviews.

**Table 1.** List of anonymized interviews / **Tablica 1.** Popis anonimiziranih intervjuja

No	Professional occupation/Sector	Date	Topic
1	Research and teaching (academia)	October 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Bulgarian context
2	Civil society organization	May 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on gendered disinformation and women's rights
3	Research (research institute, think tank)	March 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Bulgarian context
4	Media	April 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Italian context and disinformation narratives
5	Research (research institute, think tank)	May 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on how to do disinformation research
6	Civil society organization	April 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Italian contents and gendered disinformation
7	Research and teaching (academia)	October 2023	Disinformation, with a focus on the Bulgarian context

When exploring language, tropes, and stereotypical representations at the heart of the analyzed stories, we relied on studies that identified techniques for spreading disinformation, propaganda, and deception. For instance, commonly used by propagandists are “the appeal to fear, blaming, demonisation, fabrication, labelling or name-calling, relativisation, and the use of manipulative pictures or videos” (Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021: 10). Importantly, employing linguistic skills and seeking to stimulate emotions is often supplemented by manipulating the information or the context in which it is being presented (Ibid. 12). The DEPICT

<sup>3</sup> For instance, [Person/Interviewee 1] works for [type of actor/institution/organization] in [country]. They have [number of years] of experience in [topic].



categorization encompasses six misinformation techniques: Discrediting opponents, Emotional language use, increasing intergroup Polarization, Impersonating people through fake accounts, spreading Conspiracy theories and evoking outrage through Trolling (Roozenbeek et al., 2022: 2).

Particularly with respect to gendered disinformation, the incorporation of misogyny and gender stereotypes in disinformation narratives, sexualisation, and all types of cyber harassment are commonly used techniques (IGF, 2021: 26). Judson et al. isolated six rules governing related narratives and online behaviour when studying state-aligned gendered disinformation in Poland and the Philippines. These are: “Convince others that women are devious: they are not fit for politics; Denounce women as too stupid for public life; Make women afraid to talk back; Praise women for being sexy, condemn them for being sexual; Show everyone that the strong men will save them; Demonise the values women hold” (2020: 26-32).

These practical frameworks will guide us when we examine the three case studies, as our objective is to unveil the interweaving of gender in stories and narratives.

## Findings and analysis / Nalazi i analiza

### CASE 1: A Song of Vitriol / SLUČAJ 1: Vitriolova pjesma

The Bulgarian case is centered on the vicious smear and disinformation campaigns targeting the politician Lena Borislavova during her term (2021-2022) as the Head of the Prime Minister’s Political Cabinet. In early 2023, Slavi Trifonov, a Bulgarian TV show host and the founder of the “There is Such a People” (Има такъв народ) political party, released an “insulting song describing Borislavova as a “cougar” and insinuating to an alleged affair between her and the Prime Minister” (Kuneva, 2023: 4). The song, which Trifonov tried to describe as a political satire, polarized Bulgarian society. Some shared it on social media, calling it original and funny (and a true representation of Borislavova’s personality and career), while others denounced it as pathetic and disgusting. The Ekaterina Karavelova Foundation’s official position, signed by more than 160 individuals and organizations, criticized the song as sexist and misogynist and noted that under the current international gender equality standards, it could be considered violence against women in politics (Marginalia, 2023).

Other attacks against Borislavova followed. In August 2022, the Bulgarian National Television (BNT), when reporting on a press conference by Kiril Petkov, the Prime Minister at the time, published a photo in which Petkov and Borislavova appeared to hold hands. As it became clear later, the visual was selected among many others; the photographer who took them acknowledged this was an optical illusion in only one of the photos (Mediapool, 2022). Lena Borislavova denied holding hands with Petkov and added: “The first women MPs were elected back in 1946. Alas, over 70 years later, the biggest sin is being a woman who wants to develop professionally in her own right and have an opinion”<sup>4</sup> (Ibid.). Quoting Borislavova’s Facebook status, the Association of European Journalists asked BNT to explain why they have selected

<sup>4</sup>The original quotation is in Bulgarian and reads “Първите жени депутати се избират през далечната 1946 г. Уви, над 70 години по-късно най-големият грях е да си жена, която иска да се развива професионално със собствени сили и да има мнение.”

this photo, marking it as disinformation aiming to discredit not only Borislavova but also women's participation in politics in general (BTVnovinite, 2022).

Gendered abuse against Borislavova proliferated (both on social and traditional media) during and after her term as the Head of the Political Cabinet – she was accused of infidelity and mocked for how she looked like and the way she dressed<sup>5</sup>. As Kuneva (2023: 5) argues, such comments embody and, at the same time, sustain the following narratives: “Women are at least partially responsible for the harassment and insults they are faced with,” “Women in positions of power are likely to have reached and sustain their achievements through sex and immoral behaviour – trading sex for power,” and “Women in positions of power should treat intrusions upon their personal lives as an expected and normal part of being in the public eye.” Borislavova's case has also been used to illustrate a stereotypical representation of women, which is still common in Bulgarian media – as defined by their physical appearance or sexuality, as men's companions, or as victims (Kassova, 2022: 173).

In this case study, we analyzed ten articles (in Bulgarian)<sup>6</sup> about Lena Borislavova, published on two popular Bulgarian information websites (five articles from each). These sites were identified by researchers and fact-checkers as publishing disinformation and fake news, although not specifically with respect to the analyzed articles (EUvsDisinfo, n.d. and Media Eye, n.d.). Elsewhere, these websites were described as sensational and scandalous, as trivializing domestic and gender-based violence (and other important issues) and normalizing these phenomena (Paulsen et al., 2020: 21). We selected articles published during Borislavova's term as Head of the Political Cabinet (Dec 2021 – Aug 2022), focusing on the first five articles that appeared when we performed a Google Search for this period<sup>7</sup>. Table 2 shows the number of views per article as of November 19, 2023.

**Table 2.** Case study on Bulgaria: analyzed articles / **Tablica 2.** Studija slučaja o Bugarskoj: analizirani članci

Information site 1 (date of publication)	Number of views as of November 19, 2023	Information site 2 (date of publication)	Number of views as of November 19, 2023
Article 1 (22.01.2022)	41,979	Article 1 (16.12.2021)	378, 001
Article 2 (24.05.2022)	169, 898	Article 2 (11.06.2022)	616, 773
Article 3 (12.06.2022)	490, 093	Article 3 (11.07.2022)	483, 464
Article 4 (16.06.2022)	91, 432	Article 4 (21.07.2022)	496, 197
Article 5 (04.07.2022)	40, 734	Article 5 (11.08.2022)	185, 566

The tone of all the examined articles was, to a different extent, sensationalistic and critical of Lena Borislavova, addressing her personal and professional life. The

<sup>5</sup> Due to privacy considerations and restrictions related to the sharing of social media content from individual users, as well as due to the author's intention not to disseminate possible misinformation, disinformation, and offensive content, the author has chosen not to include links to or directly quote such sources. Nevertheless, upon request, these sources will be provided to reviewers.

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts from the articles and posts analyzed in this paper, which are in Bulgarian or Italian, were translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> Stories that were a quote from someone's social media post or interview (without commentary) were excluded from the selection.

stories from the second outlet predominantly focused on her personal life, often including photos possibly obtained from her social media accounts. One story contained images of her apartment building, presumably to prove the story's central claim – that Borislavova and her partner, the politician Miroslav Ivanov, have moved to a “dilapidated and unfriendly” building, deemed “unsuitable for a young couple intending to start a family” (Information site 2, Article 5)<sup>8</sup>. Borislavova's relationship with Ivanov was often discussed in a derisive, sarcastic, and even offensive manner, frequently insinuating her involvement with the former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov.<sup>9</sup> For instance, one story (IS1, A4) reported that Lena Borislavova visited the National Parliament “for no apparent reason,” possibly to “show off her engagement ring,” cynically mentioning that “perhaps” she received the ring from her fiancé, who is referred to as her “official partner.” A jargon, meaning a man who was in an intimate relationship with the same woman as another man, was used to describe Miroslav Ivanov in two articles (IS2, A3; IS2, A5). Another article (IS2, A4) claimed that Borislavova's parents do not know about her engagement; furthermore, the word engagement appeared in quotation marks to imply it might be fictitious.

Seven of the analyzed articles insinuate, without any evidence, an affair between Borislavova and then-Prime Minister Petkov. One (IS2, A2) is specifically dedicated to this, claiming that the “affair between Borislavova and Petkov has been going on for years” and asking whether “the Bulgarian taxpayer's money should be used to pay the salary of the Prime Minister's sex friend.” Having been exposed to COVID-19, Borislavova and Petkov have “decided to self-isolate together in a residence managed by the Ministry of Defense,” another story reports (IS1, A1).

One news piece (IS1, A3) seems to be a typical clickbait, as it, in a way, retells an interview given by Borislavova for a Bulgarian TV station, where she discusses relevant political developments. However, the title says that in the article Borislavova will talk about the “indecent recordings” involving her and Petkov and provide details about the conversations they had with their families.

This leads us to how Borislavova (her life, relationships, and morals) was depicted in the articles studied. According to one story (IS1, A5), a Bulgarian TV station, allegedly close to the government, has made a “desperate attempt” to make Borislavova “look good and pure” trying to improve the “government's tarnished reputation.” Another news piece claims Borislavova's relationship with her future mother-in-law is “worsening” (IS2, A3). The article employs gendered stereotypes, implying that soon after her engagement, Borislavova should have been already married with children, and the fact that she is not “is not to the liking” of her future in-laws. The politician has also been described as a “pushy brunette” (IS2, A4) and as the “scandalous/shocking Lena Borislavova,” “the miss, who became famous by association with Kiril Petkov” (IS2, A5).

Borislavova's expertise and work as Head of the Prime Minister's Political Cabinet were also mentioned. One article claims that Borislavova's father “seems not to approve of her political career because he does not show support for her on social media in the same way as Kiril Petkov's father does” (IS2, A4). Another

<sup>8</sup> From this point onwards – “IS [Number], Article [Number]”

<sup>9</sup> The excerpts that follow are provided solely to support the author's analysis and research. They do not reflect in any way the opinions shared by the author. It is not the author's intention or aim to disprove or prove the said insinuations.



story paints a controversial picture of the former Head of the Cabinet. On the one hand, it quotes a social media post by Slavi Trifonov, who “expresses indignation that she comments on every single topic, including energy issues.” Borislavova, the text notes, “seizes/takes away the leadership role during talks.” On the other hand, Borislavova is described as a “de facto shadow Prime Minister, who dictates Petkov’s decisions” (IS1, A2). The reader is left wondering whether this is a positive thing or not. However, given the criticisms against the government in other articles, most readers would possibly think the latter.

The portrayals of Borislavova are not backed by any credible and concrete sources. Statements such as “many suspect that the relations between the two (Borislavova and Petkov) go beyond the professional one” and “according to political analysts, women in the shadows play a key role in the current government” (IS1, A2) are illustrative in this regard. The articles analyzed do not contain an indication that Lena Borislavova has been asked to comment on or respond to the claims made about her.

## CASE 2: A Narrative Is Born / SLUČAJ 2: Narativ je rođen

Cases like Borislavova’s are not uncommon in Italy. Valeria Fedeli, a former Senator and a former Minister of Education (2016-2018) was targeted by gendered disinformation and vitriol because she supported a bill on gender-responsive education, which, as wrongly suggested, would confuse children about their sexual identity (Di Meco, 2023: 14). The disinformation attacks against Maria Elena Boschi, a Member of the Chamber of Deputies and former minister, have been particularly sexist and misogynistic – for instance, a fake photo showed Boschi reading a paper upside down, as if to reinforce the stereotype that beauty is equal to stupidity (Di Meco & Apolito, 2023: p. 23).

Italian women journalists also risk exposure to hate speech and abuse. In 2021, Greta Beccaglia was harassed by a fan outside the stadium while reporting after a football game; instead of condemning the fan’s behaviour, her colleague at the TV studio told her not to get angry about it (EFJ, 2021). In October 2023, a collaborative effort between academia and journalism led to the creation of *Osservatorio indipendente sui media contro la violenza nel linguaggio sulle donne*<sup>10</sup>, which monitors harassment and hate speech and deconstructs stereotypes in journalistic accounts of femicide and rape (Giulia Giornaliste, 2023).

The attacks against Valeria Fedeli are another example of how gender can be utilized to instigate confusion, polarization, and even misinformation (if not disinformation) – namely, through claims that talking to children about gender equality and sexual education in school would harm them. A recent case demonstrates how a story can cross borders and evolve into misinformation. A photo of a page from an Italian sexual education book for teenagers and young adults was shared on Bulgarian Facebook pages. It was described as a textbook for primary schools in Italy, which teaches children that “we are all hermaphrodites” (debunked by Bosse, 2023). According to the fact-checker website: a) the Italian publisher explained the book is only for young people over the age of 14; b) an Italian education union said that the claim the book was used in schools is unfounded; c) even the Italian pro-life

<sup>10</sup> Independent observatory on media against violence against women through language.

activist who took the photo did not argue the book is used in schools (Ibid). However, the narrative that reached Bulgarian social media was skewed and fabricated.

Thus, as an Italian case study, we explore what seems to be the 'birth' of a disinformation story. In November 2023, the Italian university student Giulia Cecchettin disappeared after meeting her ex-boyfriend; her body, with multiple stab wounds, was found in a ravine a few days later, while her ex-boyfriend, and main suspect, was detained in Germany (Carbonaro, 2023). Here, we will look at nine articles in Italian published, in the three days after the discovery of Cecchettin's body, on a website that has been previously identified as spreading fake news and anti-immigration messages (IDMO, 2021 and ESOC, 2020). Two articles were published on November 18, 2023, three – on November 19, 2023, and four – on November 20, 2023. There is no counter indicating how many times these were read or shared on social media.

The first article (A1, 18.11.2023), tagged as "Breaking News" and "Immigrant Crimes", says that while the death of "poor Giulia Cecchettin" seems to have been caused by her ex-boyfriend, not enough attention was paid to the fact that 28% of femicides have been carried out by foreigners (19 women in 9 months). Providing a link to another text from September 28, the author claims that despite existing evidence, "the dogs" (we assume this is the media) continue to spread propaganda against Italian men. According to the second article from November 18, 2023, the "multinational Elly Schlein<sup>11</sup>" is using the death of "poor Giulia Cecchettin" to push for gender education at schools while nothing is being done to stop the "invasion" from immigrants. The article also includes a post by Francesca Totolo, who has almost 40,000 followers on X, in which she refers to herself as "allergic to toxic feminism".

When it comes to coverage from November 19, 2023, one article reiterates that Cecchettin's death is being used to "indoctrinate children into gender" and says that calls for the eradication of archaic masculinist culture are an attempt to "collectively castrate Italian men." The second story from the same day praises the victim's uncle for making "the most sensible argument" by saying that the guilt to be borne is individual and should not be attributed to the family, "let alone to the "patriarchal society." The third analyzed article from November 19, 2023, clarifies why Cecchettin's uncle's comments are pertinent. It refers to an interview with the victim's sister, who says that the suspect (the ex-boyfriend) should not be labeled as a 'monster' because a monster is someone who exists outside of society; instead, he is a child of patriarchal society and rape culture. In a derogatory way, Cecchettin's sister is described as wearing a nose ring and looking like someone "coming out of a community center."

The mocking and vile comments about the victim's sister, Elena Cecchettin, intensified on the next day, November 20, 2023. This appears to be provoked by her call to eradicate toxic culture, which leads to femicide. One of the publications is a social media post made by Stefano Valdegamberi, a Regional Counselor (*Consigliere Regionale*) of Veneto region, who called the young woman's TV interview an "ideological message prepared beforehand" and noted that society should rather talk about Satanism, as Elena Cecchettin was wearing a "sweatshirt with Satanist

<sup>11</sup> Elly Schlein is the current (as of November 2023) Secretary of the Democratic Party. She is openly bisexual and has declared herself a feminist. She has been the target of numerous hate speech attacks as well.

symbols" (A1, 20.11.2023). After Valdegamberi's post, we find a single sentence saying that the victim's sister was soaked in "community center propaganda<sup>12</sup> and very confused" (A1, 20.11.2023). Another piece (A4) from November 20, 2023, published more comments from Valdegamberi, who continued to push the "Satanist" storyline, wondering how such a person can "climb on a pedestal and start lecturing men." The anonymous author of the post seems to disagree with Valdegamberi's assumptions about Satanism but says that the culprit is "one man" and not "the male" in general. However, the author swiftly dismisses any comparison with immigrants – we cannot attribute a crime to "one immigrant" and not to "immigration" as a whole, because the individual would not have been in the country if it were not for immigration.

The second analyzed article from 20.11.2023 comments on the call of a member of the party Movimento 5 Stelle to eliminate the culture of possession and rape that underlies violence against women. The author asks whether the fact that "a demented man killed a woman means that the government should send transvestites in schools." The third article (20.11.2023) refers to Elena Cecchetti's words as "rants" or "ramblings", which "mask" the intention of the "jackals" from the Democratic Party<sup>13</sup> to destroy the traditional family.

Finally, it must be noted that Valdegamberi's comments were criticized by a large part of the Italian public. Luca Zaia, the President of the Veneto region as of November 2023, distanced himself from the statements of his fellow party member (Redazione Ansa, 2023).

### **CASE 3: Health and Reproductive Rights – a Disinformation Playground /** **SLUČAJ 3: Zdravstvena i reproduktivna prava – igralište dezinformacija**

Women and vulnerable groups (persons with underlying health conditions, elderly people) were gravely impacted by COVID-19. From the beginning of the lockdowns, multiple actors have been warning about the rising cases of domestic violence (EIGE, n.d.). In the US, and in other places and especially during 2020, women of color were disproportionately affected by COVID-19, mostly because they are overrepresented among essential workers who could not work from home or could not afford to lose their jobs (Powell, 2020).

False information and intensive disinformation campaigns, which questioned that the virus existed, accused governments and international institutions of artificially inducing panic, and denied the effectiveness of vaccines, thus exacerbating the risks many women faced. In this section, we look at how COVID-19-related misinformation and disinformation have been gendered. To do this, we explore several narratives spreading in Europe and globally.

Sessa (2022) pinpoints two ways in which women were presented in fact-checked stories during the first year of the pandemic – one (negative) of **women**

<sup>12</sup> In Italian, Centro Sociale. These self-managed centres can be found in many Italian municipalities and are created as places where people can meet and take part in various activities. However, they are also described as "collectives of the ultra-left and the anarchists" - this description was found on another website with low credibility ratings.

<sup>13</sup> The Italian Democratic Party (PD) is often described by right-wing, far right, and nationalistic parties and groups as the flagman of 'gender ideology' in Italy and as opposing traditional and Catholic values.

as **enemies**, aimed at fueling public debate, and another (pitiful) of **women as victims**, aimed at pushing an alternative agenda (although the author clarifies the line between the two might be blurred). The false information's impact on women deepened after several anti-COVID vaccines were approved. At the core of a vicious anti-vaccine campaign was the false claim that inoculation could lead to miscarriages and infertility, thus making disinformation distinctly gendered. Based on their research in Africa, Enhab et al. concluded that COVID-19 misinformation could "exacerbate public health issues by encouraging disease spread amongst pregnant women" and increase pregnancy-related complications and urged for more research on gender-based vaccine hesitancy (2022). A study on ICT and digital media used by refugee women (a very marginalized group) in Hamburg, Germany, found that their insufficient digital access to reliable data and recommendations could increase both their distrust in public measures and their susceptibility to misinformation (Berg, 2022). A socio-demographic analysis in the US found that sharing misinformation causes disproportionately greater anxiety in women, racial minorities, and people with lower education levels (Verma et al., 2022).

Stories about how COVID-19 vaccines damage women's health have been debunked numerous times. Among the claims marked as false were: "inoculation leads to infertility and breast-feeding complications and thousands of people have died after receiving the vaccines" (debunked by Reuters Fact Check, 2021); vaccinating young women will cause "increased stillbirths, miscarriages, disabled children and infertility" (debunked by Full Fact, 2021); "a Pfizer researcher found that the company's COVID-19 vaccine will lead to infertility in women" (debunked by AFP Fact Check, 2020). We should also note another story marked as disinformation, which claimed that the "excessive and unnecessary" quarantines in Western societies were imposed by "matriarchal societies," driven by the wishes of the numerous single mothers "who tend to hysterically embrace new and unverified ideas" – in contrast to the patriarchal societies of China, Iran, and Vietnam (debunked by EUvsDisinfo, 2020).

Anti-vaccine misinformation also existed before COVID-19. For instance, the UN (2019) warned that vaccinations against measles were declining because of misinformation campaigns on social media. Similarly, Broniatowski et al. (2018) claimed that Twitter bots and trolls seek to make vaccination a polarizing social issue and "erode public consensus on the matter," thus putting public health at risk.

Misinformation (or disinformation) on reproduction and abortion poses an equally serious threat to women's health, dignity, and life. Through extensive undercover research, OpenDemocracy exposed a global network of institutions, disguised as crisis pregnancy centers, which, funded by anti-abortion groups in the US, disseminated misinformation to their women visitors – for example, that abortion can lead to cancer or make a woman's partner change their sexual orientation (Provost & Archer, 2020). Some argue that the next infodemic would be focused on abortion and call on authorities to act to "mitigate the impact of misinformation on the increased maternal morbidity and mortality that is expected to result from abortion restrictions, particularly among marginalized populations" (Pagoto et al., 2023, n.p.).

We now discuss how these three case studies could be useful to researchers when they seek to apply gender lens when examining disinformation and/or hate speech.

## Discussion and Research Limitations / Rasprava i ograničenja istraživanja

The case studies prove that abusive comments, harmful gender stereotypes, and sensationalism can be used to produce or fuel mis- or disinformation. A possible motive would be the opportunity to manipulate discourse on topics such as the political representation of women, gender equality, violence against women, and public health.

However, it should be remembered that first and foremost, such mis- and disinformation can cause personal harm to the women who were exposed to it, as well as to their families, relatives, etc. Therefore, we should continue exploring the connections between hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, and online abuse. As noted by Interview Participant 3, when a disinformation story or narrative targets or addresses groups who are more sensitive to the central topic, hate speech can be used to amplify the disinformation's emotional effect. Interviewee 7 referred to attacks against the LGBTI+ community (in Bulgaria and other countries) as an example of how both hate speech and disinformation were employed to vilify a vulnerable group. Participant 6 correctly noted that it is difficult to do research on hate speech and respond to it because states and social media platforms define it in different ways.

The portrayal of Lena Borislavova in the studied articles abounds with stereotypes about women and women in politics and with spiteful and belittling language. While her expertise and professionalism may not be explicitly disputed, they are often mocked and never really discussed in detail. Mentions of her personal and professional life often revolve around her relations with men – her fiancé, her father, the former Prime Minister. Although Borislavova's stances on specific issues are not directly criticized, she is described as "pushy", "playing the victim", and "insistent on being involved in all important political decisions". Interview Participant 1 suggested that the vehement attacks against Borislavova were part of a broader campaign, frequently relying on disinformation and aiming to discredit the government. We believe Borislavova's case illustrates how unverified and false statements and sensationalism may be 'reinforced' through the use of gender stereotypes – particularly with respect to women in visible positions, often presented as incompetent, too ambitious, vain, and having "succeeded" solely because of their connections to men. Mocking or downgrading their work or achievements may ultimately result in the suppression of their voices. According to Interviewee 2, the consequences for women targeted by online gendered disinformation and abuse are overwhelming and life-changing, as they often lose their ability to speak out and express who they are online. This may have a negative influence on other women who have not necessarily been targeted themselves but have witnessed such treatment.



The possibility of malicious statements being used to question and mock calls for women empowerment is evident in the case of Elena Cecchetin. We saw how a tragic story of femicide and loss was, swiftly and for no apparent reason, paired with ‘polarizing’ issues such as gender, sexual education at school, and migration, which have been at the center of various disinformation narratives. Participant 5 pointed out that migration has always been a salient topic in Italy, often appearing as a component of disinformation on other topics - for instance, shortly after COVID-19 appeared, fabricated stories suggested that Africa was its breeding ground for the virus and arriving migrants presented a health hazard for Italy. The same interviewee also recalled that Elly Schlein’s election as Secretary of the Democratic party was met with a wave of gender-based disinformation. In the analyzed posts, Schlein reappeared as the mastermind who exploits a young woman’s death to push forward a hidden agenda – gender and sexual education in schools, already overrun by migrants. The attempt to discredit Elena Cecchetin’s call for eliminating stereotypes and harmful cultural practices through unverified information about crimes committed by migrants and the ‘introduction of gender ideology’ in schools can be seen as an example of *whataboutism*. This technique is frequently employed by disinformation spreaders to deflect attention from the original issue and often relies on fears and uncertainties. Importantly, Elena Cecchetin was also mocked because of her appearance and clothes – a typical trait of gendered hate speech and disinformation.

Particularly relevant to our third case study is a comment by Interview Participant 4, who noted that even though women constitute half of the world population, being a woman sometimes feels like belonging to a minority. The interviewee also pointed out that disinformation attacks usually intensify and worsen in terms of abuse and insults when the attacked woman is black or belonging to the LBTIQ+ community. The third case highlighted the need for an intersectional approach to studying disinformation. It demonstrated that pseudoscience, conspiracy theories and fear-inducing falsehoods may affect persons and groups with intersectional vulnerabilities in two ways. Firstly, such falsehoods could have a direct detrimental effect on people’s health and lives. Secondly, they may cause deeper stigmatization of communities, which are already marginalized and disproportionately affected by diseases and/or lack of access to quality healthcare. Further research in this direction could be crucial. For example, fact-checkers and journalists can introduce specific, gender-related categories and tags (such as “woman”, “woman in politics”, “LBTIQ+”, “ethnicity”, etc.) when they examine and debunk false or misleading stories. In the long term, this could lead to the detection of larger narratives that are either based on topics related to women or vulnerable groups or target such groups specifically.

Drawing on the case studies explored, we propose a non-exhaustive list of questions, which those who study and analyze hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation may use to uncover gender-related aspects.

- How are women portrayed in a story? Is offensive or derogatory language used to describe how they look like, what they do, etc.? What is their relation to the men in the story (*if applicable*)?
- What unverified information about women does the story contain (*if applicable*)?
- What gender stereotypes and biases, if any, can be discerned in the story? (*For instance, does it suggest that women are unreliable, untrustworthy, weak, too emotional, unstable, etc.?*)
- Does the story/narrative include (*what you consider*) hate speech?
- How could the story impact women (*both those mentioned in it and women in general*)? Could it cause physical, emotional, and psychological suffering?
- Is the potential misinformation or disinformation targeting women from vulnerable groups (*ethnic or religious minorities, migrant women, women with disabilities, young women, etc.*)? How are they portrayed?
- How would you tag the story if you had the chance to? Would you consider adding new tags? (*"women", "gender", "ethnicity", "minority", "vulnerable group"*)
- Do you consider seeking the opinion of an expert in gender, intersectionality, gendered disinformation to address these and similar questions?
- Does the examined story fit into a larger disinformation narrative you have been studying and, if so, how? (*For example, the specific story that vaccines affect pregnancy and women's fertility could be viewed as part of the overarching narrative that COVID-19 is a hoax*)

There are limitations to this research. The women mentioned in the Bulgarian and Italian case studies were not interviewed. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the purpose of the research was to analyze stories and articles from the author's perspective based on already finalized desk research. Secondly, the ethical framework within which the research was performed does not provide for interviewing victims of hate speech, abuse, or violence about their direct experiences. However, we believe that interviewing women affected by these phenomena could only enrich future research.

Furthermore, future research must be based on a much larger number of sources and articles. However, we should note that access to lists/databases of websites spreading disinformation can be challenging for individual researchers as it is frequently linked to substantial fees. In addition, studies of hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation in less widely spoken languages are not as frequent as those centering on English. Both reflections highlight the need for even deeper collaboration among researchers, journalists, and fact-checkers speaking different languages.

## Conclusion / Zaključak

For years, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) has been at the center of polarizing political and public discussions. Some political actors and conservative civil society organizations argued that ratifying it would usher in “illegal migration” and “gender ideology”. Consequently, certain EU Member States (incl. Bulgaria, Hungary, and Lithuania) did not ratify this important document, which aims to prevent violence, protect victims, and punish perpetrators. Protests and resistance against the Istanbul Convention were largely driven by fierce disinformation campaigns, which distorted some of the document’s ideas, concepts, and provisions. By exploiting existing stereotypes, misunderstandings, and fears, disinformation-spreaders succeeded in blocking measures that could have improved the promotion of women’s rights.

The ‘fate’ of the Istanbul Convention in these countries reinforces this paper’s main argument – that issues and topics related to women, women’s rights, and gender equality can be utilized by actors to engage in hate speech or launch disinformation campaigns. Therefore, it is essential to have more research on gendered disinformation and the gender-related aspects of misinformation and hate speech – ideally, resulting from collaborations among scholars, practitioners, and journalists. This need is particularly acute when it comes to less widely spoken languages, where hate speech and disinformation are often inadequately researched.

Research collaborations could develop reliable datasets and detailed lists of sources/articles associated with gender-based disinformation or campaigns employing gender-related concepts. This could help researchers expose and analyze broader disinformation narratives circulating over time in different countries. The importance of such research lies its potential to show that gendered disinformation is a threat to democracy, the rule of law, and good governance – just any other type of disinformation does. Importantly, gendered disinformation and hate speech could have a profoundly negative impact on women and discourage them from participating in political and social life.

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# Primjena rodne perspektive u proučavanju dezinformacija i pogrešnih informacija

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## Sažetak

Ovaj rad ima cilj pridonijeti rastućem korpusu literature o rodno uvjetovanim dezinformacijama i pogrešnim informacijama. Istražuje tri slučaja u kojima su neprovjerene tvrdnje, lažni sadržaji i govor mržnje korišteni za napade na žene, uključujući žene na vidljivim pozicijama, s ciljem manipulacije javnim mnijenjem i stvaranja polarizacije. Prva dva slučaja potječu iz Bugarske i Italije, dok se treći fokusira na teorije zavjere i laži koje su kružile prije i tijekom pandemije COVID-19. Pitanja na koja želimo odgovoriti jesu kako se dezinformacije i pogrešne informacije koriste rodno i rodno uvjetovanim konceptima i stereotipima te kako takve narative možemo otkriti, razotkriti i suprotstaviti im se primjenom rodne perspektive. Da bismo odgovorili na ova pitanja, analizirali smo članke objavljene na internetu koje su provjeravatelji činjenica, istraživači i organizacije koje proučavaju dezinformacije identificirali kao štetne, obmanjujuće i/ili neistinite. Analiza je potkrijepljena uvidima iz sedam polustrukturiranih intervjua sa stručnjacima za dezinformacije i rodno uvjetovane dezinformacije, provedenih 2023. godine. Na temelju analiziranih studija slučaja predlažemo neiscrpan popis pitanja kojima se mogu koristiti istraživači govora mržnje, dezinformacija i pogrešnih informacija kako bi otkrili rodno uvjetovane aspekte.

**Ključne riječi:** rodno uvjetovane dezinformacije, dezinformacije, žene, stereotipi, rodna perspektiva.