

# THE MACHINE THAT FOSTERS SHAME

The weaponisation of sexuality  
in anti-gender anti-democracy  
disinformation



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**“The machine that fosters shame”:<sup>1</sup>**

**The weaponisation  
of sexuality in anti-gender  
anti-democracy disinformation**

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1 The authors would like to acknowledge Maya Indira Ganesh, from whose essay, “Between Flesh: Tech Degrees of Separation” (2020), we borrow the title for this work. We are grateful for the work of countless queer and/or feminist researchers on whose work we rely continuously, such as – but not limited to – Maya Indira Ganesh, Nishant Shah, Sonia Correa and Cynthia Rothschild, and the tireless work of organisations like the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). We are grateful for the editorial and substantive support provided to us throughout this process by the APC Women’s Rights Programme team, especially Namita Aavriti, Hija Kamran, Pavitra Ramanujam and Smita V, on whose insights and experience we relied heavily. The author can be contacted at [subhamw@proton.me](mailto:subhamw@proton.me).

# Author's note on timeline, methodology and positionality

This note aims to contextualise this paper for the reader in considering global South feminist theories about feminist research methodologies, which emphasise the importance of subjectivity and positionality.<sup>2</sup>

The paper works with, as its sources, existing feminist, journalistic and scholarly literature on disinformation. The author has reviewed and interpreted information from these source materials to draw some conclusions, which include identifying patterns and potential bases for counterstrategies.

The parameters for this paper were decided by the author and the Association for Progressive Communications' Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) team in September 2023, before the research for this paper began. The paper is organised in a structure which illustrates these parameters. The research period extended from early September to the end of October 2023, when a first draft was submitted to APC.

During this period, new developments occurred which have profoundly impacted the disinformation landscape. This includes, primarily, the ongoing genocide in Gaza being committed by Israel, and the deployment of disinformation in service of justifying the genocide.

The weaponisation of sexuality has been particularly pronounced in these campaigns. Most notably this includes the amplification of uncorroborated sexual violence allegations made by Israel,<sup>3</sup> and a coordinated campaign to discredit and undermine UN Women (the UN agency tasked with gender equality) and feminist activists<sup>4</sup> through the use of these claims.

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2 Wickramasinghe, M. (2010). *Feminist Research Methodology: Making meanings of meaning-making*. Routledge.

3 Rahnama, S. (2024, 19 January). Hamas 'mass rape': How Israel weaponises fear of Muslim men to fuel violence in Gaza. *Middle East Eye*.  
<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/hamas-israel-mass-rape-weaponises-fear-muslim-men-violence-gaza>

4 See here for a statement from feminist activists: <https://stopmanipulatingsexualassault.org>

Tactics also include “pinkwashing” the genocide in Gaza. “Pinkwashing” is a form of disinformation which, in the current context, includes strategies such as the dissemination of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) propaganda about same-sex marriage proposals between members of the IDF despite the fact that same-sex marriage is illegal in Israel,<sup>5</sup> while on the other hand attacking Palestinian activists and allies online by targeting their sexual or gender identity, or with racist portrayals of Palestinian society as inherently homophobic and transphobic.

While this paper does not substantively include an analysis of this issue, we hope it provides a “springboard” for further research and scholarship, and contributes to building a framework which we hope can help make connections between various anti-gender and anti-democracy agendas.

The author considers herself a feminist activist, researcher and communicator with ties to international and South Asian movements. She is from Colombo and is living in New York City.

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5 Israel. [@Israel]. (2023, 11 December). “Shmuel drove to the border to see his partner Dennis, a combat soldier and company commander...” [post]. X. <https://tinyurl.com/49mmnvnx>

# Introduction

There exists a growing body of mainstream journalistic and scholarly work about disinformation which attempts to capture and expose the bounds of a “disinformation industry”, or “disinformation for hire”.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there is a large body of data-based work which looks at disinformation as “computational propaganda” wielded by nation-states.<sup>7</sup> Much of this work uncovers the involvement of “foreign powers”, and the use of bots and trolls.

The public conversation about disinformation tends, therefore, to be framed using a “macro” lens, with concern for its “serious” impact on political and democratic processes. On the other hand, the impact of disinformation campaigns which weaponise sexuality and target communities who are excluded due to gender, sex and sexuality norms, are seen as having a “less serious” effect on politics and democracy, even though the evidence says otherwise.

Despite these conditions, there is an increasing focus on “gendered disinformation”, including from international human rights experts, like the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression (UNSR FoE). Gendered disinformation as a conceptual framework includes examining the gendered dimensions of who is targeted and by whom, and the content and impact of such disinformation.<sup>8</sup>

Our aim with this paper is to explore the specific location of sexuality in disinformation<sup>9</sup> campaigns targeting those standing up to patriarchal and authoritarian regimes of social and political power, going beyond “gender”.

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6 Fisher, M. (2021, 25 July). Disinformation for Hire, a Shadow Industry, Is Quietly Booming. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/25/world/europe/disinformation-social-media.html>

7 Woolley, S. C., & Howard, P. N. (2017). *Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary*. University of Oxford. <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2017/06/Casestudies-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

8 Khan, I. (2023). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, A/78/288*. <https://undocs.org/en/A/78/288>

9 Please see “Annex: Discussion of terms” for an expanded discussion about how we define “disinformation”.

Ideas about women's and gender-diverse persons' sexuality have long been weaponised against those fighting for gender justice and human rights, particularly sexual rights. Indeed, "lesbian-baiting" and "sexuality-baiting"<sup>10</sup> were tools historically used against feminist organising at the international level.<sup>11</sup>

When the women's rights agenda gained momentum through major multilateral conferences such as the World Conferences on Women, disinformation campaigns against feminist activists and the feminist agenda intensified.<sup>12</sup>

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, flyers distributed at the conference claimed that the Beijing Platform for Action "seeks to promote abortion, depraved sexual behaviour, homosexuality, lesbianism, sexual promiscuity and sex for children." Another asked, "do sexual rights and sexual orientation include: pedophilia, and prostitution?"<sup>13</sup>

Conservative state actors who opposed the feminist agenda, and their civil society allies such as religious fundamentalist groups, warned of "Gender Feminists".<sup>14</sup> The label signals many feminists' efforts to include "gender" as a category in law and policy, as a way to understand inequality and promote equality.

Challenges to the inclusion of the term "gender" continue today. Some member states – supported by right-wing organisations – contest the inclusion of "gender" in legal and policy documents, and challenge its inclusion in a variety of instruments, including those meant to combat gender-based violence. Its inclusion has come to be used as a bargaining tool.<sup>15</sup>

Supportive of this agenda are self-proclaimed "gender-critical feminists", or trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs).<sup>16</sup> They take issue with all aspects of what they describe as "gender theory", on the basis that it sets out to create a world beyond binary sex and gender categorisation,<sup>17</sup> and push for "sex-based rights".

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10 The terms "lesbian-baiting" and "sexuality-baiting" indicate tactics like labelling feminist activists "lesbians" or spreading disinformation about their so-called sexual behaviours

11 Rothschild, C. (2005). *Written Out: How Sexuality is Used to Attack Women's Organizing*. International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) & Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. (2020). *Gender equality and gender backlash*. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/Gender-equality-and-gender-backlash.pdf>

16 Please see "Annex: Discussion of terms" for a definition of trans-exclusionary radical feminists or TERFs.

17 Bassi, S., & LaFleur, G. (2022). Introduction: TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9(3), 311-333. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836008>



These disinformation campaigns continue the legacy of a patriarchal practice: rumour and gossip – forms of “casual disinformation”<sup>18</sup> – which historically weaponised sexuality to discredit women, gender non-conforming persons, or those who fought against patriarchal and exclusionary social hierarchies.<sup>19</sup>

The UNSR FoE points out in her 2023 report that while gendered disinformation is not a new phenomenon, it is fuelled by new technologies and social media.<sup>20</sup> Today’s disinformation campaigns that weaponise sexuality are intricately shaped by the explosive potential of digital technologies and the decision makers behind them – importantly, in many unseen and unknown ways.

**These disinformation campaigns continue the legacy of a patriarchal practice: rumour and gossip – forms of “casual disinformation” – which historically weaponised sexuality to discredit women, gender non-conforming persons, or those who fought against patriarchal and exclusionary social hierarchies.**

Disinformation campaigns such as those seen in Beijing in 1995 deliberately conflated distinct issues like prostitution, paedophilia, lesbianism (or homosexuality more generally) and sexual promiscuity, and were designed to invoke moral outrage and panic. As we will explore, similar themes and strategies persist in today’s disinformation campaigns.

There is agreement among many feminists that gendered disinformation is a strategy used to silence those criticising the powerful, particularly women and gender-diverse persons.<sup>21</sup> This is in alignment with the opinion of the UNSR FoE.<sup>22</sup> Structural exclusion and social and state violence exacerbate the impact of disinformation “because [gendered disinformation] reinforces prejudices, bias and structural and systemic barriers that stand in the way of gender equality and gender justice.”<sup>23</sup>

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18 Kamran, H., & Rana, S. (2021). Gossip and Rumor Mongering: Analysing Casual Disinformation from Gendered Lens. In S. Khan (Ed.), *Policy Perspectives on Gendered Disinformation*. Digital Rights Foundation in collaboration with Heinrich Boll Stiftung. <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/HBS-Report-2021-FINAL.pdf>

19 Ibid.

20 Khan, I. (2023). Op. cit.

21 Kamran, H., & Rana, S. (2021). Op. cit.

22 Khan, I. (2023). Op. cit.

23 Ibid.

In this paper, we explore three specific types of disinformation campaigns which weaponise sexuality: 1) the use of deepfake “pornography” to silence women engaged in the critique of powerful actors, and to attack the gender justice agenda; 2) transferences of anti-trans narratives and strategies through disinformation campaigns across borders; and 3) disinformation campaigns about comprehensive sexuality education.

## Chapter 1

# Deepfake “porn” as a tool to silence and delegitimise critiques of anti-gender and anti-democracy actors

We discuss the issue of deepfake “pornography”,<sup>24</sup> or non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery, by considering that it is a form of gendered disinformation that is increasingly used to silence those who challenge patriarchal and authoritarian power. The UNSR FoE observed in her report in 2021 that, “Digital technology has made it possible to share in new ways texts, images and videos, including ‘deep fakes’ [...] that can give a distorted picture of reality.”<sup>25</sup>

## Non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery as a tool to silence journalists, activists, politicians and critics of the state

While the impact of non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery has been widely reported for its impact on celebrity women in the global North<sup>26</sup> and global South,<sup>27</sup> public discourse surrounding this issue has largely failed to address the harms visited upon women journalists, activists and politicians, ordinary women and girls in many contexts, and the gender justice agenda more broadly.

In November 2018, prominent Indian journalist Rana Ayyub publicly wrote about the fact that her likeness had been digitally embedded, through the use of deepfake technology, onto a sexually explicit video.<sup>28</sup> This video was then widely shared on social media by her detractors. Ayyub noted that by the time the deepfake video bearing her likeness arrived on social media networks, she had already been the target of several disinformation campaigns, including the dissemination of doctored tweets made to seem like they were from her Twitter (now X) account, claiming she hated India and hated Indians.<sup>29</sup>

Rana Ayyub proudly wears her identity as a Muslim woman. In addition, her work as a journalist questions India’s ruling party’s anti-minority policies and politics, as well as the anti-democracy aspects of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s agenda.

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24 Please see “Annex: Discussion of terms” for a more extensive explanation as to why we use “pornography” in this way, within quotes.

25 Khan, I. (2021). *Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan*. <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/47/25>

26 Manavis, S. (2024, 31 January). The danger of deepfakes goes far beyond Taylor Swift. *New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2024/01/taylor-swift-deepfakes-online-safety>

27 Raj, A. (2023, 28 November). India to have deepfake regulations. *Tech Wire Asia*. <https://techwireasia.com/11/2023/why-does-india-need-new-deepfake-technology-regulations/>

28 Ayyub, R. (2018, 21 November). I Was The Victim Of A Deepfake Porn Plot Intended To Silence Me. *Huffington Post*. [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/deepfake-porn\\_uk\\_5bf2c126e4b0f32bd58ba316](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/deepfake-porn_uk_5bf2c126e4b0f32bd58ba316)

29 Ayyub, R. [@RanaAyyub]. (2022, 26 January). “These two women have made a hate video against me...” [post]. X. <https://twitter.com/RanaAyyub/status/1486321315766480901?lang=en>

Her criticism of Modi includes her investigation of the 2002 Gujarat violence,<sup>30</sup> an anti-Muslim pogrom which left over a thousand people dead under Modi's leadership as then-Chief Minister of Gujarat.

So who are Ayyub's detractors? In India's case, the targeting of journalists and activists critical of the government is almost a state policy: the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Modi and his cohort of trusted statesmen set the tone, and a widespread network of Hindu supremacist groups and ideologues who support or are affiliated with Modi and the BJP, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist group of which Modi was a member as a young man, carry out the violence.

**Reporters without borders ranked India 161 out of 180 countries in its 2023 world press freedom index, and reports note that rape and death threats online are commonplace for India's women journalists. The weaponisation of sexuality is not unusual in these attacks. For example, India's women journalists are often called "presstitutes", invoking prostitution.**

For these groups, targeting women journalists is a core tactic. Reporters Without Borders ranked India 161 out of 180 countries in its 2023 World Press Freedom Index,<sup>31</sup> and reports note that rape and death threats online are commonplace for India's women journalists.<sup>32</sup> The weaponisation of sexuality is not unusual in these attacks. For example, India's women journalists are often called "presstitutes",<sup>33</sup> invoking prostitution (not unlike the conservative anti-gender campaigns of Beijing, 1995).

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30 Ayyub, R. (2022, 27 March). An exclusive excerpt from my undercover investigation, 'Gujarat Files'. *Rana Ayyub's Newsletter*. <https://ranaayyub.substack.com/p/gujarat-files-excerpt-rana-ayyub-modi>

31 Reporters Without Borders. (2023). Asia - Pacific Sclerotic one-party regimes and media control by oligarchs. <https://rsf.org/en/classement/2023/asia-pacific>

32 Basu, N. (2022, 12 May). Women journalists trolled and targeted: India. *Institute of Commonwealth Studies*. <https://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/blog/women-journalists-trolled-and-targeted-india>

33 Reporters Without Borders. (2018, 7 May). How women have to fight to be journalists in India. <https://rsf.org/en/how-women-have-fight-be-journalists-india>

The problem is much bigger than a single case. It is no coincidence that a few years after Ayyub wrote about discovering her likeness on a deepfake “porn” video in 2018, two apps for the “auctioning” of Muslim women – including very prominent Muslim journalists and activists – appeared in the Indian digital landscape.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to journalists, other women in the public eye known for their criticisms of the state, such as politicians and activists, also frequently endure other forms of violence online, such as being targeted by highly coordinated “troll armies” or threatened.<sup>35</sup>

These women are attacked for being vocal about state policies which harm and discriminate against communities on the basis of caste, religion and several other factors in India. The use of non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery must therefore be seen as part of a continuum of targeted technology-facilitated gender-based attacks, aimed at discrediting women critics of powerful actors.

## Non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery used to target ordinary women and girls

In some contexts, ordinary young women and girls are increasingly targeted by non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery. Similar to the epidemic of the non-consensual sharing of images and videos originally taken for private consumption, this new trend threatens women and girls with public shame, and emerged about half a decade ago.<sup>36</sup>

For example, in Spain, it was reported that more than 20 girls aged between 11 and 17 were targeted in a campaign of non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery, with circulation via WhatsApp and Telegram channels.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Thomson Reuters Foundation. (2022, 10 January). ‘Auction’ of India’s Muslim women shows tech weaponised for abuse. *Al Jazeera*.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/india-bulli-bai-app-auction-muslim-women-tech-weaponised-abuse>

35 Mackintosh, E., & Gupta, S. (2020, 22 January). Troll armies, ‘deepfake’ porn videos and violent threats. How Twitter became so toxic for India’s women politicians. *CNN*.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/22/india/india-women-politicians-trolling-amnesty-asequals-intl/index.html>

36 Burgess, M. (2023, 16 October). Deepfake Porn Is Out of Control. *Wired*.  
<https://www.wired.com/story/deepfake-porn-is-out-of-control>

37 Hedgecoe, G. (2023, 23 September). AI-generated naked child images shock Spanish town of Almendralejo. *BBC*.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66877718>

In the USA, from Washington to New Jersey, parents of affected girls lead the charge for legislative change, after high school students' faces were embedded without their consent onto sexually explicit material, and distributed throughout school communities.<sup>38</sup>

International organisations affirm that international human rights law and international instruments such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ensure protections against non-consensual deepfake content.<sup>39</sup>

Research shows that major technology corporations play their own role in this, whereby the majority of non-consensual deepfake sexual images are easily discovered and consumed via search engines hosted by companies such as Google and Microsoft.<sup>40</sup>

## Understanding the “deepfake”

The technologies used for deepfakes are AI-powered programmes which “deeply” embed aspects of one image (including a moving image) in another image, hiding traces of alteration. The machine-learning aspects of the programme quickly find the ways in which an alteration can be discovered, while another part of the programme works simultaneously to obfuscate these signs. These are called adversarial networks, and “they have the capacity to set two artificial intelligence networks competing against each other, one producing forgeries, the other competing to detect the forgeries.”<sup>41</sup>

These technologies, in some form or another, are now widely available to the general public, varying from those with less “realistic” outputs, available for free online, to more expensive programmes available on the market which produce higher-quality results.

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38 Hadero, H. (2023, 2 December). Teen girls are being victimized by deepfake nudes. One family is pushing for more protections. *AP News*.  
<https://apnews.com/article/deepfake-ai-nudes-teen-girls-legislation-b6f44be048b31fe0b430aeee1956ad38>

39 Equality Now. (2024). *Briefing paper: Deepfake image-based sexual abuse, tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and the law*. Equality Now & Alliance for Universal Digital Rights.  
<https://audri.org/resources/deepfake-image-based-sexual-abuse-tech-facilitated-sexual-exploitation-and-the-law>

40 Burgess, M. (2023, 16 October). Op. cit.

41 Gregory, S. (2019, 4 October). Researcher Explains Deepfake Videos. *Wired*.  
<https://www.wired.com/video/watch/researcher-explains-deepfake-videos>

The prevailing context is an alarming one, with the rapid, global proliferation of deepfake “porn” videos, which account for almost 96% of all deepfakes found online.<sup>42</sup> According to a study in 2019, deepfake video websites established in 2018 received more than a hundred million views, and targeted hundreds of women around the world.<sup>43</sup> The study concluded that while non-pornographic deepfake content, such as political content, predominantly features male subjects, deepfake “porn” targets women 100% of the time.<sup>44</sup>

According to researchers and victims’ experiences, this content is created and disseminated by those who have scant regard for the privacy or the rights of the people they are targeting, with attitudes of entitlement: “Some seem to believe that they have a right to distribute these images,” writes Nina Jankowicz, a US-based disinformation researcher who herself was the target of a deepfake “porn” campaign aimed at discrediting her work.<sup>45</sup>

The fact that these videos are “fakes” is at times explicitly acknowledged. Veracity is not the promise. This is evidenced by words like “fake” being inserted into the very titles of some videos. Jankowicz writes: “The images don’t look much like me. Whoever created the videos likely used a free ‘face swap’ tool [...] In some moments, the original performer’s mouth is visible while the deepfake Frankenstein moves and my face flickers. But these videos aren’t meant to be convincing.”<sup>46</sup>

So the pleasure – or sense of validation – comes from something else. An important clue about what that something else is is left in the titles of these videos: the word “humiliated”, for example, is repeatedly used.

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42 Ajder, H., Patrini, G., Cavalli, F., & Cullen, L. (2019). *The State of Deepfakes: Landscape, Threats, and Impact*. Deeptrace. [https://regmedia.co.uk/2019/10/08/deepfake\\_report.pdf](https://regmedia.co.uk/2019/10/08/deepfake_report.pdf)

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Jankowicz, N. (2023, 25 June). I Shouldn’t Have to Accept Being in Deepfake Porn. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/06/deepfake-porn-ai-misinformation/674475>

46 Ibid.



## Deepfakes used to attack trans rights agendas<sup>47</sup>

An emerging issue is the use of deepfake political content to attack trans advocates and trans rights agendas. For example, in January 2023, a doctored video of US President Joe Biden showed him speaking disparagingly about trans persons.<sup>48</sup> The video amassed hundreds of thousands of views in a week, but many users quickly identified it as “fake”.<sup>49</sup> *AP News* reported that “Digital forensics experts said the video was created using a new generation of artificial intelligence tools.”<sup>50</sup>

A series of related online occurrences followed: an AI-generated audio sample of Hillary Clinton (a popular target of US right-wing movements) reading the same anti-trans text from the Biden clip was circulated, and actress Emma Watson purportedly read Hitler’s manifesto *Mein Kampf*<sup>51</sup> (she is seen as a prominent pro-trans figure after she challenged British TERF J. K. Rowling).<sup>52</sup>

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47 We explore anti-trans disinformation further in Chapter 2.

48 Ahmed, T. (2023, 10 May). Minnesota advances deepfakes bill to criminalize people sharing altered sexual, political content. *AP News*.  
<https://apnews.com/article/deepfake-minnesota-pornography-elections-technology-5ef76fc3994b2e437c7595c09a38e848>

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Haynes, S. (2020, 11 June). Emma Watson, Eddie Redmayne and More *Harry Potter* Actors Voice Support for Transgender People. *TIME*. <https://time.com/5851989/emma-watson-transgender-jk-rowling>

## Chapter 2

# Sexuality weaponised in disinformation campaigns targeting sexually and gender-diverse communities

In this chapter, we look at a number of different country contexts in which sexuality is weaponised in disinformation campaigns deployed against sexually and gender-diverse persons – with a particular emphasis on trans persons – and/or gender inclusion policies.<sup>53</sup> We explore how similar themes arise in anti-trans and anti-gender disinformation campaigns across vastly different geopolitical contexts.

## Latin America: Anti-trans disinformation trends

Across Latin America, there is a sweeping trend of anti-trans legislation and measures against gender inclusion.<sup>54</sup>

While Brazil's trans community is still recovering from former president Jair Bolsonaro's explicitly anti-trans state policies and measures,<sup>55</sup> other countries like Argentina, where there has historically been progress on trans rights, are experiencing conservative pushback from local authorities resisting federal policies.<sup>56</sup>

Dozens of bills are being introduced in Argentina, working towards making space for gender diversity in language, and there has been huge resistance to these efforts. For example, in Buenos Aires, the education minister proclaimed that the practice of using letters "x" or "e" to neutralise gendered terms in Spanish should be banned in schools.<sup>57</sup>

At least 10 Latin American countries are witnessing legislative efforts attacking the rights of trans and gender-diverse young people and educators, and freedom of expression more generally.<sup>58</sup> These campaigns in lawmaking are supported by widespread disinformation.

In Peru, the "Don't Mess With My Kids" (DMWMK) campaign weaponised sexuality and created public suspicion of those who are sexually and gender-diverse for many years.

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53 Please see "Annex: Discussion of terms" for a detailed explanation of what we mean when we use the term "gender inclusion".

54 Carbajal, M. (2022, 29 August). How trans rights are being 'weaponised' by Latin American right-wing populists. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trans-rights-lgbt-latin-america-brazil-bolsonaro>

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

This campaign can be seen as one of the precedents to the successful passing of the controversial Law No. 31498,<sup>59</sup> which restricts what educators can and cannot discuss in classrooms with their students, targeting material deemed to be about sexual and gender diversity.

**Anti-gender groups in Peru use a range of online tactics, such as offering online certifications in family counselling from organisations which have no academic licence to do so, to offering children and young adults online activities and clubs where they are introduced to anti-gender disinformation.**

**Today, Peru is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trans person, especially owing to an alarming number of recent murders of transwomen.**

Cardinal Cipriani, one of the leaders of the DMWMK movement, was adept at using communication technologies to promote anti-gender disinformation well before the social media age. He used his radio programme to make statements like, “God’s plan is male and female,” and to rail against “gender ideology”.<sup>60</sup>

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59 Chamaya, M. (2022, 23 June). Ley 31498: Padres participarán en la elaboración de material educativo. *Peru Legal*. <https://perulegal.larepublica.pe/normativa/2022/06/23/ley-31498-padres-participaran-en-la-elaboracion-de-material-educativo-3209>

60 Rivera, P.B. (2017). “Don’t you mess with my children” – Conservative Inter-religious Cooperation in Peru in the XXI Century. *International Journal of Latin American Religions*, 1, 296-308. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320660523\\_Don't\\_you\\_mess\\_with\\_my\\_children-Conservative\\_Inter-religious\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_Peru\\_in\\_the\\_XXI\\_Century](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320660523_Don't_you_mess_with_my_children-Conservative_Inter-religious_Cooperation_in_Peru_in_the_XXI_Century)

The DMWMK movement is now popular online on YouTube, where hundreds of people express their “concerns” with gender-inclusive policies.<sup>61</sup> Anti-gender groups in Peru use a range of online tactics, such as offering online certifications in family counselling from organisations which have no academic licence to do so, to offering children and young adults online activities and clubs where they are introduced to anti-gender disinformation.<sup>62</sup>

Today, Peru is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a trans person, especially owing to an alarming number of recent murders of transwomen.<sup>63</sup>

## **The United States of America: “Groomers” and “butchers” in anti-trans disinformation trends**

In the United States’ (US) southern state of Florida, similar legislation, now commonly known by its opponents as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, was signed into law by the controversial state governor Ron DeSantis in March 2022.<sup>64</sup> DeSantis wages his war against what he deems “woke” politics: a recurring theme, as we will explore.

The passing of this legislation was informed by fervent amounts of disinformation about gender identity and diversity online. While the focus is on creating fear about trans persons through disinformation, a core component of these disinformation campaigns still relies on invoking fears about sex, sexuality and “sexual deviancy”.

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61 Martinez, J., Duarte, A., & Rojas, M. J. (2021). Case Study 1. Peru: How Gender-Restrictive Groups May Lose the Legal Battle, but Win the Communications and Cultural War. In *Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights*. Elevate Children Funders Group & Global Philanthropy Project. <https://static.showit.co/file/knf23xCwQpGjRUnqCreM-A/145396/mmp-case-study-1-peru.pdf>

62 Ibid.

63 Silva-Santisteban, A. (2023, 20 March). Trans rights becomes a life and death issue in Peru. *News Decoder*. <https://news-decoder.com/trans-rights-becomes-a-life-and-death-issue-in-peru/>

64 Diaz, J. (2022, 28 March). Florida’s governor signs controversial law opponents dubbed ‘Don’t Say Gay’. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis>

“Groomer” has become a label commonly used in attacks against trans rights and gender justice advocates in the US who push back against regressive legislation.<sup>65</sup> This label carries with it the implication that teachers, parents, gender justice advocates and anyone opposed to these laws are “grooming” children into “gender ideology”,<sup>66</sup> in an effort to grow their numbers.<sup>67</sup>

Conservative blogs and social media influencers in the US warn about “a transgender fever”<sup>68</sup> – a tide of “transgenderism” – as though it is a contagion, or a trend, wherein trans and gender-diverse people and gender justice advocates are sources of danger. The aim is clear: using the word “grooming” invokes a fear of paedophilia, so-called “sexual deviancy” and the sexual abuse of children.

Video-friendly platforms such as YouTube have become the most popular forums for right-wing conservative “influencers” in the US.<sup>69</sup> Popular, privately-owned and funded right-wing media companies with millions of subscribers like *Daily Wire* rely heavily on YouTube for their viewership, who flock to “podcasts” with influential hosts.

The *Daily Wire*-produced anti-trans “documentary” titled *What is a Woman?*, hosted by right-wing pundit Matt Walsh (who has his own show on *Daily Wire*), garnered 170 million views in one week according to Twitter, where the movie was promoted by owner Elon Musk when he tweeted, “Every parent should watch this.”<sup>70</sup>

TikTok is another increasingly popular platform for conservative voices in the US, where anti-trans disinformation is heavily in circulation among young people.<sup>71</sup>

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- 65 Berg-Brousseau, H. (2022, 10 August). Anti-LGBTQ+ Grooming Narrative Surged More Than 400% on Social Media Following Florida's 'Don't Say Gay or Trans' Law, As Social Platforms Enabled Extremist Politicians and their Allies to Peddle Inflammatory, Discriminatory Rhetoric. *Human Rights Campaign*. <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/new-report-anti-lgbtq-grooming-narrative-surged-more-than-400-on-social-media-following-floridas-dont-say-gay-or-trans-law-as-social-platforms-enabled-extremist-politicians-and-their-allies-to-peddle-inflammatory-discriminatory-rhetoric>
- 66 See, for example, this article from the *Washington Examiner*, a right-wing media outlet: Soh, D. (2021, 21 December). Children are being groomed with gender ideology. *Washington Examiner*. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/2881141/children-are-being-groomed-with-gender-ideology>
- 67 See, for example, this article from the journal of the right-wing think-tank The Witherspoon Institute: Blake, N. (2022, 28 March). OK, Groomer: Why Some in the LGBT Movement Are Focusing on Kids. *Public Discourse*. <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2022/03/81314>  
Or this article from *The Daily Citizen*, a right-wing online publication: Daily Citizen Staff. (2023, 15 February). Yes, Trans Activists Admit They Are Grooming Your Kids. <https://dailycitizen.focusonthefamily.com/yes-trans-activists-admit-they-are-grooming-your-kids>
- 68 See, for example, this post on the America First Policy Institute blog: Pidluzny, J., & Campana, A. C. (2023, 7 March). Radical Gender Ideology is Transforming American Society, and AFPI is Fighting Back. *AFPI*. <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/radical-gender-ideology-is-transforming-american-society-and-afpi-is-fighting-back>
- 69 Hermann, J. (2017, 3 August). For the New Far Right, YouTube Has Become the New Talk Radio. *New York Times Magazine*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/03/magazine/for-the-new-far-right-youtube-has-become-the-new-talk-radio.html>
- 70 Tolentino, D., & Ingram, D. (2023, 2 June). Musk's response to an anti-trans video sparks 24 hours of chaos at Twitter. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/musk-elon-twitter-ella-irwin-trans-video-what-is-a-woman-stream-rcna87429>
- 71 Lorenz, T. (2022, 19 April). Meet the woman behind Libs of TikTok, secretly fueling the right's outrage machine. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/04/19/lib-oftiktok-right-wing-media/>

TikTok accounts such as Libs of TikTok (with millions of followers across platforms) spread anti-trans disinformation targeting doctors providing care to trans and gender-diverse persons, calling them “groomers” and “butchers”.<sup>72</sup>

Many believe that these targeted attacks on educators, parents, doctors and activists also led to 11 schools receiving bomb threats after being the subject of posts on Libs of TikTok.<sup>73</sup> Researchers note that the rise in online anti-trans disinformation in the US significantly increases trans and gender-diverse people’s vulnerability to violence.<sup>74</sup>

## Being “anti-woke”: A global trend in anti-trans disinformation

In Singapore, a similar rhetoric emerged when a popular convention centre in the city-state decided to establish gender-neutral bathrooms for the duration of a major event in 2023.<sup>75</sup> On online discussion forums, people who were opposed to the measure complained that the city was going “woke”, and sexually and gender-diverse persons were harassed online.

One commenter asked, “Wonder if those perverts will go in.” Another commenter said, “There’re only two genders, male and female. There is no in-between.” Here again, we see the familiar conflation of the issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and fears about “sexual deviancy”. A student interviewed by the online Singapore newspaper *TODAY*, for an article republished by the *South China Morning Post*, said, “I don’t know if it’s safe,” echoing a fear of violence, and repeating the popular myth which correlates gender inclusion measures to danger.

The student reportedly added “that it might attract sex-related crime activity such as the installation of hidden cameras to spy on users,”<sup>76</sup> showing how commentators are comfortable conflating gender inclusion measures with crime and danger.

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72 Zadrozny, B., & Collins, B. (2022, 7 October). Doctors providing trans care are under increasing threat from far-right harassment campaigns. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/far-right-influencers-are-targeting-individual-doctors-rcna49701>

73 Riedel, S. (2023, 5 October). At Least 11 Schools Got Bomb Threats After Libs of TikTok Posted About Them. *Them*. <https://www.them.us/story/bomb-threats-schools-libs-of-tik-tok>

74 Santoro, H. (2022, 12 December). How Anti-LGBTQ+ Rhetoric Fuels Violence. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-anti-lgbtq-rhetoric-fuels-violence>

75 Today. (2023). Singapore debates gender neutral toilets amid backlash against ‘woke’ washrooms at Suntec. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3231758/singapore-debates-gender-neutral-toilets-amid-backlash-against-woke-washrooms-suntec>

76 Ibid.

## Resurgence of the so-called “bathroom debate”

The so-called “bathroom debate” is a coordinated campaign of disinformation about a series of gender inclusion policies targeting public spaces, and has found an audience yet again. It surfaced globally in popular discourse in 2016, when US legislators and activists tried to challenge limitations on trans persons’ ability to use the bathroom of their choice.<sup>77</sup>

Today in the US, many more states are now proposing legal restrictions on trans persons using the bathroom of their choice.<sup>78</sup> In the United Kingdom (UK), Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has advanced a policy to strip communal spaces of all-gender bathrooms,<sup>79</sup> vowing to challenge “lefty woke culture.”<sup>80</sup>

Anti-gender actors use this debate to peddle disinformation, while ignoring numerous studies that show that there is no correlation between violence and gender-inclusive policies for bathrooms.<sup>81</sup> In fact, studies show that these policies would protect gender-diverse persons from gender-based violence to a significant degree.<sup>82</sup>

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- 77 Gersen, J. S. (2016, 24 May). The Transgender Bathroom Debate and the Looming Title IX Crisis. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/public-bathroom-regulations-could-create-a-title-ix-crisis>
- 78 PBS. (2023, 29 March). More states consider bills limiting which bathroom trans people can use. *PBS NewsHour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/more-states-consider-bills-limiting-which-bathroom-trans-people-can-use>
- 79 Hansford, A. (2023, 13 August). UK government announces crackdown on gender-neutral toilets. *PinkNews*. <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/08/13/gender-neutral-toilets-policy-kemi-badenoch>
- 80 Wakefield, L. (2022, 17 August). Rishi Sunak tries to save PM bid with attack on ‘woke culture that wants to cancel women.’ *PinkNews*. <https://www.thepinknews.com/2022/08/17/rishi-sunak-liz-truss-tory-conservative-leadership-perth-hustings>
- 81 Hasenbush, A., Flores, A. R., & Herman, J. L. (2018). Gender Identity Nondiscrimination Laws in Public Accommodations: A Review of Evidence Regarding Safety and Privacy in Public Restrooms, Locker Rooms, and Changing Rooms. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 16(1), 70-83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0335-z>
- 82 Francis, J., Sachan, P., Waters, Z., Trapp, G., Pearce, N., Burns, S., Lin, A., & Cross, D. (2022). Gender-Neutral Toilets: A Qualitative Exploration of Inclusive School Environments for Sexuality and Gender Diverse Youth in Western Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(16), 10089. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610089>



## Role of influential figures in spreading anti-trans disinformation

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak also made it clear that his actions were part of his agenda to *protect women* from being “cancelled” and “erased”.<sup>83</sup> This signals another disturbing trend. In the UK, the major drivers behind anti-trans disinformation campaigns are not religious fundamentalists or traditional anti-feminist conservatives. They are secular actors who themselves identify as “feminists” (TERFs).

UK TERFs who spearhead anti-trans disinformation campaigns found themselves utterly vindicated when their views were echoed in 2022 by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women (UNSR VAW) in a letter to the Scottish government.<sup>84</sup>

Her letter, which rehashed popular anti-trans myths about legal gender recognition systems, opposed Scotland’s attempts to reform their gender recognition laws. She invoked the fear around “violent males” abusing such a system to harm women, while not providing any documented evidence, hinting at the age-old transphobic myth that transwomen are really just “men in dresses”.<sup>85</sup> Both Scottish<sup>86</sup> and international feminists,<sup>87</sup> along with other UN experts,<sup>88</sup> strongly rejected her position.

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83 Ibid.

84 Alsalem, R. (2022). *Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences*. OL GBR 14/2022. <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27681>

85 Official report of the Scottish Parliament Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee meeting of 19 December 2022. See comments of the former Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Victor Madrigal-Borloz: <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/official-report/search-what-was-said-in-parliament/EHRCJ-19-12-2022?meeting=14062&iob=127362>

86 Six Scottish women’s rights organisations co-signed this letter to the UNSR VAW: Rape Crisis Scotland. (2022, 30 November). Rape Crisis Scotland statement on the open letter to Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls. <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/news/news/rape-crisis-scotland-statement-on-the-open-letter-to-special-rapporteur-on-violence-against-women-and-girls>

87 A coalition of international feminist organisations co-signed this letter to the UNSR VAW: <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/feminist%20letter%20to%20SR%20VAW%E2%80%99s%20letter%20Scottish%20.pdf>

88 Madrigal-Borloz, V. (2022, 16 December). Scotland should not deny trans women’s human rights because of predatory men – Victor Madrigal-Borloz. *The Scotsman*. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/scotland-should-not-deny-trans-womens-human-rights-because-of-predatory-men-victor-madrigal-borloz-3954832>; BBC. (2022, 16 December). UN chief backs Scottish government’s gender recognition reforms. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-63993415>

British TERFs mobilised around the UNSR VAW's letter, using online and mainstream media to amplify their disinformation campaign. Renowned UK TERF Julie Bindel wrote that the reforms to Scotland's gender recognition law would enable "male-bodied, convicted sex offenders who identify as women demanding to serve their sentences in female prisons" to do so.<sup>89</sup> Jo Bartosch, a prominent journalist who led disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting British LGBTQIA+ organisations Stonewall and Mermaids,<sup>90</sup> wrote that trans and gender-diverse persons seek gender recognition so they can increase their intimate contact with children.<sup>91</sup> These statements act as dog whistles aimed at stoking fears, once again, about sexual deviance and sexual violence against women and children.

British public figures like J. K. Rowling have been at the forefront of TERF campaigns. Rowling's own enormous influence over the UK context has recently culminated in the establishment of a so-called "women-only" rape support centre in Edinburgh.<sup>92</sup> Rowling has been strategic about her use of social media but has expanded to other digital media, launching, for example, a podcast dedicated to "explaining" her views on sex and gender.<sup>93</sup>

Just months before the opening of Rowling's "women-only" rape support centre, the Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre reported that anti-trans activists had forced them into shutdown, with ongoing attacks and threats against its head, Mridul Wadhwa. Wadhwa is not only a prominent transgender justice advocate, but gained visibility in 2020 when she launched a bid to be a candidate in local elections.<sup>94</sup>

TERF attempts to block Scotland's gender recognition reform, through creating confusion and legitimising anti-trans hate, have so far been successful.<sup>95</sup>

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89 Read Julie Bindel's op-ed, as an example of how mainstream media is used to spread disinformation: Bindel, J. (2023, 3 February). Scotland's gender recognition bill would have harmed women. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/3/scotlands-gender-recognition-bill-would-have-harmed-women>

90 See the bio of TERF Jo Bartosch here: <https://sex-matters.org/about-us/team/jo-bartosch>

91 Read Jo Bartosch's op-ed here, as an example of anti-trans disinformation: Bartosch, J. (2023, 22 May). Gender self-ID is a predators' charter. *Spiked*. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2023/05/22/gender-self-id-is-a-predators-charter/>

92 BBC. (2022, 12 December). JK Rowling funds women-only rape help centre in Edinburgh. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-63943766>

93 Quah, N. (2023, 27 February). Can Anyone Trust *The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling*? *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/article/witch-trials-jk-rowling-podcast-essay-review.html>

94 Ramsay, A. (2022, 17 October). How anti-trans activists forced Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre into lockdown. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trans-scotland-mridul-wadhwa-for-women-scotland>

95 BBC. (2023, 8 December). What's happening with Scotland's gender reform plans? <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-60221034>

This exacerbates an already dire environment for trans and gender-diverse persons in the UK, with the prevalence of anti-trans hate crimes rising faster than other types,<sup>96</sup> and anti-trans hate crimes hitting a record high across England and Wales.<sup>97</sup>

In 2023, British TERF Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull went on an international speaking tour, which she provocatively titled “Let Women Speak”, a dog whistle meant to invoke the myth that trans advocacy curtails women’s speech and stoke fears about “cancel culture”, theories propounded by TERFs when they are criticised, and repeated by politicians.<sup>98</sup>

Researchers in New Zealand observed an uptick in disinformation about trans and gender-diverse persons revolving around this event as it approached them. They even theorised that transphobia played a “community bridging” role, bringing together diverse parts of the disinformation community in New Zealand almost overnight.<sup>99</sup>

In this context, harmful stereotypes about paedophilia and “sexual deviancy” were well-baked into anti-trans disinformation. They noted, “Overwhelmingly, content is thematically linked to ideas of harm to children, particularly sexual harm; harm to women; and language and imagery which equate people to things, animals, witches, or demons – all consistent with the hallmarks of dangerous speech.”<sup>100</sup>

In Pakistan, where long since established trans rights legislation is now being attacked in religious courts, prominent designer and influencer Maria B went viral on social media when she wrote, “Forcing biological men into women’s universities under the garb of transgenders will be a great disservice to women’s education. [...] there are MEN PRETENDING TO BE WOMEN in the universities.”<sup>101</sup>

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96 Yao, D. (2023, 27 January). Data shows huge increase in trans hate crimes across Scotland in past decade. *Xtra*. <https://xtramagazine.com/power/hate-crimes-rise-scotland-244357>

97 Goodier, M. (2023, 5 October). Hate crimes against transgender people hit record high in England and Wales. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/oct/05/record-rise-hate-crimes-transgender-people-reported-england-and-wales>

98 Romano, A. (2021, 18 June). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s cancel culture screed is a dangerous distraction. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/22537261/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-transphobia-cancel-culture-jk-rowling-akwaeke-emezi-olutimehin-adegbeye>

99 Mathias, S. (2023, 5 May). Tracking the surge in online anti-trans hate sparked by Posie Parker’s visit. *The Spinoff*. <https://thespinoff.co.nz/internet/05-05-2023/tracking-the-surge-in-online-anti-trans-hate-sparked-by-posie-parkers-visit>

100 The Disinformation Project. (2023, May 26). Working paper: Transgressive Transitions. *Dangerous Speech Project*. <https://dangerousspeech.org/working-paper-transgressive-transitions/>

101 Jalal, M. (2023, 12 August). Maria B has yet another factually incorrect take on transgender people. *The Current*. <https://thecurrent.pk/maria-b-has-yet-another-factually-incorrect-take-on-transgender-people/>

She targeted Aurat March – a renowned annual public feminist demonstration in Pakistan – and the organisers behind it for “not standing up for women’s rights” and “shutting women’s voices”,<sup>102</sup> echoing core ideas underlying TERF propaganda.

Researchers from Pakistan noted that Maria B’s disinformation campaign legitimised the further spread of anti-trans disinformation and hate online: “hate towards the transgender community began snowballing, a superstorm of hashtags by right-wing troll armies began trending, and volleys of fake news and disinformation began circulating around the issue.”<sup>103</sup>

## Beyond a “backlash” analysis

In places like Pakistan and the UK, TERFs could be seen as responding to progress – in the form of laws, policies or reform efforts (though, in their campaigns, TERFs make false claims about what the reforms contain exactly) – hence the use of the term “backlash”. However, similar phenomena are observed in contexts where there aren’t many pro-trans laws, policies or reform efforts to speak of and where anti-trans disinformation campaigns are rampant nonetheless, and the rhetoric is eerily similar.

This was evident in the case of the “bathroom debate” surging in Singapore, where online discussion forums saw an outsized public response to a private institution’s decision to implement gender-neutral bathrooms for the duration of a single event.

In a similar case in Sri Lanka, journalist Thulasi Muttulingam is a purveyor of anti-trans disinformation and has gained both national and international traction. She is featured on international platforms like the Women’s Human Rights Campaign – a notable global anti-trans endeavour led by Australian and UK TERFs<sup>104</sup> – where she speaks explicitly about entering this arena as a result of J. K. Rowling’s public anti-trans advocacy.<sup>105</sup>

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102 Ibid.

103 Durrani, Z. (2023, 27 January). Digital Waves of Hate: The Struggle Continues for Pakistan’s Transgender Community. *GenderIT*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/digital-waves-hate-struggle-continues-pakistans-transgender-community>

104 See the following, from the Women’s Human Rights Campaign, as an example of an international anti-trans disinformation campaign: <https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/about/>

105 You can watch the talk here, to get a glimpse into how anti-trans rhetoric travels: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=hFEANTC0DOo>

She suggests that it is a “woke crowd” pushing this “ideology” in Sri Lanka.<sup>106</sup> In a public Facebook post on 10 March 2023 she hit back at criticism from local trans advocates, claiming that “transgender ideology” demands we “[m]ake public bathrooms gender neutral,” and that “[a] lot of women and girls have already been raped.” She explicitly named the UK, but shared no evidence, and attacked self-ID policies for legal gender recognition.<sup>107</sup>

Neither gender-inclusive bathroom policies nor self-ID-based gender recognition laws are in effect in Sri Lanka, where criminalisation, penalisation and social stigma still harm sexually and gender-diverse people, and trans persons are still required to undergo a long, arduous process and be certified by a psychiatrist in order to obtain legal gender recognition.<sup>108</sup>

## Religious fundamentalists and anti-gender disinformation

While secular anti-gender actors have gained visibility in recent years, the more traditional opposition to the gender equality agenda – religious fundamentalists – is not any less impactful today.

In Malaysia, sexually and gender-diverse communities fear the growing political power of religious fundamentalist forces and growing threats to their communities. Drag queens discussed the widespread disinformation campaigns against them, in which they’re called “sexual deviants” and “sinners”.<sup>109</sup> Activists note that online disinformation and abuse often lead to on-ground harassment.<sup>110</sup>

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106 Ibid.

107 Read Thulasi Muttulingam’s Facebook post on 10 March 2023 for an example of anti-trans disinformation: [https://www.facebook.com/thulasi.muttulingam/posts/pfbid08ddiRHD5HonXbEztQZjg9uqSDvNrD1touogeT7hkDuD5fHFSxTWWfV8muivkkfNCl?notif\\_id=1678470353488891&notif\\_t=feedback\\_reaction\\_generic&ref=notif](https://www.facebook.com/thulasi.muttulingam/posts/pfbid08ddiRHD5HonXbEztQZjg9uqSDvNrD1touogeT7hkDuD5fHFSxTWWfV8muivkkfNCl?notif_id=1678470353488891&notif_t=feedback_reaction_generic&ref=notif)

108 Equal Ground & Center for International Human Rights (CIHR) of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law. (2023). *Violations by Sri Lanka of the rights of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LBTQ) women under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. UN Treaty Body Database. [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=Z2evgg/KQitPmEcSGMucoAXe/dkihbdHJNoBlEo1nGgnQ+n0309o51vXZlxDln+E4eVMKwGfAgSXj/GwFS41Vw==](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=Z2evgg/KQitPmEcSGMucoAXe/dkihbdHJNoBlEo1nGgnQ+n0309o51vXZlxDln+E4eVMKwGfAgSXj/GwFS41Vw==)

109 Latiff, R., & Ananthalakshmi, A. (2023, 21 August). LGBTQ fears grow in Malaysia as Islamists shatter reform hopes. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/lgbtq-fears-grow-malaysia-islamists-shatter-reform-hopes-2023-08-21/>

110 Ibid.

When social media posts from members of the community are labelled an “insult to Islam”, it legitimises increased attacks against sexually and gender-diverse persons<sup>111</sup> – this is not unlike earning the label “anti-national” in India, as we explored in relation to Raya Ayyub in Chapter 1.

In 2022, a report revealed that a Malaysian government-sponsored app promised sexually and gender-diverse persons a pathway to “return to nature”,<sup>112</sup> and included the experience of a gay man who “abandoned homosexual behaviour during Ramadan”.<sup>113</sup>

This demonstrates a strategy in which disinformation is used to promote coercive change efforts against sexually and gender-diverse persons (also known as so-called “conversion therapy”), efforts that often involve religious or spiritual promises. This has a historic basis: coercive change efforts and the propaganda surrounding them could be seen as one of the oldest forms of disinformation targeting sexually and gender-diverse groups. Major technology corporations do little to curb this type of disinformation, especially in languages other than English.<sup>114</sup>

In Lebanon, in August 2023, a group of extremist Christian hardliners who call themselves the Soldiers of God violently shut down a drag show. That same year, the Shiite militant group Hezbollah accused NGOs of distributing books which “promote homosexuality” in schools, and called for the banning of these books.<sup>115</sup>

The Soldiers of God are adept at using social media and video platforms such as YouTube, and post videos of themselves discussing their philosophy online.<sup>116</sup> They share these videos alongside images and videos of their acts of violence and vandalism on their Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages.<sup>117</sup>

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111 Tatum, M. (2022, 8 June). Meet the LGBTQ activists fighting to be themselves online in Malaysia. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/08/1053212/lgbtq-activists-online-in-malaysia/>

112 Human Rights Watch. (2022, 10 August). “I Don’t Want to Change Myself”: Anti-LGBT Conversion Practices, Discrimination, and Violence in Malaysia. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/08/10/i-dont-want-change-myself/anti-lgbt-conversion-practices-discrimination-and>

113 Ratcliffe, R. (2022, 17 March). Malaysian government’s ‘gay conversion’ app pulled by Google Play. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/17/malaysian-governments-gay-conversion-app-pulled-by-google-play>

114 Wepukhulu, K. S. (2022, 18 January). Google, Facebook and Amazon turn blind eye to anti-gay disinformation. *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/google-facebook-amazon-turn-blind-eye-anti-gay-disinformation/>

115 Mroue, B., & Chehayeb, K. (2023, 1 September). Rainbows, drag shows, movies: Lebanon’s leaders go after perceived symbols of the LGBTQ+ community. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-lgbtq-beirut-human-rights-38399886d44895c85eb70bbfd8e711ac>

116 Ben Hamad, F. (2022, 14 July). In Lebanon, ‘Soldiers of God’ threaten the LGBT community and condemn civil marriage. *The France 24 Observers*. <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220715-in-lebanon-soldiers-of-god-threaten-the-lgbt-community-and-condemn-civil-marriage>

117 Ibid.

Similarly, the US has seen a widespread effort by hardline religious actors working to restrict or ban drag performances in a number of states through state-level legislation,<sup>118</sup> as well as to ban certain books and educational material available to school children.<sup>119</sup>

In Indonesia, religion is instrumentalised in a unique way. Disinformation is used as a widespread tool for social control,<sup>120</sup> and disinformation campaigns are aimed at discrediting entire minority communities and sexually and gender-diverse communities at the same time.<sup>121</sup>

Sexually and gender-diverse persons marginalised by all religious groups, dominant or otherwise, are blamed for social, political and economic issues, from natural disasters to paedophilia.<sup>122</sup> Anti-gender and anti-minority disinformation is spread widely through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.<sup>123</sup>

Respondents from a study in Indonesia noted that it was incredibly difficult for minoritised persons to push back against disinformation campaigns due to their already “weakened” position in a society where people from minority religions are thought to be “devil worshippers, sinners, and godless”,<sup>124</sup> echoing harmful stereotypes about sexually and gender-diverse persons.

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118 Soto, J. (2023, Spring). Fighting Back Against Anti-Drag Bills. *Equality Magazine*.  
<https://www.hrc.org/magazine/2023-spring/fighting-back-against-anti-drag-bills>

119 Lavietes, M. (2023, 25 April). Over half of 2022's most challenged books have LGBTQ themes. *NBC News*.  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/half-2022s-challenged-books-lgbtq-themes-rcna81324>

120 Neo, R., Yin, J. D. C., & Au, A. (2021). *Of social discipline and control: A study of the impact of fake news and disinformation on minorities in Indonesia*. Association for Progressive Communications.  
[https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/design\\_copy\\_of\\_social\\_discipline\\_and\\_control.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/design_copy_of_social_discipline_and_control.pdf)

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid.

## Chapter 3

# Attacks on comprehensive sexuality education as a tool in the anti-gender and anti-democracy toolkit



Many studies agree that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)<sup>125</sup> helps reduce and prevent childhood sexual abuse, increase health outcomes for children and young people and ensure their rights and well-being.<sup>126</sup>

Despite this, disinformation campaigns to distort the agenda of CSE and stop its progress have a long history. Today, these attacks continue unabated, and in fact have taken on newer manifestations and greater power in recent years. Chapter 3 aims to unpack how sexuality continues to be weaponised in campaigns against CSE.

## **Disinformation campaigns against CSE with international ambitions, facilitated by digital technologies**

The global campaign against CSE is often led by US and Europe-based non-governmental organisations, such as C-Fam, CitizenGO and the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). These (religious) organisations are also engaged in other anti-gender efforts, such as campaigns against reproductive rights, same-gender unions, and trans rights.

These actors conflate the aforementioned issues when they make claims that CSE “promotes homosexuality and transgenderism” to children from a young age,<sup>127</sup> invoking fears rooted in homophobia and transphobia.

Their campaigns are designed to work across borders. For example, CitizenGO, founded in Spain, boasts a global board comprising wealthy and well-connected religious fundamentalists across Europe, Russia, Latin America and the United States.<sup>128</sup> CitizenGO’s efforts against CSE have a far-reaching impact, reaching countries like Kenya, where they claim CSE is “more destructive than Boko Haram or Al-Shabaab”.<sup>129</sup>

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125 Please see “Annex: Discussion of terms” for details on how we define comprehensive sexuality education.

126 UNESCO. (2015). *Emerging Evidence, Lessons and Practice in Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Global Review*. [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/CSE\\_Global\\_Review\\_2015.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/CSE_Global_Review_2015.pdf)

127 For an example of disinformation spread by C-Fam, see: Oas, R. (2023, 30 January). Why Comprehensive Sexuality Education is Not the Answer. *C-Fam*. <https://c-fam.org/definitions/why-comprehensive-sexuality-education-is-not-the-answer/>

128 Shameem, N. (2021). Chapter 4: Anti-Rights Actors. In I. Marler (Ed.), *Rights at Risk: Time for Action. Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2021*. Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). [https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Ch4\\_RightsAtRisk\\_TimeForAction\\_2021.pdf](https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Ch4_RightsAtRisk_TimeForAction_2021.pdf)

129 Ibid.

CitizenGO claims, on their own website, that they work “in fifteen cities on three continents”, and that “Technology makes it possible to cooperate in a ‘virtual (international) office.’”<sup>130</sup>

US-based ADF launched their “global initiative” in 2010, with the stated aim of “obtaining the same kind of legal successes internationally”,<sup>131</sup> and now have a footprint in legal cases across the UK, Europe and Latin America.<sup>132</sup>

## **Kenyan tech researchers found that foreign groups like citizenGO manipulated Twitter to spread disinformation which weaponised sexuality in a range of ways, to impact progress on issues such as reproductive rights and health in Kenya.**

CSE activists and researchers observe how anti-CSE organisers engage in international recruitment through the “training of local leaders by international opposition groups.”<sup>133</sup> Ironically, while coordinating internationally, they use anti-CSE campaigns to destabilise multilateralism through advancing a narrative of sovereignty under attack.<sup>134</sup>

CitizenGO explicitly states that one of its core strategies is to use the internet and information technology to achieve its goals, and ADF is adept at using social media.<sup>135</sup> Researchers note that CitizenGO emphasises the use of online petitions as a strategy to disseminate disinformation, especially in their campaigns against abortion and CSE, and that these petitions are used both internationally and in specific country contexts.<sup>136</sup>

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130 For CitizenGO’s own website, see: <https://citizengo.org/en/about-us>

131 Shameem, N. (2021). Op. cit.

132 Ibid.

133 Ipas. (2023). *False Pretenses: The Anti-Comprehensive Sexuality Education Agenda Weaponizing Human Rights*. <https://www.ipas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/False-Pretenses-The-Anti-Comprehensive-Sexuality-Education-Agenda-Weaponizing-Human-Rights-OPPCSEE23b.pdf>

134 Ibid.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

Kenyan tech researchers found that foreign groups like CitizenGO manipulated Twitter to spread disinformation which weaponised sexuality in a range of ways, to impact progress on issues such as reproductive rights and health in Kenya.<sup>137</sup>

An investigation by openDemocracy found that US evangelical groups had mobilised over USD 280 million to right-wing groups across five continents, spending the most in Europe, then Latin America (followed by Asia and Africa).<sup>138</sup> Another report reveals that US-based right-wing funders poured more than USD 50 million into various anti-gender campaigns across the African continent.<sup>139</sup> The outcomes of these efforts culminate in horrific on-ground realities, such as the anti-homosexuality bill passed in Uganda in May 2023.<sup>140</sup>

Other research shows that while US-based funders are responsible for donating about USD 1 billion to global anti-gender movements, “there is also a network of wealthy funders supporting the anti-gender movement in countries throughout Europe.”<sup>141</sup> A report published in *The Wire* in 2022 examines how Hindutva right-wing work in India has been funded by proxy groups in the US.<sup>142</sup>

While there are active investigations ongoing about the sources of funding for disinformation specifically,<sup>143</sup> we can learn something from climate justice movements, which have uncovered that the major sources of funding for climate disinformation are often fossil fuel corporations and their owners – those who benefit directly from said disinformation.<sup>144</sup>

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137 Madung, O. & contributors. (2022). *Exporting Disinformation: How Foreign Groups Peddle Influence in Kenya through Twitter*. Mozilla Foundation. <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/exporting-disinformation-how-foreign-groups-peddle-influence-in-kenya-through-twitter>

138 Archer, N. N., & Provost, C. (2020, 27 October). Revealed: \$280m ‘dark money’ spent by US Christian Right groups globally. *openDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>

139 Namubiru, L., & Wepukhulu, K. S. (2020, 29 October). Exclusive: US Christian Right pours more than \$50m into Africa. *openDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/africa-us-christian-right-50m/>

140 Sanderson, E. (2023, 8 June). The Unholy Relationship Between Uganda’s Anti-LGBTQ+ Law and US Evangelicalism. *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*. <https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/unholy-relationship-between-ugandas-anti-lgbtq-law-and-us>

141 Global Philanthropy Project. (2020). *Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement*. <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Meet-the-Moment-2020-English.pdf>

142 The Wire. (2022, 30 May). New Report Traces Activities of US-Based Hindutva Groups Over Last 7 Years. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/world/new-report-traces-activities-of-us-based-hindutva-groups-over-last-7-years>

143 Moshavi, S. (2023, 16 May). Journalists Team Up to Uncover Who’s Funding Disinformation. *International Center for Journalists*. <https://www.icfj.org/news/journalists-team-uncover-whos-funding-disinformation>

144 [https://www.campaigncc.org/climate\\_change/sceptics/funders](https://www.campaigncc.org/climate_change/sceptics/funders)

## The impact of anti-CSE disinformation on CSE advocacy and advocates

Anti-CSE disinformation, typically manufactured in Europe or the US, is then repeated across the world, and its repercussions are faced by organisations like Aahung, a community-based sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) organisation in Pakistan.

Activists like those at Aahung, who work on promoting curricula aimed at empowering young people to understand their right to bodily autonomy and health, find that the impact of CSE-related disinformation leads them to distance themselves from certain topics. They note, “Schools have not allowed us to actually work on sexual orientation – we can’t put that in. [...] it’s the one terrain which approaching is like hitting a wall of lead.”<sup>145</sup>

While their campaigns promote educational materials which ultimately aim to enhance the sexual and reproductive rights of young people, the programme in Pakistan is called “life skills-based education”. This reveals advocates’ explicit understanding of the stigma that has become attached to CSE, due to disinformation against CSE.<sup>146</sup>

Young activists in Angola are battling the same stigma, where many people believe that CSE and “talking about [sexuality] with adolescents and young people will lead them to have sex”<sup>147</sup> despite it being widely recognised that CSE equips young people to have safer sex with greater respect for consent.<sup>148</sup>

Amnesty International reported that regression is taking place in Paraguay, where in 2017 the Ministry for Education banned all “gender-related” material in public education, a move which was the result of help from ADF.<sup>149</sup> Paraguayan feminists note that due to this law, “anything related to gender has been forbidden and demonised” in the education system, and that they “have to disguise materials on sexual and reproductive health, to rename the word ‘gender’.”<sup>150</sup>

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145 Sumbul, D. (2017, October). Interview: Sheena Hadi, Executive Director Aahung. *Newsline Magazine*. <https://newslinemagazine.com/magazine/interview-sheena-hadi-executive-director-aahung/>

146 Venkatraman, C., Plesons, M., Hadi, S., Baig, Q., & Lang, I. (2018). Building Support for Adolescent Sexuality and Reproductive Health Education and Responding to Resistance in Conservative Contexts: Cases From Pakistan. *Global Health: Science and Practice*, 6(1), 128-136. <https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-17-00285>

147 UNFPA. (2023, 5 June). In Angola, young people help shatter the stigma around comprehensive sexuality education. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/angola-young-people-help-shatter-stigma-around-comprehensive-sexuality-education>

148 World Health Organization. (2023, 18 May). Comprehensive sexuality education. <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/comprehensive-sexuality-education>

149 Cariboni, D. (2021, 28 January). How Paraguay became a ‘lab for anti-rights ideas’. *openDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/how-paraguay-became-a-lab-for-anti-rights-ideas/>

150 Ibid.

In the US, online right-wing actors simultaneously weaponise sexuality and mobilise anti-trans hate in their attacks on CSE, spreading claims that CSE teaches “porn literacy” to elementary school students, and that CSE “delivers an ‘LGBTQ centered’ curriculum that takes sex education beyond condoms to dental dams, sex toys, and perilous transgender radicalism.”<sup>151</sup>

Amnesty International calls attention to the “misinformation, distortions and lies that create a lot of fear among young people and their families and put rights at risk.”<sup>152</sup> UNESCO believes that misinformation about CSE is still a significant hurdle to achieving CSE progress across the world.<sup>153</sup>

## “Parents’ rights”: Campaigns against CSE in Latin America and the US

The historic campaign against CSE has found landfall among contemporary religious right-wing actors who frame their struggle against educational content, teachers, schools, libraries, legislators, advocates and other parents as one for “parents’ rights”.

In Peru, the “Don’t Mess With My Kids” (DMWMK) campaign is mobilising through online forums to lead the formulation of educational material that is in line with narrow religious norms, and to advocate for laws which mean that public servants who fail to “consult parents” can be punished or lose their jobs.<sup>154</sup>

In Chile, ultra-religious actors utilise homophobia and moral panic with claims that CSE promotes “homosexuality” and “destroys the family”. These campaigns reinforce the notion that responsibility for the primary education of a child should be held by the child’s parents, and the parents alone.<sup>155</sup>

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151 See, for example, this article in *The Federalist*, a right-wing media outlet: Miller, A., & Yenor, S. (2022, 22 September). How Activists Use Your Tax Dollars To Sexualize Kids At School. *The Federalist*. <https://thefederalist.com/2022/09/22/how-activists-use-your-tax-dollars-to-sexualize-kids-at-school/>

152 Amnesty International. (2021, 26 April). Americas: Guaranteeing the right to comprehensive sexuality education saves lives. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/04/americas-garantizar-derecho-educacion-sexual-integral-salva-vidas/>

153 UNESCO. (2021). *The journey towards comprehensive sexuality education: Global status report*. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Journey-towards-comprehensive-sexuality-education-Global-status-report-en.pdf>

154 Cabrera, C. G. (2023, January 24). Peru Is Threatening Human Rights Education. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/24/peru-threatening-human-rights-education>

155 Ojeda, T., & Astudillo, P. (2023, 23 August). Anti-gender ideology in Chile: Sex education is not abuse. *ALIGN*. <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/anti-gender-ideology-chile-sex-education-not-abuse>

In Mexico, in 2020, legislators across many states won parents the right to remove their children from classrooms where they deem sex, gender, sexuality – even issues such as contraception – are being discussed,<sup>156</sup> and in Uruguay, since 2019, legislators have been working on reforms that would require parental consent to teach CSE content and give parents the right to negotiate said content.<sup>157</sup>

In the United States, so-called “parents’ rights” groups have become particularly powerful, where their growing political power has the ability to directly shape legislation and policy in several states, as well as the ability to shape a presidential election.<sup>158</sup>

There, conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic, and often those peddled in the far-right network known as QAnon, started appearing in “moms’ groups” on Facebook and Instagram, quickly leading to a heightened spread of disinformation, followed by in-person mobilisation.<sup>159</sup>

The Southern Poverty Law Center names “Moms for Liberty” (M4L) – one of the most influential “parents’ rights” groups in the US – an extremist group.<sup>160</sup> Researchers note that social media has been critical to the expansion of M4L,<sup>161</sup> and observe the strategic use of memes and online discussion forums to their advantage.<sup>162</sup>

M4L conflates issues of trans rights with sexual orientation and sexual abuse, which informs their disinformation about CSE curricula. Memes in an M4L Facebook group in Florida consistently imply that CSE in school would mean that “educators are openly discussing their intimate lives”.<sup>163</sup> M4L also elevates the use of the term “groomer”, and claims that inclusive curricula “sexualize” children.<sup>164</sup> Here, we see the coalescing of anti-trans and anti-CSE disinformation, where trans persons, CSE and gender inclusion efforts are all targeted.

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156 Ibid.

157 Ibid.

158 Swenson, A. (2023, 12 June). Moms for Liberty rises as power player in GOP politics after attacking schools over gender, race. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/moms-for-liberty-2024-election-republican-candidates-f46500e17761a7e6a3c02b61a3d229>

159 Butler, K. (2020, 23 September). The Terrifying Story of How QAnon Infiltrated Moms’ Groups. *Mother Jones*. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/09/the-terrifying-story-of-how-qanon-infiltrated-moms-groups/>

160 Southern Poverty Law Centre. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty>

161 Wallens, D. (2023, 26 June). Moms for Liberty: The Use of Facebook to Spread Far-Right Propaganda and Change Public School Curriculum. *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/06/26/moms-for-liberty-the-use-of-facebook-to-spread-far-right-propaganda-and-change-public-school-curriculum/>

162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.

164 Southern Poverty Law Centre. Op. cit.

## Chapter 4

# The role of disinformation weaponising sexuality in the broader anti-democracy agenda

Following the deepfake attack discussed in Chapter 1, journalist Rana Ayyub herself wrote of the changes to her practice, “From the day the video was published, I have not been the same person. I used to be very opinionated, now I’m much more cautious about what I post online. I’ve self-censored quite a bit out of necessity.”<sup>165</sup>

**Deepfake political content featuring male political figures is given special attention, more attention than non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery (where victims are women and girls), as the former is seen to be “breaking democracy”. This suggests how attacks that weaponise sexuality against women as their main strategy are themselves not taken as a threat to democracy, even though they have a direct impact on democratic rights and principles.**

Still, deepfake political content featuring male political figures is given special attention, more attention than non-consensual deepfake sexual imagery (where victims are women and girls), as the former is seen to be “breaking democracy”.<sup>166</sup> This suggests how attacks that weaponise sexuality against women as their main strategy are themselves not taken as a threat to democracy, even though they have a direct impact on democratic rights and principles.

In the United States, “parents’ rights” groups who use disinformation to restrict gender-inclusive policies also take aim at racial equity policies. The term critical race theory (CRT) is intentionally used incorrectly<sup>167</sup> to spread disinformation and tarnish legitimate education efforts.<sup>168</sup>

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165 Ayyub, R. (2018, 21 November). Op. cit.

166 Turk, V. (2019, 18 November). Deepfakes are already breaking democracy. Just ask any woman. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/deepfakes-pornography>

167 To read more about what CRT really is, see: <https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-faq/>

168 Gross, T. (2022, 3 February). From slavery to socialism, new legislation restricts what teachers can discuss. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1077878538/legislation-restricts-what-teachers-can-discuss>



Experts warn that this is tied to a broader agenda to take US society back towards racial segregation,<sup>169</sup> with some pushing the Supreme Court to make it, once again, the law of the land.<sup>170</sup>

In addition, it's widely agreed that the bans on drag performances across the US are a "chilling attack" on free speech, with intentionally vague legislation which could criminalise a range of activities.<sup>171</sup>

In New Zealand, the coalescence of diverse right-wing actors around a single anti-trans event involving Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull illustrated a broader destabilisation agenda. Researchers noted: "The type of imagery used was more overtly violent, and included overt references to far-right and neo-Nazi ideology."<sup>172</sup> Neo-Nazi groups also attended Keen-Minshull's event in Australia.<sup>173</sup>

In Latin America, far-right religious actors have weaponised sexuality in disinformation in their attempts to capture political power. Their main targets have been sexually and gender-diverse communities and reproductive rights, but many also promote an anti-minority – and in particular, an anti-Indigenous – agenda.

In Brazil in 2018, the evangelical right helped bring Bolsonaro to power<sup>174</sup> through widespread anti-gender disinformation. And disinformation continues to shape Brazil's politics in profound ways,<sup>175</sup> with support from US-founded evangelical churches.<sup>176</sup> Once in power, Bolsonaro, a proud Christian, mounted state attacks on free speech and elections,<sup>177</sup> and adopted policies which diminished the rights of both trans and Indigenous peoples.<sup>178</sup>

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169 Oladipo, G. (2023, 4 March). 'Just the tip of the iceberg': Kimberlé Crenshaw warns against rightwing battle over critical race theory. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/04/critical-race-theory-kimberle-crenshaw-segregation-us-democracy>

170 Walsh, M. (2022, 28 November). Schools Are Resegregating. There's a Push for the Supreme Court to Consider That. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-are-resegregating-theres-a-push-for-the-supreme-court-to-consider-that/2022/11>

171 Nossel, S. (2023, 10 March). The drag show bans sweeping the US are a chilling attack on free speech. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/commentisfree/2023/mar/10/drag-show-bans-tennessee-lgbtq-rights>

172 Mathias, S. (2023, 5 May). Op. cit.

173 McClure, T., & Graham-McLay, C. (2023, 26 March). Anti-trans activist Posie Parker leaves New Zealand after chaotic protests. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/25/anti-trans-activist-posie-parker-ends-new-zealand-tour-after-violent-protests-erupt>

174 Franzen, N. (2022, 2 September). How Bolsonaro is breaking the divide between the state and church. *International Politics and Society*. <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/how-bolsonaro-is-breaking-the-divide-between-state-and-church-6168/?obOrigUrl=true>

175 Sívori, H., & Zilli, B. (2021). *Anti-rights discourse in Brazilian social media. Digital networks, violence and sex politics*. Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights and Feminist Internet Research Network. [https://firm.genderit.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Report\\_Anti-rights\\_discourse\\_in\\_Brazilian\\_social\\_media.pdf](https://firm.genderit.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Report_Anti-rights_discourse_in_Brazilian_social_media.pdf)

176 Franzen, N. (2022, 2 September). Op. cit.

177 Human Rights Watch. (2021, 15 September). Brazil: Bolsonaro Threatens Democratic Rule. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/15/brazil-bolsonaro-threatens-democratic-rule>

178 Savarese, M. (2019, 2 January). Brazil's Bolsonaro targets Indigenous groups, LGBTQ rights on 1st day as president. *PBS*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/brazils-bolsonaro-targets-indigenous-groups-lgbtq-rights-on-1st-day-as-president>

In Peru, the evangelical right has frequently supported its own chosen candidates in elections. It threw its support behind the unpopular, conservative Fujimori political family and their allies. In this cause, the Catholic Church and the evangelical right – historic rivals – were united.<sup>179</sup>

The Fujimori family were tainted by their involvement in corruption and human rights violations when former president Alberto Fujimori was sentenced to prison in 2009.<sup>180</sup> But religious leaders weaponised sexuality in disinformation about abortion, same-sex unions and gender inclusion,<sup>181</sup> in a bid to have Keiko Fujimori, the former president's daughter, elected in 2021. Keiko Fujimori was widely denounced by Peruvian feminists as an anti-gender and anti-feminist candidate,<sup>182</sup> and ultimately didn't win.

The same religious leaders who decried abortion in these disinformation campaigns, condoned the systematic sterilisation of Indigenous people during the Alberto Fujimori regime.<sup>183</sup>

In August 2023, Lebanon's culture minister shared plans to pass legislation that could punish not just "any act that explicitly or implicitly promotes abnormal sexual acts", but also "promoting, facilitating, protecting or inciting" so-called "homosexual acts".<sup>184</sup>

Activists and journalists all warn that the new legislation threatens the freedom of expression and press freedom in an already high-risk context.<sup>185</sup> They also point out that ongoing anti-gender disinformation campaigns are a distraction from the country's combined social, economic and political crises.<sup>186</sup>

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179 Barrera Rivera, P. (2017). Op. cit.

180 Cespedes, T., & Wade, T. (2009, 8 April). Peru's Fujimori gets 25 years prison for massacres. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-peru-fujimori/peru-fujimori-gets-25-years-prison-for-massacres-idUSTRE5363RH20090408/>

181 Barrera Rivera, P. (2017). Op. cit.

182 Cariboni, D. (2021, 18 May). There's no way to vote for women's rights in Peru's presidential elections. *openDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/theres-no-way-to-vote-for-womens-rights-in-perus-presidential-elections/>

183 Barrera Rivera, P. (2017). Op. cit.

184 Reporters Without Borders. (2023, 25 August). Lebanon: anti-LGBT bills threaten press freedom. <https://rsf.org/en/lebanon-anti-lgbt-bills-threaten-press-freedom>

185 Ibid.

186 Michaelson, R. (2023, 30 August). Lebanon LGBTQ+ activists say attacks are distraction from country's problems. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/30/lebanon-lgbtq-activists-attacks-distraction-scapegoated>

In Indonesia, a new penal code amendment passed in December 2022 criminalises a range of acts from “obscene acts”,<sup>187</sup> to sex outside of marriage (which could include both sexually and gender-diverse people and/or religious and ethnic minorities who avoid registering their marriages due to the lack of legal recognition for minority religions).<sup>188</sup> This legislation also criminalises acts which are deemed “to show, to offer, to broadcast, to write or to promote a contraception to a minor.”<sup>189</sup>

According to the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Indonesia’s new penal code amendment is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression, freedom of religion and belief, and is incompatible with Indonesia’s commitments to international treaties.<sup>190</sup> Experts warn that this signals a return to the “Suharto era”.<sup>191</sup>

At the international level, human rights and gender justice advocates have long since warned that anti-CSE campaigns are not merely about CSE. Ipas, an international reproductive rights organisation, notes, “These [anti-gender] organizations and countries use CSE as an entry point to attack other SRHR and human rights, particularly language that addresses discrimination and diversity,”<sup>192</sup> and that “[t]hese initiatives often use children’s safety as a basis for derailing social progress.”<sup>193</sup>

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187 This is typically applied to sexual and gender-diverse communities.

188 International Commission of Jurists. (2022, 9 December). Indonesia: New Penal Code is a major human rights setback and must be repealed or substantially amended. <https://www.icj.org/indonesia-new-penal-code-is-a-major-human-rights-setback-and-must-be-repealed-or-substantially-amended/>

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.

191 Ramli, R. (2022, 19 December). Indonesia’s Latest Tilt Toward Authoritarianism. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/indonesias-latest-tilt-toward-authoritarianism/>

192 Ipas. (2023). Op. cit.

193 Ibid.

# Conclusions

While public awareness about the issue of disinformation has increased in recent years, due to greater resources and support being invested in the study of it, disinformation research is still a largely male-dominated field shaped by patriarchal biases.

One of our key strategies, then, must be to ensure that disinformation research is conducted by more diverse people: feminists and gender justice advocates from different communities and contexts across the world must be supported to produce disinformation knowledge.

**Researchers believe that right-wing disinformation campaigns are often successful because they instrumentalise concepts other than perceptions of factfulness, such as feelings of community, where disinformation is used to “recruit” or “unite” people.**

This knowledge, produced by feminists and gender justice advocates, must be seen as equally valuable to the field as other kinds of disinformation study, and disinformation which weaponises sexuality and targets women, girls, feminists and gender justice advocates must be taken seriously for its proven impact on human rights and democracy.

To develop effective counterstrategies, we must try to get to the root of why these disinformation campaigns are so successful. The “virality” offered by the latest digital technologies helps these campaigns succeed to a great extent, but there is more to it.

We saw that veracity or believability is not a core criteria of disinformation campaigns that weaponise sexuality. Researchers believe that right-wing disinformation campaigns are often successful because they instrumentalise concepts other than perceptions of factfulness, such as feelings of community,<sup>194</sup> where disinformation is used to “recruit” or “unite” people. We observed this to be true in a number of cases we explored, from New Zealand, to Peru, to the US.

To understand the appeal of these campaigns, we may need to look at the alienating effects of numerous intersecting existential crises: information overload, increasing economic inequality, the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate anxiety. It requires reflection on some progressive discursive strategies, like the perceived righteousness of arguing with “facts”, which may only further exacerbate feelings of alienation and “othering”.

We should instead see disinformation campaigns as the telling of stories. The Narrative Initiative’s “Wave Model” helps us understand the function of stories: stories reflect underlying narratives, and narratives are constructed upon a deeper worldview or value system.<sup>195</sup>

What we are doing, then, is not just countering stories but countering a worldview. Sara Ahmed appealed to us to examine the role emotions play in creating political collectives from individual subjects,<sup>196</sup> and it might be helpful for us to revisit this idea: that emotions, and the ability to cause them, call on them and invoke them, should not be taken lightly in our counterstrategies.

Therefore, we must deeply understand the worldview we are opposing. The disinformation campaigns explored in this paper make it clear that the dehumanisation and perceived disposability of diverse communities is both a core *tactic* and a core *belief* for anti-gender and anti-democracy actors: this is evidenced by the fact that their policies often deliver what their rhetoric promises. We must narrate a worldview in which every person’s inherent value is recognised and protected.

Since “What is or is not false is a contentious issue”,<sup>197</sup> disinformation doesn’t always deploy the notion of objectivity. In fact, many disinformation campaigns instrumentalise subjectivity. Take the rallying cry of “parents’ rights”, which appeals to parents to act as parents, or TERFs, whose rhetoric utilises subjective and legitimate experiences of gender-based violence and feminist analysis.

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194 Dickinson, K. (2023, 5 September). Disarming disinformation: How to understand and counter the “post-truth playbook”. *Big Think*. <https://bigthink.com/the-learning-curve/on-disinformation/>

195 Narrative Initiative. (2020, 8 Jul). Waves: A model for deep narrative change. <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/waves-a-model-for-deep-narrative-change/>

196 Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective Economies. *Social Text*, 22(2), 117-139. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/55780>.

197 Khan, I. (2023). Op. cit.

Therefore, we can see that disinformation relies on *perceptions of credibility* attached to the speaker, not the content. Disinformation works because the public largely trusts technology corporations' leaders, state actors and/or other powerful authority figures like religious leaders, parents or indeed those who claim to be women's rights champions.

While the focus of much mainstream disinformation study tends to solely emphasise the automated and technical aspects of disinformation campaigns, our case studies show that many powerful human actors – “authority figures” – normalise the spread of disinformation simply through leveraging their platforms to spread propaganda.

**Our responses, then, should include strategies which do not just target the distortions of truth contained in disinformation, but interrogate the credibility of these so-called “authority figures”. This would necessitate a reclamation of control and authority over our own experiences and knowledge about the way disinformation impacts us.**

Often, these authority figures reinforce their own credibility through their rhetoric. “Parents’ rights” campaigners proclaim, “We [...] know better than anyone what they [children] need to thrive,”<sup>198</sup> overriding seasoned educators and experts, and TERFs claim, “We are the experts,”<sup>199</sup> overriding others’ lived experiences.

We may be quite familiar with state and religious leaders presenting themselves to the public as authority figures. But technology corporations’ leaders who operate as de-facto unelected leaders in our context do it too, when they present themselves as “self-made”, altruistic geniuses who have our best interests at heart.

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198 See this claim from extremist group Mom’s for Liberty: Ogles, J. (2022, 16 November). Moms for Liberty slams national teachers union for claiming it knows child needs best. *Florida Politics*. <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/571774-moms-for-liberty-slams-national-teachers-union-for-claiming-it-knows-child-needs-best/>

199 See this article by renowned British TERF Julie Bindel: Bindel, J. (2023, 14 December). Kemi Badenoch must terrify the trans lobby – she refuses to back down. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/14/kemi-badenoch-must-terrify-the-trans-lobby/>

To add to this, their corporations now employ a variety of so-called fact-checking tools, still best suited for the identification of misinformation.<sup>200</sup> The promotion of these tools and the myths about corporate leaders together perpetuate the notion that corporations have everything “under control”.

Our responses, then, should include strategies which do not just target the distortions of truth contained in disinformation, but interrogate the credibility of these so-called “authority figures”. This would necessitate a reclamation of control and authority over our own experiences and knowledge about the way disinformation impacts us.

The other important way in which we believe disinformation works is by reaffirming existing social hierarchies. In the case of the disinformation campaigns we examined, we see that these anti-gender and anti-democracy actors aim to evoke both *fear* and *shame* through their narratives on sexuality, creating, on the one hand, a sense of personal threat for those consuming these campaigns, and on the other, a sense of humiliation for their victims.

The UNSR FoE notes in her 2023 report that gendered disinformation aims, among other things, to portray “women as weak, incompetent and sexualized objects, incapable of leadership.”<sup>201</sup> But disinformation campaigns which portray their victims as “sexualised objects” (for example, deepfake “porn”), only succeed because of the social contract which dictates that being sexual is a shameful thing for some groups of people.

This is evidenced by the fact that these videos aren’t made to deceive the viewer, but to laugh at the subject’s assumed “humiliation”. Disinformation campaigns which accuse feminist activists of “prostitution” rely on the same logic: the widespread consensus that sex work is not work, and that it is shameful.

Our strategies to counteract the impact of these disinformation campaigns, then, must continue to include a strong rejection of sex, gender and sexuality norms which perpetuate shame and maintain social hierarchies. We must continue to dismantle the “private”/“public” binary, and indeed the “online”/“offline” binary, erected to deploy shame against women, sexually and gender-diverse people, and those who challenge power.<sup>202</sup>

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200 Shah, N. (2021). (Dis)information Blackouts: Politics and Practices of Internet Shutdowns. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 2693-2709. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13977/3466>

201 Khan, I. (2023). Op. cit.

202 Ganesh, M. I. (2020, 30 April). Between Flesh: Tech Degrees of Separation. *13th Gwangju Biennale*. <https://13thgwangjubienale.org/minds-rising/ganesh/>

Finally, we believe that demystifying disinformation systems is essential to our counterstrategies. As we have noted, mainstream contemporary disinformation study and discourse may tend to overemphasise the technological and “industrialised” aspects of disinformation. The biases in this field of study are further reinforced by dominant notions that “men” are the true custodians of technology and that the rest of us “don’t understand tech.”

It becomes even more important, then, to look concretely at the network of human actors who make it happen. This can look like exposing the sources of funding for disinformation campaigns, or investigating whether shared sources of funding indicate shared agendas and tactics.

It can also look like pushing corporations to share more about how their platforms work. Online disinformation campaigns are made successful by social media platform algorithms which, by design, simultaneously drive up divisive content while limiting potential exposure to alternate viewpoints. The human actors who make decisions regarding these platforms and algorithms continue to keep their decision-making processes and their technologies closed for independent review (hence the term “black box technologies”).

These actors try instead to evade accountability for their role in knowingly creating and deploying information systems which, for example, increase body-image issues for girls and young women,<sup>203</sup> or drive more people to join extremist groups.<sup>204</sup> They also evade accountability for how their advertising practices help fund disinformation.<sup>205</sup>

Furthermore, diverse anti-gender and anti-democracy actors are now strongly linked through shared agendas, and while some aspects of their agendas are driven by an ideological vision, some actors, and indeed some agendas, are also increasingly driven by monetary interests. The impact of this reality is seen across corporate-owned technologies, where billionaire owners of platforms consistently prioritise self-interest, both financial and ideological, and support and protect growing right-wing online ecosystems.<sup>206</sup>

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203 Al Jazeera. (2021, 14 September). Facebook knows Instagram is harmful to teen girls: WSJ.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/9/14/facebook-knows-instagram-is-harmful-to-teen-girls-wsj>

204 Zadrozny, B. (2021, 23 October). ‘Carol’s Journey’: What Facebook knew about how it radicalized users. *NBC News*.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/facebook-knew-radicalized-users-rcna3581>

205 Silverman, C., Talbot, R., Kao, J., & Klühspies, A. (2022, 29 October). How Google’s Ad Business Funds Disinformation Around the World. *ProPublica*.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/google-alphabet-ads-fund-disinformation-covid-elections>

206 Klar, R. (2022, 21 October). How billionaires are building a right-wing online ecosystem. *The Hill*.

<https://thehill.com/policy/technology/3697807-how-billionaires-are-building-a-right-wing-online-ecosystem/>



Human actors in disinformation, therefore, include those who fund it, create it, ensure its widespread dissemination, create and govern the technological systems on which disinformation is held, spread and shared, those who protect and uphold unjust sex, sexuality and gender norms which make the harms of disinformation material, and those who protect anti-gender and anti-democracy actors and help them evade accountability.

The UNSR FoE notes, “The ultimate aim of gendered disinformation is to reduce public participation and the diversity of voices and views, including in the media, weaken democratic institutions and destroy inclusive societies.”<sup>207</sup> Therefore, counterstrategies must include concrete steps to push state, corporate and other actors to be held accountable in international, regional and national forums.

**The best counterstrategies, then, to stand up to “the machine that fosters shame” arise from coordinated, transnational exercises to build movements, and amplify the voices of communities who are impacted, increasing public ownership of technologies and public leadership in their governance.**

The imaginary society that anti-gender and anti-democracy actors invoke in their disinformation campaigns, simply put, is a society free from patriarchy and authoritarianism in all their forms: a notion so very unsettling to those who have power.

The best counterstrategies, then, to stand up to “the machine that fosters shame”<sup>208</sup> arise from coordinated, transnational exercises to build movements, and amplify the voices of communities who are impacted, increasing public ownership of technologies and public leadership in their governance.

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207 Khan, I. (2023). Op. cit.

208 Ganesh, M. I. (2020, 30 April). Op. cit.

# Annex:

## Discussion of terms

### How do we define “disinformation”?

It’s important to understand “disinformation” within today’s context, and as a concept distinct from similar terms like “misinformation”. The two are semantically similar, and the distinctions between them are continuously being clarified through scholarship and debate. However, there is some agreement on the key differences:

- Misinformation describes the sharing of false or misleading information without any intention to cause harm.
- Disinformation describes the deliberate sharing of false or misleading information, with the aim of causing harm.

The methods for the dissemination of online disinformation often involve the use of social media, memes and bots, but can involve more sophisticated tools as well. “Often, disinformation is organised, well resourced, and reinforced by amplification techniques, including automated technology.”<sup>209</sup> There is also some agreement that disinformation – while varying in forms and modalities – contains three important shared vectors: manipulative actors, deceptive behaviour and harmful content.<sup>210</sup>

Producers of disinformation target journalists and online influencers to further disseminate their message, and disinformation both produces and relies on a captive audience with limited exposure to other perspectives. This highlights the important role of privately-owned and governed “black box technologies” that ensure this environment.

However, there needs to be a further qualification of the term, through feminist approaches.

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209 APC. (2021). *APC policy explainer: Disinformation*. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-disinformation>

210 Ibid.

First, it is necessary to highlight the systemic nature of present-day disinformation. The Association for Progressive Communications, for example, points out that we need to see “disinformation as a multifaceted, global and complex issue that should be understood as a symptom of much broader information disorders.”<sup>211</sup>

Disinformation campaigns have been seen as originating in, or supporting, moments of state crisis or failures in leadership, and have the effect of creating a diversion – a scapegoat (often a marginalised group) – and, importantly, constructing an “enemy”.<sup>212</sup> This is especially important given that disinformation aids the legitimisation of authoritarian figures through establishing patriarchal “strong men” and “saviour” narratives.<sup>213</sup>

Disinformation campaigns often rely on the exploitation of existing patterns of historical discrimination, which lends credibility to the disinformation<sup>214</sup> and builds community among its purveyors. This exploitation can be seen as what results from actors who “coordinate to covertly use information insincerely to achieve political, social or economic goals.”<sup>215</sup> Researchers also agree that gendered disinformation exists at the intersection of disinformation and online gender-based violence.<sup>216</sup>

Furthermore, mainstream definitions of disinformation are based on traditional and gendered ideas about “information”. Feminist scholar Maya Indira Ganesh observes, “The idea that ‘information just wants to be free’ perhaps pre-supposes that creators of that information already have the experience of human rights and privilege.”<sup>217</sup> She questions the traditional framing of “information” within the libertarian “free speech” paradigm, noting that this doesn’t acknowledge dimensions of power and the existence of social hierarchies.<sup>218</sup>

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211 Ibid.

212 Mroue, B., & Chehayeb, K. (2023, 1 September). Op. cit.

213 Goldsman, F. (2021, 23 September). A mine-ridden internet and six rules for understanding anti-rights narratives. *GenderIT*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/mine-ridden-internet-and-six-rules-understanding-anti-rights-narratives>

214 Thakur, D., & Hankerson, D. L. (2021). *Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender*. Center for Democracy & Technology. <https://cdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-02-10-CDT-Research-Report-on-Disinfo-Race-and-Gender-FINAL.pdf>

215 Judson, E., Atay, A., Krasodonski-Jones, A., Lasko-Skinner, R., & Smith, J. (2020). *Engendering Hate: The contours of state-aligned gendered disinformation online*. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>

216 Ibid.

217 Ganesh, M. (2017, 21 February). The Architectures of Online Harassment (Part 1). *GenderIT*. <https://genderit.org/feminist-talk/architectures-online-harassment-part-1>

218 Ibid.

Feminist research on disinformation as “propaganda” gets us closer to a framework which does acknowledge these things.

In such a framework, false information that is shared through the process of misinformation can easily be “debunked” and “delegitimised”<sup>219</sup> – in contrast, disinformation cannot be easily fact-checked or identified, because it is an act of manipulation wherein the authority and authorship of the information is not under suspicion.<sup>220</sup>

Disinformation cycles are often tools of state or other powerful machinery and result from the *systemic* manipulation of both information and entire information ecosystems.<sup>221</sup>

Disinformation, then, can also be instances where “Truthful information can be labelled as ‘fake news’ and delegitimized.”<sup>222</sup>

At times, the conflation of misinformation and disinformation could be seen as deliberate. This conflation allows for the misplacement of responsibility, placed solely on the individual through an emphasis on media literacy.<sup>223</sup> This emphasis should instead be placed on the complex institutional structures from which disinformation originates. Power structures such as the state, media and those who make decisions regarding information systems, such as major technology companies, must be interrogated and held accountable.<sup>224</sup>

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219 Shah, N. (2021). Op. cit.

220 Ibid.

221 Ibid.

222 Khan, I. (2021). Op. cit.:

223 Kuo, R., & Marwick, A. (2021). Critical disinformation studies: History, power, and politics. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 2(4). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-76>

224 Ibid.

## Why we use “pornography” in quotes when referring to deepfake “pornography”

We use quotation marks around the words “pornography” and “porn” in this context as a rejection of the frequent conflation of pornography with deepfake sexual material.

Sexual content that has been manipulated with the use of AI-powered technologies should not be conflated or confused with pornography, which refers to sexual content featuring consenting adult performers, made for dissemination and consumption by consenting adult audiences. The use of the words pornography and porn in quotation marks articulates our position that deepfake sexual material *parades* as pornography, but is in fact not.

## Who are “gender-critical feminists”, trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs?

“Gender-critical feminists” are open about their discomfort with feminist conceptualisations of “gender” as a “system of hierarchy, which uses socialisation to construct human beings according to what the culture prescribes for different sexes.”<sup>225</sup>

This movement maintains that the category of so-called “biological sex” – not “gender” – should inform law and policy, and that all efforts to improve conditions for trans or gender-diverse persons are eroding women’s so-called “sex-based rights”.<sup>226</sup>

Many feminist actors have strongly voiced their opposition to this.<sup>227</sup>

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225 Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. (2020). Op. cit.

226 For a campaign on so-called “sex-based rights”, see: <https://www.womensdeclaration.com/en/>

227 Read, for example, the statement titled “An Affirmation of Feminist Principles”: <https://www.feministaffirmation.org/letter>

## Why do we use “anti-gender and anti-democracy actors”?

The forces we aim to describe or interrogate in this paper, who we loosely call “anti-gender and anti-democracy actors”, have been studied by feminists since at least the early 2010s, when a resurgence of religious fundamentalist actors started shaping law, policy and public debate across parts of Europe and Latin America.

They work in a specific way: targeting bodily autonomy and gender equality as part of a campaign to capture mainstream political power. These movements work transnationally,<sup>228</sup> and deploy a variety of political rhetoric such as religious and social orthodoxy, nationalism, economic populism and anti-gender disinformation.<sup>229</sup>

We don’t use the term “anti-rights” to describe these actors because it would “miss the point” according to Brazilian feminist Sonia Corrêa,<sup>230</sup> who, like other global South feminists, insists that a deeper analysis of the last few decades of neoliberalism is essential to unpacking the effects of present-day anti-gender and anti-democracy strategies.<sup>231</sup>

Correa notes, “Although their [anti-gender and anti-democracy actors] economic conceptual frame is radically adverse to state protection and robust market regulations, it is not against rights or anti-rights. Rather it carries with it the classical liberal understanding of right to property and citizenship rights as individual equality under the law.”<sup>232</sup>

These forces are not contesting rights, they simply employ a different conceptualisation of “rights” than we do, and are “reshaping” human rights to serve their agenda. These movements include a globally recognised and well-resourced network of academic institutions which are training young people to do “rights” work.<sup>233</sup>

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228 Corrêa, S., Paternotte, D., & Kuhar, R. (2018, May 31). The globalisation of anti-gender campaigns. *IPS Journal*. <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/>

229 Kuhar, R., & Paternotte, D. (2017). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

230 Murray, L. (2022) ‘Missing the point’: A conversation with Sonia Corrêa about the emergence and complexities of anti-gender politics at the intersections of human rights and health. *Global Public Health*, 17(11), 3243-3253. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17441692.2022.2135751>

231 Ibid.

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid.

## What do we mean by “gender inclusion”?

By “gender inclusion”, we mean policies, practices and measures which aim to include a larger number of persons affected by gender-based violence and exclusion. This could be women and girls, but further includes trans, gender-diverse, intersex and queer persons who are victimised by gender regimes.

## What do we mean by comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)?

When we refer to CSE, we employ widely-accepted definitions used by UN agencies such as UNESCO: “an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information”;<sup>234</sup> and the World Health Organization (WHO): “Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) gives young people accurate, age-appropriate information about sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health, which is critical for their health and survival.”<sup>235</sup>

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234 UNESCO. (2009). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach for schools, teachers and health educators*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183281>

235 World Health Organization. (2023, 18 May). Op. cit.

