Gender Disinformation in the Global South
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Summary: As the international arena changes and the power dynamics shift, countries are fighting to remain in control and guarantee societies their fundamental human rights. However, social unrest has been pulling societies apart leaving them vulnerable to foreign influences (coming from countries such as China and Russia) with malicious intentions and methods that want to destabilize these democracies and what they stand for. The role of disinformation in society has been increasing exponentially as technology evolves. Disinformation has become a tool used by many actors locally and globally to destabilize societies and individuals, and to manipulate outcomes that affect the social security and the human rights of individuals. Vulnerable groups, such as women, are not only at risk, but have become a target of violent disinformation attacks that threaten their quality of life.

A digital world and its dangers
Technological advancements in the past decades have changed the world, societies, and its dynamics. People are on their devices using the internet and its platforms constantly allowing them to learn and connect with people from all around the world. At the same time, they have become accustomed to having information accessible and instantaneously. While the world’s interconnectedness brings many opportunities, it has also become easier for information to be misused.

Purposeful information manipulation (disinformation) has been recognised globally as a major threat to public safety and security. Furthermore, disinformation has also been recognised as a major threat to democracies around the world. Nowadays, there are institutions that constantly threaten the security of individuals or institutions through online censorship, surveillance, manipulation of content among other practices that put at risk the fundamental human right to freedom of expression (a human right that has evolved to the freedom of expression online due to the increased use of the internet).

Therefore, there are actors that are now using disinformation as a tool to destabilize and cause social unrest. However, disinformation has also become a weapon for many actors to harm
members of society. Vulnerable groups, especially women, are at risk as they have become a target of these methods. Gendered disinformation is often used as a way to regain control and dominance over women who have fought hard to break the patriarchal system rooted in societies.

This paper will explore the threat posed by disinformation in our societies and how rising actors (such as China and Russia) endanger the lives and safety of women and other vulnerable groups.

**Disinformation vs. Misinformation**

Disinformation has become a multifaceted historic phenomenon. Disinformation, by definition, is the dissemination of false or erroneous information by an individual or entity who maliciously wishes to trick or harm other individuals, groups, or organizations. This type of information becomes misrepresented, and it is then spread to generate confusion to its receiver (Fundación Multitudes, 2022).

In contrast, misinformation is errors or biased information, but that has not been maliciously spread by its issuer. The person who holds this information is unaware that it is not correct and even if it is spread, their intention was not to spread false news. An example of misinformation is taking a fact out of context and sharing it in other platforms or with other individuals. Overall, the individual who is spreading this false information is unaware that it is incorrect (Fundación Multitudes, 2022).

It is important to note that both of these have a big impact on society and its individuals. The spread of false or incorrect information harms individuals no matter what the intent was. One common way of disinformation that has increased its popularity in the past decade is fake news. Fake news entails the creation of a false story or piece of information (it can involve the manipulation or editing of a picture, document, data, among others) and it is spread through the internet and its platforms to create conflict. For example, when President Gabriel Boric visited his hometown and passed by a well-known bar, the images show him greeting an employee and then continuing to tour the premises, but his detractors show him, making malicious use of the image, that he was supposedly drinking alcohol and the President had to
address these rumors as fake (Boric Font, 2022). There is editing, image manipulation and expressly a deliberate lie with the sole purpose of doing harm.

There are no clear parameters that define if a piece of false information is exclusively disinformation or misinformation, they are intrinsically related and they have consolidated themselves as a factor that affects the day-to-day life of all individuals, whether it is known or not. Nowadays, people use digital media platforms and social media as their main source of information. Nonetheless, there is not a common practice of critically digesting information, individuals can often look at a publication and take for a fact that what is written is true. According to Ibarra (2021), there are studies that show that social media users are more likely to believe disinformation than non-users. Consequently, there is a vicious cycle where people with malicious intent take advantage of those who are gullible and who will help spread disinformation even if it is not their intention.

Parallelly, just like every individual has the power to decide what they believe or not believe in regards to what they read on the internet; they also have the power to decide what they disseminate. In other words, on one hand, as stated above, they may not have the tools to discriminate between what is true and what is not. On the other hand, individuals may be inclined to believe what they read without checking their sources because “lies are more likely to be believed… when they reinforce our pre-existing beliefs” (Ibarra, 2021). Consequently, the dissemination of information and the misuse of information is also a choice. The internet has become a space in which there is a threat to democracy and human rights, especially for the most vulnerable, impacting their decision-making process when it is based on information that is not verified or decontextualized, as well as their right to access information. Disinformation has become a weapon to discredit, undermine, harass, and abuse individuals. For vulnerable groups, disinformation becomes one of many obstacles that already put them at risk, deprives them of fully enjoying their human rights, and destabilizes their place in society.

**Gendered Disinformation**

When it comes to accessing technology and connectivity, women are already at a disadvantage in society. The gendered digital divide, while it is more enhanced in the global south, it is present all around the world. According to the Office of the United Nations High
Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCRH) in 2021, women and girls make up the majority of the 3.7 billion people who remain unconnected to the internet worldwide. This means, that there is still a big percentage of women and girls who don’t have access or use of the internet, who lack digital skills and lack knowledge of the use of digital tools, who don’t participate in science, technology, engineering and math fields, and who don’t pursue any leadership positions in the tech sector or entrepreneurship (Britain, Dunn & Vaillancourt, 2023). In a world and an era characterized by being technology driven, this puts women and girls at an even more disadvantage that enhances the discrimination that they already suffer.

When it comes to disinformation, this phenomenon has become a force that affects everyone in society, directly or indirectly. However, it is important to consider that there are groups that are more vulnerable to disinformation because just like in other aspects of life, they are targeted and discriminated against because of their qualities. Gendered disinformation has therefore become common in societies given that the internet has merely facilitated the harm that abusers want to inflict on vulnerable groups. The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) uses the definition provided by Jane Bailey, Nicola Henry, and Asher Flynn to describe gender-based discrimination as “an umbrella term used to describe the use of digital technologies to perpetrate interpersonal harassment, abuse and violence” (Britain, Dunn & Vaillancourt, 2023). In a recent report the CIGI developed titled Supporting Safer Digital Spaces, they argue that women and other non-binary gender identities are more likely to suffer attacks online than men. Using the responses of a little over 18,000 respondents from 18 countries, they concluded that around 25% of people claimed to experience online harm due to their gender identity (Britain, Dunn & Vaillancourt, 2023).

Technology-facilitated violence (TFV) can come in different ways and forms, and while it can be directed towards anyone, it tends to be more violent towards women. According to a report by the Women’s Observatory against Disinformation, women are attacked online in the forms of threats, pictures, false information, sexual or any other type of harassment, stalking, breaching of security, manipulation, blackmail, undermining, hate-speech, name-calling, among others. Women are turned more often than men into the object of disinformation, in a survey by the Women Observatory Against Disinformation from Fundacion Multitudes, carried out with Chilean women working in the Constitutional Convention, 69% of the women respondents have had incidents in regards to their work (compared to 47.3% within men) 41.4% referencing their political work (versus 31.6% of men) and 24/1% (versus
10.5%) in regards of their families (Fundacion Multitudes et al. 2022). TFV can happen to any individual, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, and while some of these attacks may start online, it can also evolve into physical or in-person violence or harassment.

Women are particularly vulnerable to these types of attacks especially if they have a public life. Gendered disinformation is a multidimensional phenomenon that is used as a powerful tool to exclude women from decision-making. Disinformation methods are often used as weapons to discredit, undermine, harass, attack, abuse, and create doubt about women’s capabilities and competency. One of the interviewees from a survey conducted by the Women’s Observatory Against Disinformation and Fake News detailed how “on social media everyone could comment on my appearance and not on my contribution in politics” (Fundacion Multitudes, et al. 2021). Compared to male politicians, research suggests women are not only disproportionately targeted, but disinformation against them focuses on character over policies. This is enhanced even more for women from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups; for example, research from Fundación Multitudes confirms that indigenous populations in Chile are “5 times more likely to be objects of disinformation campaigns with the clear intention to delegitimize the democratic institutions they represent” (Fundacion Multitudes et al. 2022). Data from the CIGI study shows that individuals are often targeted because they belong to social movement or equity-seeking groups (Britain, Dunn & Vaillancourt, 2023). For example, Madam Vice President Kamala Harris has been targeted multiple times with accusations such as her not being African-American and having an affair with a married man during the 2020 Presidential Campaign (Ibarra, 2022).

The strong systematized patriarchal culture that is still embedded in many societies affects the way women participate in democratic processes. According to Britain, Dunn and Vaillancourt (2023) “lies and disinformation campaigns about individual women and women as a group are used to reinforce sexist gender norms”. In other words, this tends to happen in societies that are not used to women being in power or independent. It is often the case that women are considered to be essential for the home, but not in other aspects of society. According to Ibarra, “gendered political disinformation… is used to question the qualities and capacities of women to be leaders, reinforcing pre-existing sexist beliefs” (2022).

Therefore, it has been the case that when women get involved in politics, they are often questioned or not taken seriously by the media, their counterparts, and their opponents,
sometimes even by their own colleagues. “Women, unlike their male counterparts, face barriers designed to keep them out of public life” (Ibarra, 2022), consequently, disinformation becomes a weapon to restore the power balance and discourage their participation and leadership. It becomes a tool to try to regain control over the necessary and inevitable change that societies need when it comes to women. According to the Women’s Observatory against Disinformation who carried out a survey of women Chilean parliamentarians and members of the Constitutional Convention, 93.5% of women parliamentarians and 61.4% of members of the convention have been victims of disinformation as a type of gender-based violence and almost all of them normalized the violent nature of their relationship and role in politics (Ibarra, 2022). Another study with young women activists in Chile indicated that 56% admitted that this type of violence may result in them withdrawing from further involvement in their political career (Ibarra, 2022).

Consequently, women are more prone to be the object of disinformation attacks. Disinformation is used as a tool to provoke fear for what could be said and fabricated of them or of their loved ones, even if they know it is untrue. It therefore becomes a weapon with no boundaries. Furthermore, it is often used to discourage women from participating in the public sphere and from keeping them from taking a stand for what they believe. One of the most common methods used against women are fake deeps. These are fabricated pictures created to humiliate or discredit an individual or group of people. In the case of women, these images often depict them in compromising situations such as naked pictures. For example, in 2019, a fabricated video of Nancy Pelosi was disseminated in which she appeared intoxicated. The video received more than 2.5 million views on Facebook. In other words, in just one platform, a woman got bullied and harassed for actions which were not even committed by her (Appel & Prietzel, 2022). It raises the question that if a woman like Nancy Pelosi, an already established politician, still suffers consequences from this type of attacks, how are other women going to feel welcome and encouraged to participate and take leadership positions in politics.

_Disinformation enhanced: The use Artificial Intelligence to spread disinformation._

Recently, disinformation has intensified through technological developments. Artificial Intelligence are large language models that are programmed to assist individuals by generating content online, in the hands of unethical actors with malicious intent, this
technology can be used to create and manipulate information in many different forms such as voice, video, image, among others. UNESCO defines AI as “machines capable of imitating certain functionalities of human intelligence, including such features as perception, learning, reasoning, problem solving, language interaction, and even producing creative work” (UNESCO, 2019b). Examples of these platforms include Chat GPT, Midjourney, MURFAI, among others.

One of the main uses for AI when it comes to disinformation are deep fakes. Deep fakes can be videos, images or sounds that are meant to incriminate an individual or group with actions that were not their own. The first use of the word “deepfake” was from a Reddit user in 2017 who uploaded artificially swapped pornography of popular female celebrities. With this origin in mind, it has become more and more common for these technologies to be used to harass and misrepresent women and individuals. According to the ACE Agency, 20% of the images generated by AI included women as their focus, and according to DAC Beachcroft, 90% of deepfakes victims are women. This can have an effect on women’s public life, for example, Annalena Baerbock, the German Green chancellor candidate, had a fake nude picture circulating at the beginning of her campaign, this along with other rumors and disinformation campaigns, caused a voters with intentions to vote for her to drop by almost 30% (Ibarra, 2022).

Furthermore, AI algorithms do not process or understand the requests that they are given. In other words, they are not bound by morale or a sense of ethics which would otherwise prevent them from creating damaging content. There is also a gender bias rooted within the system given that most of these are created by men. In cases in which, for example, AI is used to sell ads, then there are no ethical boundaries that keep AI from disseminating false or misleading content. These have then amplified, accelerated, and exacerbated the many different forms of gender harm. It is particularly worrying that these are even starting to be normalized by social media platforms and its users. According to Fundación Multitudes, it has created a “dark box” effect that given the lack of legislation then it leaves free reign on the type of content that can be disseminated (2023).

Disinformation in Latin America: the influence of People’s Republic of China and Russia
Disinformation in Latin America is rising and threatening already weak democracies in the region. Historically, Latin America has suffered conquests that have shaped societies as they are at the moment: a product of violence and abuse. While the region has gained its independence, that is not to say that other powers seek to manipulate and control the region, it is only the case that now they do it diplomatically.

Consequently, many countries have grown tired of the inability to progress and their dependency for economic growth to other countries. Social and political unrest increases as the quality of lives decreases. There is a “New Cold War” consisting of a “global struggle for geopolitical influence and strength” (Andres, 2021). There are rising powers such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Russia competing with the United States for power, one way to obtain it is by controlling Latin America. They have therefore started to spin a narrative which could then manipulate countries into changing its western ways. Overall, the accumulation of these factors and their incidence in society has allowed these countries to use disinformation as a weapon to destabilize democracies.

**People’s Republic of China**

As the ties with the PRC increase in the region, so does their influence. As stated before, in Latin America, there is a historic resentment with western countries, especially the United States, because of their colonialist and extractivist relationships with the global south. This has led countries in Latin America to look for alternatives and strengthen their relationship with rising powers such as the PRC. Therefore, there is a continuous attempt to tie relationships through cooperation which has inevitably generated economic progress. For example, in the case of Chile, who is among the 15 countries most influenced by the PRC in topics such as economy (Institute for the Challenges of Democracy, 2022), domestic policy and media, in 2021 reached a bilateral trade value of USD $57,724 millions (Oviedo, 2006).

For the Chinese government, Latin America is key to rise in the world’s political economy. It gives them access to their raw materials, reservoirs of energy, minerals, and agricultural products (Oviedo, 2006). However, the relationship with the PRC in Latin America has had side effects that endanger societies. For example, Laura Richardson, the chief of Southcom, confirmed in the South American Conference for Security that the “mega projects” being financed by the PRC are having severe environmental impacts on the environment. Among
these there is water pollution, river erosion, and destruction of fertile lands; for example, the Chinese fleets are threatening the already fragile ecosystem in the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador (Le Point, 2022).

In regards to political influence, the PRC has managed to become a key actor when it comes to decisions that are made by corporations and agencies in Latin American countries, the more they invest, the more influence they get, especially when it comes to the media (Doublethink Lab, 2022). The Chinese Media Group has managed to sink its claws into many national media agencies through paid inserts. They have influence in the print media, local media who are wholly or partially owned by Chinese citizens or corporations. In countries like Chile, they have invested economically or other resources which allow them to influence decisions; Public or private, there are employees receiving direct or deferred benefits from people or entities related to the PRC (Doublethink Lab, 2022). Laura Richardson also referenced this by saying that there are organizations with ties to the PRC that promote disinformation campaigns as well as malicious cyber-activities. These often support authoritarian governments and promote the disestablishment and delegitimization of national and international democratic institutions.

Furthermore, the Chinese government has also invested into AI and implemented this technology to strengthen social control through censorship and espionage. There have been reported cases in Venezuela and Ecuador. This breach is possible because with Chinese technology, such as AI, evidence can be compiled and monitored in order to have access to security systems that allow them to get intelligence on the economy, cyberattack, and carry out disinformation campaigns (Andres, 2021).

Chinese influence puts vulnerable groups in Latin America at greater risk. In Brazil, as their ties have grown stronger over the years, they have created an interdependent bond in which the PRC has a big influence in their decision-making process, mainly because they export to the PRC 80% of their soy exports (according to the rates in 2017 (Freitas da Rocha, Bielschowsky, 2018)). The PRC’s intention to invest and improve Brazil’s infrastructure endangers indigenous communities and nature from the Amazonas. Similarly, in Peru, the mining project Las Bambas also endangers indigenous groups and nature. Indigenous women have become key actors in this dispute because of their willingness to stand up and defend their territory.
Chinese Artificial Intelligence in Latin America

There is a clear intention on behalf of the Chinese to become a global leader in artificial Intelligence. AI gives them a clear economic, military, and political advantage. According to Andres, there is data that shows that there are many countries using Chinese AI surveillance technology from companies like Huawei, Hikvision, Dahua, and ZTE in Latin America. While there are some benefits to this technology being introduced to the regions, for example, in Ecuador, Chinese AI has helped in times of crisis such as Earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic, this also poses many threats to other countries and societies. One of the uses and interest for China in regards to AI is cyberespionage. This tactic allows them to gain technology information and insight regarding the economic and political moves of other countries, but it also gives them easier access to conduct cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns (Andres, 2021).

Nonetheless, there are still many countries that prefer Chinese technology. In fact, Andres (2021) quotes a report from 2019 that reveals that 43 from countries around the world there are 75 smart city projects with AI. Among these countries, there were several from Latin America and the Caribbean like Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Panama, and the British Virgin Islands. While this report does not include Ecuador and Venezuela, these two other countries have several Chinese technological investments. In the case of Venezuela, in 2018, the country had a $23 billion debt with the PRC. They have accepted their investments and funded projects such as the one for the Fatherland Card, which are digital identity cards in which the government used the Chinese company ZTE to develop them. This has helped current president Nicolás Maduro’s presidency (which started in 2013) continue with lack of democratic and transparency practices (Andres, 2021).

Russia

Similarly to China, Russia is another actor that has every intention of becoming a superpower. Russian ties with Latin America historically go back to the Cold War and the communist influence that passed through the region as a wave and alternative to the established capitalist United States already had on the region. Communism managed to rule over several countries such as Cuba and Venezuela and it managed to rile up its followers in several different others. Nonetheless, with the fall of the USSR, so did most of Russia’s
influence in the region; That is until recently. According to Chaguaceda & Boersner-Herrera, (2022), “it is pertinent to pay attention to the contribution of the Russian presence (particularly the synergies of practices and narratives with allied governments) to the permanence and legitimisation of leadership and authoritarian regimes in the region”. The country has since then offered political and economic support in exchange for diplomatic support. Countries such as El Salvador and Brazil, as well as Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua are among those who support and let themselves be influenced by the nation (Chaguaceda & Boersner-Herrera, 2022).

It is no secret that Russia has been inserting themselves in the international arena and gaining influence over countries whose social unrest is worrisome. Russia has therefore tried to strengthen its economic ties with Latin America as an attempt and separate the influence of the United States in the area. “Latin America is part of increasing interest in promoting Russia’s international presence and trade relations with the region” (Chaguaceda & Boersner-Herrera, 2022). Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico are one of the most important markets for Russia (Chaguaceda & Boersner-Herrera, 2022).

Another way in which they have tried to insert themselves in these societies is through espionage and political fraud. The Spanish firm, Alto-Analytics, has suggested that there are social media accounts or mass media companies with ties to Russia that during electoral periods portray the State as a violent actor in order to manipulate public opinion. This has happened in both Colombia and Chile. In the case of Colombia, there are theories about Russian influence during the elections that stimulated “anti-government protests in the country” (2019) during the last elections, this was claimed by the former Vice President Marta Lucia Ramirez (Alsema, 2019). Another incident was in Mexico where, according to a report by Atlantic Council, they revealed that there is a clear anti-North American bias in pro-Kremlin media during their presidential elections (Galante & Lee, 2018).

Fake news and false propaganda from Russia have incremented in the past years because of the war with Ukraine. Disinformation regarding the war is spread by Russian media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik. They use the Spanish platforms to promote a good versus evil narrative between the west and east to undermine democratic values. While there have been regulations put in place by platforms warning in regards to disinformation, they have still found ways around them. In the end, it is also up to the people, according to a New York
Times interview with Bret Schafer, there are people in Latin America who view Russian media outlets as a trusted source of information, consequently, even if there are regulations in place to stop dissemination, some people can go straight to the source and still believe what the governments are saying (Myers and Frenkel, 2022).

Next steps: how do we move forward?

There is an urgent need to move forward and tackle the issue of disinformation. Solutions need to be based on evidence and data with a human rights based approach that prioritizes the lives of all of those who are most vulnerable. According to Ibarra, the first step to fight disinformation, especially gendered political disinformation, is to recognise it as a public problem that affects all individuals in societies (2022). At the end of the day, individuals need to be the ones who are critically aware of the information they digest and disseminate for others to use. Education is always needed to create a culture that is sensible to the information that is being shared within a community or society. Nowadays, social media is one of the most trusted sources by individuals for information, Vorhaus in Forbes reported that there is an increase in the amount of people who turn to social media for news, according to Reuters Institute Digital News Report in 2020, people under 25 are “two times more likely to look at news on social media apps” (Vorhaus, 2020), among these platforms are Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube.

There is a need for legislative measures on a local, national, regional, and international level. National constitutions, especially in Latin America, need to formally recognize digital rights as fundamental human rights. According to Ibarra, in most countries, “regulations are outdated and need to catch up to reality” (2021). A good example to follow would be the European Union’s Action Plan Against Disinformation. The formal recognition and establishment of disinformation in the countries’ constitutions would allow the establishment of formal mechanisms to fight this issue. There needs to be alliances from different stakeholders from our societies, for example the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to act and solve this issue.

In addition, it is important to remember that violence is often normalized in women’s day-to-day life. Gendered-based digital violence should not be normalized as well for them to participate in public life. The digital gap between women and men is one of the many
problems that have accelerated the use of disinformation to threaten women’s integrity and human dignity, part of it is due to the lack of knowledge and skills on behalf of women to insert themselves in spaces which could prevent unregulated technology from existing in the first place. Consequently, it is also important to invest in women’s capacity building and participation in society.

Nonetheless, the gravity of the problem also demands for institutional measures that can help regulate and facilitate this cultural change. While in an ideal world it would be best for people to follow the ethical and moral intuition that sharing false information is wrong, this is not the case. It is necessary to design and implement strategies on an institutional level that can help prevent the use of disinformation as a weapon.

There needs to be preventive, regulative, monitoring and accountability measures to ensure the compliance of all institutions and platforms, including social media. “Social media companies must acknowledge and redress the real-world harm they’re facilitating - and profiting from - online” (Ibarra, 2021), in other words, these platforms need to be held accountable and they need to actively fight against disinformation. “Governments cannot be afraid of regulating social media” (Fundación Multitudes, 2023). Digital threats need to be dealt with in order to ensure human security.

Lastly, there needs to be more investment in research and technology to fight this issue. It is necessary that, first, the incidents are documented and analyzed in order to figure out how to properly respond to these incidents. For example, disinformation needs to be monitored during key processes such as elections, to learn about its dynamics and how it manifests in societies (Ibarra, 2021). This is especially important now that AI systems are becoming more accessible, it is necessary to spread awareness of the existence and impact that these systems have on society. “It is crucial to promote gender-responsive and inclusive AI development” (Fundación Multitudes, 2023). This can be done by implementing feminist principles into the design of AI systems and their algorithms which would ideally eliminate or counter their gender bias.

States need to invest into cybersecurity systems and technology in order to protect their data and mechanisms. Part of the reason for which countries such as China and Russia are able to interfere so easily in processes such as elections is because they are unprotected against these
attacks. Consequently, it is necessary that States implement strategies that, on one hand, protect the fundamental human right of freedom of speech which also extends to online platforms, but, on the other hand, protect their human integrity by censoring TFVs and other forms of disinformation.

References:


