WHEN DISINFORMATION TARGETS WOMEN, IT'S DESIGNED TO KEEP THEM OUT OF PUBLIC LIFE

Multitudes

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By the time the first verified reports about COVID-19 were published, misinformation about the virus was already being shared. Disinformation and 'fake news' soon followed. It didn't take much time at all before distortions, lies and fictions were reaching more people, more quickly, than facts.

None of this should surprise us, since we've known for some time that lies spread faster than truth. The real problem arises when lies are believed. And when does that happen? Research tells us that lies are more likely to be believed, and especially catch fire, when they reinforce our pre-existing beliefs. While some beliefs are harmless, others can be weaponized, with the help of disinformation, to achieve undemocratic ends.

In the world of politics, this is already happening. Disinformation campaigns regularly rely on sexist beliefs about women, power and politics in attempts to delegitimize women who hold or seek office. Distinct from online abuse, trolling, revenge porn or even pornographic deepfakes, disinformation is a stealthier, more pernicious way to undermine women and dissuade them from entering politics. This emerging threat has devastating implications for women in public life and, by extension, democracies everywhere.

It's crucial that we pay attention, and commit energy and resources to better understand this problem. What's at stake is simply too important to ignore, especially now. Just when women are inching closer to a more equitable share of public power, trying to actualize democracy's promise of government by the people, for the people—women being a key part of the people—gendered disinformation puts hard-fought gains at risk.

Right now women hold just 25.5% of parliament seats worldwide. After years of progression, we're seeing women's representation slow, stall or even move in the opposite direction. In 2020 the number of countries with no women in government increased, reversing a promising trend. Sliding backwards is not an option. Not only because equitable representation is a democratic ideal we should all strive for, but because we know that more women's representation means more stability, equality and social welfare for the societies they help lead. In study after study, we see that women prioritize health, education and development, and their participation boosts citizens' confidence in democracy.

Surely the least we can do is remove barriers designed to keep women from public leadership. Disinformation represents a considerable barrier, especially in an age when people increasingly get their news from social media and studies show that social media users are more likely to believe disinformation than non-users.

It's important to remember that with misinformation, malicious intent is unclear. But with disinformation, it's deliberate. Disinformation is intentionally false or misleading and is expressly designed to harm a person or cause. Applied to women in politics, it often relies on sexist beliefs, stereotypes and tropes like the hysterical woman, the bad mother or the disloyal wife.

What this looks like in practice could be an image of a mayor talking on the phone at a playground while her child cries after taking a fall. The caption might call the politician a ‘neglectful mother who’s blinded by her own ambition’, when in reality the woman immediately ran over to help her child.

Gendered disinformation is powerful because it sows doubt. And in societies that are so unused to women being in power, there’s plenty of doubt to exploit. Disinformation encourages suspicion and distrust of women who publicly counter norms. It makes us question whether they belong or are capable of being decision-makers.

The script is always the same: dispute a woman’s fitness for public life by attacking her private life. Compared to male politicians, research suggests women are not only disproportionately targeted, but disinformation focuses on character over policies. And of course these patterns are even more pronounced for women from racial, ethnic, religious or other minority groups.

So what’s the antidote to disinformation? There are governance, private sector and research-based solutions. In most countries, regulations are outdated and need to catch up to reality; the EU’s recent Action Plan against Disinformation offers some promising ideas. Social media companies must acknowledge and redress the real-world harm they’re facilitating—and profiting from—online.

Our best chance, however, starts with research. We need to document and analyze gendered disinformation so we can respond more effectively. Later this month, the Women's Observatory Against Disinformation is launching in Chile with exactly this aim. A team of researchers will monitor and assess the spread of disinformation in the run-up to a series of elections over the next two years. The initiative will be replicated across other countries in Latin America, ideally resulting in concrete policy solutions that can help counter this rising tide.

Ultimately, it's up to us to decide what we're willing to tolerate as a society. We need to claim ownership of disinformation as a collective problem and choose to do better—for women, democracy, and our shared future.

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