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**Online Threats to Women’s Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them**

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## Women's Political Engagement in the Digital Age

There is little doubt that technological innovations, and particularly the internet, have revolutionized the way people live, work, consume news and engage politically all over the world.

As everyday more people use the Internet – and social media in particular – for accessing news, forming opinions, and engaging in political debates, researchers are beginning to understand the new opportunities and unprecedented challenges the digital space poses to women's political engagement.

On the one hand, social media<sup>1</sup> platforms represent important avenues for female candidates and politicians to directly communicate with their constituency, overcoming the marginalization and bias they suffer on traditional media outlets; on the other hand, it exposes them to shocking amounts of sexism, harassment and threats, with detrimental effect for young women's political ambitions. While there is no global research focused on the understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of women's political engagement, we only expect that the spike in social media use, the postponement of several elections, and the voter suppression that has ensued in many countries have made things worse for many female political candidates and minority politicians. They risk being pushed out of the political process, at a time when so many of them are trying to join for the first time.

In the face of a the wave of authoritarianism that uses the internet and social media to diminish progress on gender equality, it's critical that feminist movements, women's networks and civil society organizations work in coalition, advocating for best practices and policy changes aimed at ensuring that the online space becomes a tool for promoting women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life.

### The Double-Edged Sword: Women in Politics & Social Media

As everyday more people join the 830 million who are already online <sup>2</sup> and use the Internet as a key source of information around politics and governance<sup>3</sup>, it's critical to analyze the role social media outlets are playing, consciously or unconsciously, in the promotion of more gender inclusive and participatory democracies – yet the intersection of gender, democracy, disinformation, and information technology remains understudied.

A 2016 survey of female Parliamentarians from 107 countries<sup>4</sup> found that more than 85% of them use social media and particularly Facebook, with younger legislators being the most active. Through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, female politicians and political aspirants are in fact being able to

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, social media refers to forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos). This definition is borrowed from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *ITU ICT Facts and Figures 2017* (2017). <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament, *Women in decision-making: The role of the new media for increased political participation* (2013). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/493010/IPOL-FEMM\\_ET\(2013\)493010\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/493010/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2013)493010_EN.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Patterson, T., *Social Media: Advancing Women in Politics?*, Women in Parliaments Global Forum (2016). [http://www.w20-germany.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/documents/WIP-Harvard-Facebook-Study\\_Oct2016.pdf](http://www.w20-germany.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/WIP-Harvard-Facebook-Study_Oct2016.pdf)

communicate directly with voters and influence the political agenda at more limited costs and on their own terms<sup>5</sup>, seemingly overcoming the bias and marginalization they face on traditional media outlets around the world<sup>6</sup>. In some cases, female politicians and candidates seem to be particularly apt at social media use, as study found female politicians in Europe<sup>7</sup> are able generate more followers and likes on social media pages than their male colleagues<sup>8</sup>.

Yet, while recognizing the benefits in being online, the majority of the eighty-eight female politicians and experts I interviewed for my study in 2019<sup>9</sup> reported being extremely concerned about the pervasiveness of gender-based abuse (ranging from insults to death threats) in the digital space as a real barrier for women who want to engage in politics, and a serious disincentive for young women to consider a political career.

According to Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia from 2010 to 2013: “Social Media is for women politicians a double-edged sword, as it has both benefits and burdens. The benefits are that you can establish relations with a mass constituency. You can say what you want to say and publish it. The very considerable downside is the fact that the social media environment is so gendered and full of vile material when it comes to women politicians.<sup>10</sup>”

Emails, blogs and social media platforms have in fact provided new channels for misogyny and gender-based violence, with the most vicious attacks being against women of color and religious minorities<sup>11</sup>.

A 2014 survey carried out in Europe calculated that in this region one in ten women have already experienced a form of online violence since the age of 15.<sup>12</sup> According to the Women’s Media Center, women are “the majority of the targets of some of the most severe forms of online assault — rape

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<sup>5</sup> Cmeciu, C. and Pătruț, M., “The Visual Framing of Romanian Women Politicians in Personal Campaign Blogs during the 2012 Romanian Parliamentary Elections”, in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition* (2014). <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/women-in-politics-and-media-9781628921069/>.

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Haraldsson & Lena Wängnerud (2019) The effect of media sexism on women’s political ambition: evidence from a worldwide study, *Feminist Media Studies*, 19:4, 525-541, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797).

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament, *Women in decision-making*.

<sup>8</sup> Bystrom, D. and Kaid, L., ‘Are Women Candidates Transforming Campaign Communication? A Comparison of Advertising Videostyles in the 1990s’, in C. S. Rosenthal (Ed.), *Women transforming Congress* (pp.146-169) (2003). <https://www.oupres.com/books/9784692/women-transforming-congress>. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.; Barbara Lee Family Foundation ‘Politics is Personal: Keys to Likeability and Electability for Women’ (2017). <https://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/research/likeability/>.

<sup>9</sup> The names of the experts and female politicians interviewed are included in the acknowledgement section of my research. They come from the following thirty countries: Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, Ghana, India, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Malawi, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Slovenia, Africa, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, Ukraine, Uruguay and the United States. Di Meco, L., *#ShePersisted. Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World* (2019) <https://www.she-persisted.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 23 .

<sup>11</sup> Barboni, E., *(Anti)social media: the benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians* (2018). <https://www.atalanta.co/antisocial-media>.

<sup>12</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey – Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 104. (2014). <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>.

videos, extortion, doxing with the intent to harm...(and are) victims of nonconsensual pornography, stalking, electronic abuse and other forms of electronically-enhanced violence.<sup>13</sup>

Female politicians and political activists are, in this respect, easy and frequent targets, with online threats, harassment and graphic sexual taunts<sup>14</sup>, often amplified by armies of trolls and bots, being used to delegitimize, depersonalize ultimately dissuade them from being politically active,.

A recent survey of women parliamentarians found that 41.8 per cent of the respondents had seen extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them spread through social media, including photomontages showing them nude<sup>15</sup>.

In Britain and the United States, a female politician or journalist is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds<sup>16</sup> and cybercrimes often remain unpunished, as most law enforcement jurisdictions have limited resources with which to investigate cybercrimes, requiring them to ignore all but the most severe or disturbing complaints, often only after an escalation to a more tangible threat has occurred. In 2016, Jo Cox, a female Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, was killed by a far-right activist. She had been victim of repeated online harassment and threats.

In India, online attacks and trolling against female politicians and journalists have become particularly visible and grave. A recent Amnesty International report<sup>17</sup> found that they are twice as likely to be attacked than their counterparts in the United Kingdom or the United States.

## **Gendered Disinformation and Organized Attacks Against Women in Politics**

In addition to being the targets of online threats and attacks from social media users, women in politics are increasingly finding themselves overwhelmed by armies of politically motivated trolls and bots, amplifying negative messages and making it very difficult for candidates to set their own narratives.

In the absence of a formal definition, I'm describing gendered disinformation as the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women. Women in politics in particular are the targets of overwhelming volumes of online attacks, fake stories, humiliating or sexually charged images, including photomontages, often aimed at framing them as untrustworthy, unintelligent, emotional/angry/crazy, or sexual. This type of disinformation is designed to alter public understanding of female politicians' track records for immediate political gain, as well as to discourage women seeking political careers, and it deserves specific attention because of its nature, volume and impact on democratic processes.

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<sup>13</sup> Women's Media Center, *Online Abuse 101*. <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/online-abuse-101>.

<sup>14</sup> iKNOWPolitics, *Consolidated Response on Prevention and Mitigation of Electoral and Political Violence Targeted at Women* (2015). [http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/violence\\_againt\\_women\\_in\\_politics.docx](http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/violence_againt_women_in_politics.docx).

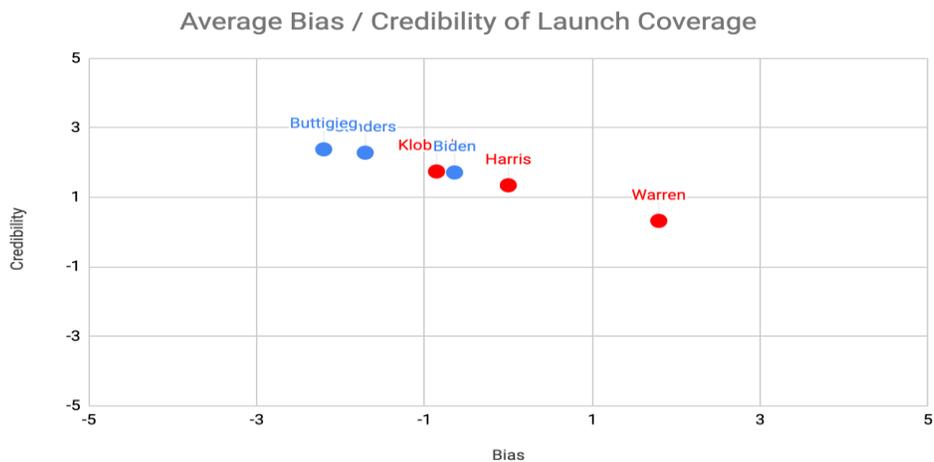
<sup>15</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians* (2016), <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Amnesty International, *Troll patrol* (2018). <https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings>.

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, *Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India* (2020). <https://amnesty.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Troll-Patrol-India-Findings.pdf>.

While some attention has been given to analyzing and, to a lesser extent, counteracting online violence against women in politics, less has been paid to gendered disinformation, a phenomenon that is as pervasive as it is overlooked. While online attacks and gendered disinformation might have slight variations in targets, extent, and tone, their main goal—and outcome—is common. They undermine women’s credibility, pose obstacles to their electoral success, and ultimately represent a significant disincentive for women to pursue a political career. There is more: gendered disinformation weakens democratic institutions by limiting the participation of a significant part of the population and increasing the notion of politics as an inherently “dirty,” corrupt, cynical, and violent field, where leadership characteristics associated with women do not have a place.

Tracking four months of the U.S. Democratic Primaries, original research by the author and Marvelous AI, a data analytics company that uses artificial intelligence to detect online narratives around political campaigns. In the graph below, MarvelousAI uses link-sharing behavior of Twitter users to place them on a two-dimensional graph: political bias on the X-axis (lower values = left-leaning, higher values = right-leaning) and credibility on the Y-axis (lower values = fake / conspiracy, higher values = credible). The chart below shows the average political bias and credibility of the users discussing each candidate, based on what kinds of news outlets they propagate, finding that female candidates were attacked more often than their male counterparts by social media accounts associated with far-right ideologies, as well as accounts that shared a greater volume of content containing false and misleading information<sup>18</sup>.



The narratives employed were frequently more negative and more concerned with the female candidates’ character than with their policies and ideas, as is more generally the case when male candidates are targeted by the same types of actors. As a result, even from the very early stages of their campaign, female candidates experienced difficulties driving the conversation on topics that matter to electorates, making it more challenging to establish themselves as qualified contenders.

<sup>18</sup> Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C. and Di Meco, L., Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries (2019). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3444200](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3444200).

Recent reporting shows that female parliamentarians in the United Kingdom and Europe are targeted by similar narratives and are frequent targets of disinformation attacks, in addition to various forms of abuse<sup>19</sup>.

Gendered disinformation attacks against women in politics, both coming from political opponents and as a result of foreign interference, have been recorded in multiple countries, including India<sup>20</sup>, Ukraine and Italy, and do represent increasingly common occurrences<sup>21</sup>.

Very often, harassers and trolls play into discriminatory gender norms that sexualize and objectify them, and by distributing fake nude photos of female politicians. This has happened in Rwanda, where harassers posted fake nude photos of Diane Rwigara<sup>22</sup>, the only female presidential candidate in the 2017 election, as well as Svitlana Zalishchuk, a Ukrainian Member of Parliament<sup>23</sup>, and endless more.

For more to be done, it is critical that gendered disinformation is further researched, understood, and tackled as a problem for democratic institutions, instead of an inevitable side product of social norms and misogyny, as many social media platforms prefer to frame it.

## **Feminist Digital Activism Shaping Electoral Outcomes & Driving Change**

While social media represents for many young women a disincentive to engaging politically for fear of smear campaigns and online threats, it can also be used as a tool to advocate for policy-change, denounce sexism and gender-based violence, and change norms on gender and power.

In her study of young women's use of the Internet, Harris<sup>24</sup> argues that the mere act of 'going online' allows women to create identities, identify themselves as a citizen and take civic action in new ways for the issues that they care about. Similarly, other studies<sup>25</sup> finds that through their online engagement, young women are building confidence as political actors and beginning to engage in the public arena.

According to Ross, especially for political actors marginalized by mainstream traditional media such as women and members of smaller political parties, being able to speak to an infinite public "out there on

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<sup>19</sup> Spring, M. and Webster, L., 'A web of abuse: How the far right disproportionately targets female politicians' *BBC Newsnight* (2019). <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-48871400>.

<sup>20</sup> Chaturvedi, S., *I Am a Troll: inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*, Juggernaut (2016). <https://www.juggernaut.in/books/i-am-troll-1>.

<sup>21</sup> Di Meco, L., *#ShePersisted*.

<sup>22</sup> Busari, S., "Fake nude photos were used to 'silence me', disqualified Rwandan candidate says", CNN News. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/04/africa/rwanda-election-nude-photos-candidate/index.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Nina Jancowicz, "How Disinformation Became a New Threat to Women" (2017). <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/>.

<sup>24</sup> Harris A., "Young women, late modern politics, and the participatory possibilities of online cultures", *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2008), pp. 481-495. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13676260802282950>.

<sup>25</sup> Keller J.M., "Virtual Feminisms, Girls' blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics", *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:3 (2012), pp. 429-447. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369118X.2011.642890>; European Parliament, *Women in decision-making*.

their Facebook page, via their Twitter feed, or in their personal blog is both personally and politically liberating but also good for democracy.”<sup>26</sup>

According to democracy activist Kristina Wilfore<sup>27</sup>, “being part of a global community of activism for women has bolstered countries with less visible rights for women, and with less presence of women in politics. It’s now more acceptable to label oneself as a feminist, which in many countries in the Former Soviet Union, have historically characterized such identity as a Western phenomenon. Social media has been a vehicle for pointing out sexism and rigid gender roles toward women by creating a public account of the instances of insult and discrimination - in media, politics and everyday interactions between men and women. Digital platforms have given minority voices more power to level the playing field and help women activists find a common voice and see opportunities for organizing less active women by encouraging them to speak out and use their own platforms as well as contribute to various hashtag campaigns.”

Social media can shape attitudes around women’s political abilities, and the importance of women’s representation. Such attitudes matter enormously, as they have proven to be better predictors of women’s advancement in public life than, for example, a country’s level of socioeconomic and democratic development, or women’s participation in the labor force<sup>28</sup>.

Digital activism campaigns can also shape electoral outcomes and drive policy change.

In 2018, 37% of American women (and 50% of millennial women) reported that as a result of the #MeToo movement, they were more likely to vote for women candidates. That same year’s Mid-Term elections saw an unprecedented number of female candidates run for office and win seats in the United States House of Representatives and Senate.<sup>29</sup> Globally, digital activism campaigns like #NotTheCost and #BetterThanThis<sup>30</sup>, in addition to raising awareness on violence against women in politics, have also laid the groundwork for long-term institutional reforms for the inclusion of women in political spaces in some countries.

Laura Boldrini, Congresswoman and former President of the Italian Chamber of deputies, says that the support of an online community of like-minded people was crucial when she became target of vicious online attacks carried out by armies of trolls: “As I exposed and denounced the trolls and harassers, thousands of people came to my defense online, claiming the digital space as an arena to denounce sexism and shape the political discourse.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ross, K., *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides* (2017). <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Gender%2C+Politics%2C+News%3A+A+Game+of+Three+Sides+-+p-9781118561645>.

<sup>27</sup> Di Meo, L., *#ShePersisted*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Inglehart, R., and Norris, P. “Women and Democracy: Cultural Obstacles to Equal Representation.” *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (2001): 126–40. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/women-and-democracy-cultural-obstacles-to-equal-representation/>.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Lee Family Foundation, *New research: Voters, Candidates and #MeToo* (2018). <https://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Memo-How-Voters-Feel-About-MeToo.pdf>.

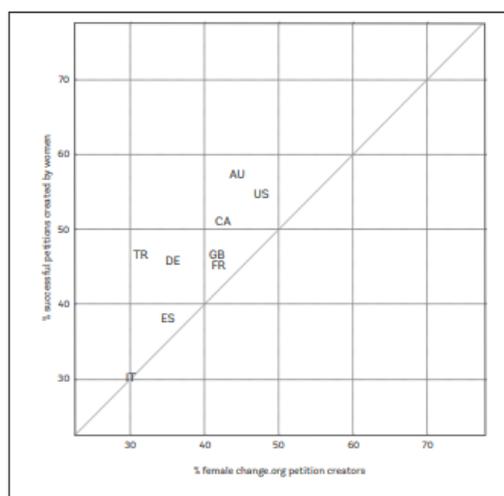
<sup>30</sup> Bardall, G., “Gender-Specific Election Violence: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies” (2013), *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2(3). <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Gender-Specific-Election-Violence%3A-The-Role-of-and-Bardall/fd2065a742b1b2bd3a1020f76007a6e5576b61e4>.

<sup>31</sup> *#ShePersisted*, p. 55.

While these examples all point to the important role women’s networks can play in using the internet, and social media in particular, to support women’s political empowerment, research on online petitions seems to point to the positive impact of an offline and online coalition approach to drive policy change.

On Change.org, a website allowing anyone worldwide to create and sign petitions and disseminate them through social media, women are on average much more successful than men in reaching a higher number of signatures as well as in achieving policy change, their success being largely due to the ability to attract more female signers and mobilize policy-makers around the issues they care for, creating truly virtuous circles of offline and online support and engagement (see illustration below)<sup>32</sup>.

Proportion of Successful Online Petitions Created by Women  
Against the Proportion of All Petitions Created by Women for Countries  
with 50 or More Total Successful Petitions



### The Need for a Broader, Women-Led Coalition to Promote and Defend Women’s Digital Rights & Political Empowerment

Online misogyny, combined with a new wave of authoritarianism in other parts of the world, possess a major threat to women’s rights globally. While traditional and social media companies have an extremely important role in promoting a fairer coverage and safer, more active engagement of female politicians, changing the narrative on women and power will require a comprehensive effort from all the stakeholders involved in the democratic process, including policy-makers and women politicians themselves.

Ministries of education all over the world, for example, have the responsibility to guarantee everyone has equal access to the Internet, as well as the cognitive skills to understand and elaborate the

<sup>32</sup> Mellon, J. and Russon-Gilman, H., Sjoberg, F. and Peixoto, T., “Gender and Political Mobilization Online: Participation and Policy Success on a Global Petitioning. [https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/gender\\_and\\_political\\_mobilization\\_online.pdf](https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/gender_and_political_mobilization_online.pdf).

information that they receive online. For Valeria Fedeli, former Minister of Education and Senate Vice-President in Italy: “We need a plan for digital literacy, in which the media, social networks and public policy makers must take responsibility to put everyone in the position of being citizens who are more aware, responsible and involved in the democratic life of the country.”<sup>33</sup>

Women in politics have also begun demanding greater accountability from social media platforms on online violence against women and gendered disinformation.

For this to happen, national school curricula must integrate Media and Information Literacy (MIL) courses<sup>34</sup> promoting critical thinking and providing citizens with the ability to consume and create media content in a positive, thoughtful and effective way, aware of existing bias and able to recognize it and call it out.

In 2016, the European Union launched the Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online<sup>35</sup>, together with four major IT companies (Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube) in an effort to respond to the proliferation of racist and xenophobic hate speech online, yet without any associated legislation to give the rule teeth, this code has had limited impact.

In August of this year, 100 U.S. women lawmakers and current and former legislators from around the world signed a letter to Facebook, urging the platform to take decisive action to protect women from rampant and increasing online attacks on their platform that have caused many women to avoid or abandon careers in politics and public service<sup>36</sup>.

While these efforts are crucial, they cannot alone fix this such a complex and global problem.

Online misogyny and disinformation against women in politics must be tackled through a multi-stakeholder, coalition-based approach, engaging women’s civil society organizations, academics, philanthropists, internet activists, and female politicians who are living the consequences of online disinformation campaigns and trolling every day.

Historically, women’s networks and coalitions have been crucial in advocating for policy changes promoting greater gender equality in government, eliminating barriers to women’s political participation and fostering dialogue among critical actors to the legislative process (including women in government, civil society and political party activists), and informing women’s political leadership.

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<sup>33</sup> Valeria Fedeli, personal interview, January 11, 2019.

<sup>34</sup>International nonprofits have designed, piloted and implemented such courses all over the world, with some best practices analyzed by Grizzle, A., ‘Enlisting media and informational literacy for gender equality and women’s empowerment’ in Vega Montiel A. (ed.), *Media and gender: A scholarly agenda for the global alliance on media and gender: Towards a global alliance* (UNESCO/IAMCR, Paris, 2014). <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/media-and-gender-a-scholarly-agenda-for-the-global-alliance-on-media-and-gender/>.

<sup>35</sup> The Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, European Commission. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ganda\\_20\\_1135](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ganda_20_1135).

<sup>36</sup> Democratic Women’s Caucus, Speaker Pelosi Send Letter to Facebook Demanding it Stop the Spread of Gendered Disinformation and Misogynistic Attacks Against Women Leaders, Press Release. <https://speier.house.gov/2020/8/democratic-women-s-caucus-speaker-pelosi-send-letter-to-facebook-demanding-it-stop-the-spread-of-gendered-disinformation-and-misogynistic-attacks-against-women-leaders>.

Networks bringing together representatives from the women's movement<sup>37</sup> and women in public office have been particularly beneficial for keeping female law-makers connected with their female constituency, informing and granting legitimacy and public support to their policy-making, and supporting their voices when they are being sidelined. For women's civil society activists, such networks have provided a channel to influence policies and promote lasting change<sup>38</sup>.

For example, in Central and Eastern Europe, women from progressive political parties, civil society organizations and parliament, organized through the CEE Network for Gender Issues, successfully advocated for the adoption and implementation gender quota policies in Slovenia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Indonesia, Ukraine, Albania and several other countries<sup>39</sup>.

In the 1990s in Uruguay, women legislators, despite occupying only 15 percent of seats, succeeded in shaping the legislative agenda in favor of gender equality thanks to the strength of their cross-party parliamentary network *Bancada Femenina* and its connectivity with the Uruguayan women's movement<sup>40</sup>.

Similarly, Bolivia's ground-breaking law to combat gender-based harassment and violence in politics, passed in 2012, was the result of twelve years of advocacy by the Steering Committee for the Political Rights of Women, led by Association of Women Mayors and Councilwomen (ACOBOL), working together with women civil society organizations, government, international cooperation, as well as experts and activists from all backgrounds and origins, including from both urban and rural areas<sup>41</sup>.

Learning from the successes of women's networks and digital feminist campaigns, it's now time to apply a similar multi-stakeholder, coalition-based approach to tackle the problem of gendered disinformation and online violence against women in politics.

Such a coalition or network must lead a deliberate research agenda, a coordinated advocacy strategy around national policies and regulations, as well as a cohesive and adequately resourced strategy to link

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<sup>37</sup> The notions of feminism and women's movement vary across national and cultural boundaries and need to be interpreted in the context of the culture in which they develop. Historically, feminist movements, in their various shapes and forms, have been instrumental in advocating for women's rights. In some countries, however, the term feminism is associated with ideological radicalism and approached critically by many women, including women in politics. For this reason and in order to be as inclusive as possible in the descriptions of a very diverse spectrum of experiences and ideologies, this paper refers to women's (instead of feminist) movements and civil society organizations, unless otherwise specifically identified.

<sup>38</sup> Some of the women who reported this conviction and are quoted in the research are: Melanne Verbeke, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and first ever US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues at the Department of State from 2009 to 2013; Sonja Lokar, Sonja Lokar, executive board member of the Women's Lobby of Slovenia and member of Slovenian parliament from 1986 to 1992; Valeria Fedeli, Italian Senator and former Education Minister; and Anita Perez Ferguson, former President of the National Women's Political Caucus and White House Liaison to the U.S. Department of Transportation under President Bill Clinton. Di Meco, L., *Women's Political Networks. Defining Leadership, Breaking Barriers, and Fostering Change. Background Research*, The Wilson Center (2017). <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/womens-political-networks-defining-leadership-breaking-barriers-and-fostering-change>.

<sup>39</sup> Lokar, S. Democracy in Eastern Europe: Women's way? *Development*, 50, 110–116 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100341>.

<sup>40</sup> Nelida Archenti and Niki Johnson, "Engendering the Legislative Agenda With and Without the Quota: A Comparative Study of Argentina and Uruguay," *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas* no. 52 (2006): 133-153. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281295121\\_Engendering\\_the\\_legislative\\_agenda\\_with\\_and\\_without\\_the\\_quota\\_A\\_comparative\\_study\\_of\\_Argentina\\_and\\_Uruguay](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281295121_Engendering_the_legislative_agenda_with_and_without_the_quota_A_comparative_study_of_Argentina_and_Uruguay).

<sup>41</sup> UN Women, Fomentar la igualdad de género: practicas promotoras. Violencia política por razón de género (2013), p. 127-136. [https://www.unwomen.org/mdgf/downloads/MDG-F\\_Case-Studies\\_SP.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/mdgf/downloads/MDG-F_Case-Studies_SP.pdf).

democracy with the digital experiences of women leaders, advocates and everyday citizens and achieve lasting change.

As Covid-19 poses new challenges for health systems and democratic governance globally<sup>42</sup>— and women political leaders have been providing some of the most effective responses to contain the pandemic<sup>43</sup>, now more than ever, it is urgent that women act to make sure that online spaces allow their voices to be heard without manipulation, harassment, or intimidation.

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, F.Z., Brechenmacher, S. and Carothers, T, *How Will the Coronavirus Reshape Democracy and Governance Globally?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2020) <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>.

<sup>43</sup> Garikipati, S. and Kambhampati, U., *Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender 'Really' Matter?* (2020). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3617953](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3617953).