

Regional Conference on Gender Disinformation and Ethical Media Coverage

Conference outcomes: report

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Summary

A regional conference on gender disinformation and ethical media coverage was held in Tbilisi on December 13, 2022, with over 60 stakeholders (90% female), representing the media and gender disciplines. Sascha Gabizon, executive director of *Women Engage for a Common Future (WECF)*, and Tamar Kintsurashvili, executive director of *Media Development Foundation (MDF)*, opened the conference. There were 17 speakers from five countries, including the U.S, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Russia, who presented their latest research, experiences, and recommendations to the guests online and offline. Guests and speakers included media, propaganda and disinformation researchers and practitioners, as well as gender researchers, feminist and LGBTQ+ activists. The conference facilitators were Tamar Kintsurashvili, Amalia Oganjanyan, and Mamuka Andguladze, all experienced experts in communication, media, and propaganda research.

The conference managed to combine global with regional viewpoints and experiences showing more similarities rather than differences in anti-gender campaigns in various countries and its role in spreading, explaining, and combating mis- or disinformation. Ultimately, the conference was a success and paved the way for promising future collaboration between gender and media researchers and practitioners. Therefore, the event provided a safe space for participants to exchange views and opinions, allowing them to openly discuss their experiences, concerns, and solutions. The audience was eager to learn more about the subject and had many questions in response to the speakers' presentations and speeches. They were particularly interested in learning how to increase awareness of the issue, ensure better collaboration between different stakeholders, and increase reach.

Overview of the sessions' main talking points

The first session, "Anti-liberal discourse and gender disinformation for internal political clashes in regard to Russian / Anti-Western propaganda" introduced the concept of gender disinformation, provided a broad overview of the global evolution of gender-based disinformation, propaganda, and campaigning, and gradually zoomed in to more regional perspectives, such as those of Ukraine with intensive wartime Russian propaganda that dehumanizes Ukrainian women and portrays them as subservient to the Russians. Anti-liberal discourse and gender disinformation are frequently used by both internal and external forces in political conflicts, posing a serious threat to national security.

The second session, "Harassment cases of female journalists and female human rights defenders online / offline and their main challenges" hosted women journalists and activists who shared how they often face online and offline attacks for being actively involved in public life, and struggle to find legal and psychological support. During the sessions, the legal

mechanisms were also discussed , in particular, for example, as part of the Council of Europe, to protect those women experiencing harassment.

In the third session, "Gender-sensitive coverage - a case of media ethics and/or media education," the importance of media and gender-sensitive reporting was emphasized. The discussion reflected the main challenges media in Georgia and Armenia encounter when covering gender issues, including gender disinformation, cases of unethical media coverage, and the difficulties and lack of gender education within higher education, especially in media studies. Furthermore, the speakers presented civil society perspectives, particularly the women's movement, its main successes and challenges, and the need for effective coordination and communication with other stakeholders.

Main takeaways

The following points and observations are the most important takeaways of the conference:

- We all are part of a global gender disinformation campaign which has been on rise over the past decade. The actors and triggers spinning the gender disinformation might be different, the motivation is always the same though: to keep the power, to cultivate phobias and hatred, and spread fears of losing the “traditional” values and ways of living.
- As Nina Jankowicz and her colleagues noted, there are three defining characteristics of gender disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination. The conference's speakers also pointed out that gender disinformation is not merely sporadic but a coordinated campaign, incorporating accurate information but packing it with false interpretations and creatively avoiding breaking the law, moving into a gray zone of the legal framework.
- In Eastern Europe, gender disinformation is a salient part of Russian / Anti-Western propaganda aiming at initiating disorder, polarizing societies, and pushing them away from democratic/liberal developments and cooperations with West Europe and the U.S.
- Gender disinformation is more effective in conservative societies, such as Georgia and Armenia, because these societies are more conservative and isolated. Overall, anti-gender misinformation aims to protect the "traditional" male-centric world.
- Women actively involved in public life are attacked online and offline not for their professional opinions or performance but simply because they are women, and often these discriminatory attacks target their physical appearance. The threats they face intend to use and demonstrate men's power to suppress women and cause physical humiliation.
- The dissemination of anti-liberal, anti-gender messages through the media, particularly social media platforms, plays a significant part in the increase in violence and hate speech against women, LGBTQ+ people, and gender activists worldwide.
- Those media outlets that oppose gender disinformation and cover gender and women's issues ethically face aggression, attacks, and threats from anti-liberal forces and public officials. The government frequently fails to protect journalists on the job. Previously, female journalists were less likely to be attacked by the police or aggressive anti-liberal protesters; however, the latest trend is that whether you are a female or a male journalist, you can become a target of verbal or physical harassment.

- When it comes to gender equality, there is a slightly positive trend in the region, as CSOs, media, governments, and the general public have become more accepting of women's rights and gender equality over the years.

Recommendations

Based on the conference discussions and findings it would be recommended:

- To organize a yearly conference involving representatives of various stakeholders such as government officials, online, central and regional media outlets, CSOs.
- To start and develop a conversation with government institutions to create proactive measures protecting the safety of individuals and the country's security, undermined by gender disinformation.
- To facilitate more collaboration between media and gender researchers and practitioners, for example, by providing research grants.
- To provide hands-on training and seminars for media practitioners on gender disinformation and ethical coverage of gender issues.
- To work with media managers to develop policies and practices that promote gender-sensitive reporting in media organizations.
- To nourish and further develop the network of the conference's participants and engage more with like-minded professionals by creating a common space where, for instance, a journalist can find expert and professional advice on gender issues or propaganda research when needed.
- To incorporate a more constructive and solution-oriented approach into the activities, such as allocating specific time during the conference for working groups to develop a memorandum or ideas on how to reach more people and raise awareness of gender disinformation.
- To actively work with youth, for example, through informal education or extracurricular activities, use innovative forms and formats, such as hackathons, gamification, quizzes, etc., to make the topic appealing and to engage the broader public in the discussion and activism on gender issues and gender disinformation. It will contribute to an increase in social awareness.
- To organize competitions among high school and/or university students in order to involve younger generations and create a network of multipliers who can identify and debunk gender myths and disinformation on a peer-to-peer level.