An Underestimated Threat: Gendered Disinformation about Ukrainian Women Journalists
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This study has been conducted to research the phenomenon of gendered disinformation in Ukraine, focusing on specific threats faced by Ukrainian women media workers while performing journalistic work. This is one of the first thorough attempts to research the issue of gendered disinformation, particularly regarding Ukrainian women journalists, during the Russian military aggression in Ukraine.

Due to the lack of attention to the issue of gendered disinformation from the government and from specific institutions, particularly the media, women who face information attacks are left alone with the problem and its consequences, which may eventually lead to a decreased engagement of women in social and political processes. Raising critical subjects and fighting for the rights of others, women media workers are not always ready to stand up for themselves, since precedents of public exposure and response to gendered disinformation in particular are isolated cases so far, rather than a systematic pattern.

For the first time, the authors draw the connections between specific gender-based fakes with general narratives; therefore, it is advisable to track Russian narratives on which gendered disinformation about Ukrainian women media workers is based. It is one of the means of undermining the entire country by forming a negative image of active women who raise important, contentious subjects. The narratives that underlie gendered disinformation are part of the Russian propaganda machine, the grand narrative about Ukraine.

We hope that the information published herein will contribute to making the issue of gendered disinformation more visible and help find ways of overcoming it. We also hope this information will be used to develop assistance and support programs for women journalists in Ukraine.
Key findings:

Russia uses a strategy of gendered disinformation in Ukraine to silence women journalists and create a certain negative image of gender equality and the role of women in democratic societies.

Online violence can take on a variety of worms: doxxing¹, sectoring, trolling, cyberstalking, threats of violence and cyberbullying, as well as certain forms of disinformation and malinformation.

There are essentially no data or research about the nature and scope of gendered disinformation as a phenomenon in Ukraine. This subject is not yet the focus of the Center for Combating Disinformation or the The Center for Strategic Communication under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. It can be assumed that this problem is erroneously believed to be insignificant.

Content analysis of the information space of Ukraine and Russia (media, social networks, radio, television) using the information and analytical service Attack Index in the period from February 24, 2022 to August 2023 showed the presence of gendered disinformation about Ukrainian journalists.

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¹ Doxxing, or doxing (spelling alteration of "docs" for "documents") is a practice of collecting and publishing personal or identifying information about a specific person or organization.
The general context of the information field illustrated that in the analyzed period, Russian information space saw an intensification of negative attitudes to the ideas of feminism and gender equality. For example, the Russian media consolidate the following line of associations:

feminism – sexual deviations – pro-Ukrainian views (nationalism) – terrorism

The Ukrainian information environment, on the other hand, has narratives that differ from the Russian ones regarding this subject:

"Feminism is a movement of strong women,"

"The history of Ukrainian feminism is much older than the communist traditions,"

"The gender-based approach is about equal opportunities and universal human values."

Ukrainian radical right-wing groups are independent agents distributing gendered disinformation. However, they are not part of the mainstream and have little influence on the public discourse.
Narratives about Ukrainian women journalists containing gendered disinformation:

Narrative "Leading Ukrainian women journalists can make a career only through their relationships with men." This narrative was spread about Nataliia Moseichuk, a Ukrainian journalist, news anchor of the 1+1 TV channel.

Narrative "(Military) women correspondents are SBU agents, feminists, prostitutes, lesbians, escort workers." This narrative was spread about Iryna Sampan, Ukrainian journalist of Butusov+.

Narrative "Appointment of an American transgender as an official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a slap in the face of a former Soviet republic residents." This narrative was spread about American journalist and speaker of an English-language project of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Sara Ashton-Cirillo.

Polina Vernyhor, a journalist of the online publication Zaborona, which regularly covers the Russian aggression in Ukraine, reported gendered disinformation about herself. She received threats on Telegram, she was called a "left liberal," a "traitor" and a "pro-Russian whore." Unknown individuals used doxxing against the journalist.

Similar gendered disinformation was spread about Gayane Avakyan, editor of the Svoi.City network. Unknown individuals called the journalist a "journalawhore" in a Telegram channel, alleging her to be a friend of Serhii Haidai, former head of Luhansk Oblast State Administration.

Similar phrases were used to another Ukrainian journalist, Maryna Mukhina, a correspondent of the Starobilsk telenewspaper (Luhansk oblast). She reported this publicly.
This forms the image of women journalists as the enemies of Ukraine combined with open calls for physical violence against them; the technology of doxxing on social media with subsequent dissemination of this information is also employed.

The identified narratives are systemic in nature. Thus, we can assume that there is a single technical assignment on the part of Russia to undermine Ukrainian women journalists based on their gender. The purpose is to have a destructive impact on Ukraine’s information security, form a negative attitude to European countries and the European system of values.

It should be noted that some women journalists are reluctant to report sexual violence due to fear of acquiring the reputation of reporters incapable of handling dangerous assignments.

The same applies to gendered disinformation, making it challenging to assess the scale of the issue, since women are either not well aware of this phenomenon, or consider this subject a taboo or not deserving of public exposure and help.

It is important to create an environment and a system at every level (the state – the police – newsrooms – NGOs) where women journalists could identify and report facts of gendered disinformation without fear of suspension from future assignments, feeling confident that they will be able to get the necessary help and support.
Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine has been ongoing for over 9 years. Since February 24, 2022, it turned into a full-scale war. Russia is waging not only a classic war against Ukraine and democracy, but also an information war. It uses fake news, post-truth, bot armies and psychological information operations (PSYOPs), as well as gendered disinformation to spread lies and sow doubt.

The existence of fake news is no longer a new phenomenon, nor is the existence of misogyny, sexism, and gender stereotypes. What has changed in the digital age, however, is the ease with which disinformation campaigns can be coordinated, financed, and disseminated. On the other hand, there have been positive developments in the understanding of the problem and its real consequences, since women, especially ones holding public office or decision-making positions, are disproportionately targeted with online disinformation. This is covered in the 2022 material What Is Gendered Disinformation by Heinrich Boell Foundation.
Gendered disinformation undermines the representation of democratic institutions and poses a security threat, as online threats can sometimes inspire aggression in real life. This practice affects nearly half the population, as women tend to withdraw from dialogue, censor themselves, and avoid careers in politics and other male-dominated professions.

Online violence has real-life consequences similar to those of violence in the physical world, found a 2020 UNESCO study, Online Violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Overview of Cases and Consequences. For instance, in Pakistan, nine out of ten women journalists reported that their mental health had been impacted. There were cases of stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicide. As a result, women journalists, who are already underrepresented in the news, use various forms of protection, such as refusing assignments, working under pseudonyms, refraining from expressing their opinions online, changing the subject area of their work, or even changing the profession. The authors of the study conclude that online gender-based violence is not a private crime, but a real and actual threat to freedom of speech.

The 2021 IMS study "Multiple Risks: The Safety of Women Journalists in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine" covers the trend of using children as a way to threaten journalists. All of this is done to silence women and make them feel vulnerable. In Ukraine, it was publicly reported by Katerina Sergatskova, founder of Zaborona online publication. The journalist was subjected to doxxing and trolling on social media, in particular, her home address and a photo of her young son were posted on Facebook.
We view gendered disinformation as a subset of misogynistic violent treatment of women and violence against them, as false or misleading gendered and sexualized narratives, often with a certain degree of intention and coordination, in order to prevent women from participating in the public sphere and affect their reputation.

Both state and non-state foreign actors use the strategy of gendered disinformation to silence women, obstruct the political discourse online, and form certain ideas about gender and the role of women in democratic societies. This is covered in the bulletin "Gendered Disinformation: Tactics, Themes, and Trends by Foreign Malign Actors" published by the Global Engagement Center of the US State Department in 2023.

These data confirm that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by online violence, including online bullying and harassment. Online violence takes different forms, and is implemented by a variety of means. They include:

- **doxxing** (e.g., publication of the woman’s home address online claiming that she seeks sexual relations);
- **sectoring** (e.g., threatening to publish intimate photos of a woman in order to blackmail her demanding sex);
- **trolling** (e.g., making posts that incite violence against women), cyber-stalking, threats of violence, and cyberbullying;
- **some forms of disinformation and malinformation** (e.g., an article that contains information about a person’s sexual orientation, even though it is not of public interest and has no connection with the person’s professional qualities)².

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What can gendered disinformation be like?

Disinformation campaigns are used against influential women, including politicians, journalists, and women's rights activists, to discredit, intimidate, or silence them. These campaigns use the following tactics:

- Publication of false sexualized information, images, and videos which violate the socially acceptable behavior of women or men;
- Publication of doctored images, videos, memes to discredit or mock somebody;
- Using automation to enhance attacks.

Disinformation campaigns use narratives about gender roles, gender equality, and sexual orientation to:

- polarize public discussions
- disrupt social cohesion
- sow panic

In the case of Ukraine, unfortunately, there is essentially no data or research about the nature and scope of gendered disinformation. This subject is not the focus of the Center for Combating Disinformation\(^3\) or the Center for Strategic Communication under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine\(^4\). It can be assumed that this problem is not yet believed to be insignificant.

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3 The Center for Countering Disinformation is an agency of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC) established under the NSDC decision of March 11, 2021 "On the Establishment of the Center for Countering Disinformation" and put into operation by the Decree of the President of Ukraine dated March 19, 2021, No. 106.

4 The Centre for Strategic Communication and Information Security under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy has been established under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine as one of the mechanisms of countering disinformation through joint efforts of the state and civil society. The Centre's work is focused on countering external threats, particularly Russian information attacks, by means of communications.
On the other hand, in September 2022, Kyiv hosted an international round table on Countering Disinformation during Warfare, initiated by the Center for Countering Disinformation under the NSDC, where this subject was raised by the Portfolio Manager for the Democratic Governance and Reform Program of UNDP in Ukraine Olena Ursu.

“During a crisis, particularly during a pandemic or a war, disinformation spreads and changes very rapidly. Ukrainian women and girls are increasingly faced with gender-based disinformation. Refugee women from Ukraine are targeted by sexist remarks from around the world that impose harmful gender stereotypes and downplay the complexity of their situation due to war. One of our main challenges now is to help Ukraine overcome the threats posed by the growing popularity of certain mobile applications that spread disinformation,” emphasized Olena Ursu.

The lack of proper data concerning gendered disinformation is also highlighted by Emma Lygnerud Boberg, gender advisor on program development at International Media Support (IMS), in her material "Digital misogyny: Why gendered disinformation undermines democracy."

“However, while this reoccurring issue affects women all over the world, few if any resources are dedicated to understanding how profoundly this phenomenon affects our democratic process. The impact of gendered and sexualized disinformation on women in public life, as well as its corresponding effect on national security and democratic participation, is conspicuously absent from the discourse on disinformation,” she notes.
Among civil society, the team of Detector Media has addressed the subject of gendered disinformation. In 2022, it analyzed 45,000 social media posts to determine how and why Russian propaganda attacks Ukrainian women.

While investigating Russian disinformation in Ukrainian social media, Detector Media noticed an increase in the number of mentions and manipulations about Ukrainian women. Targets include refugees who were forced to leave Ukraine to escape the war with Russia and those who joined the defense forces. In the information field the Kremlin spreads gendered disinformation based on the so-called traditional values to discredit Ukrainian women, painting them as frivolous women who move abroad for personal gain, sell their bodies, have no concerns about the fate of their country where the war continues.\(^5\)

In addition, Russia’s influence was discussed back in 2020 during the discussion "Attack on Values. Gender Issues and Countering Disinformation" organized by Povaha Campaign against Sexism in the Media and Politics and the Regional Press Development Institute (RPDI).

"Gender is one of the basic themes of the instrumentalization of Russian propaganda. [Russia] uses this topic to strengthen the positions of the ‘Russian world,’ in order to create an image of the enemy from Western countries. And it uses this not just for its own audience, but also targets the West, albeit with somewhat different messages,“

said Liubov Tsybulska, head of the task force for hybrid threats analysis of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center.

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\(^5\) "Prostitution Will Save Ukraine from the Default.‘ Researching Russian Gendered Disinformation on Social Media“ / Detector Media / http://surl.li/drkhm
Section 2

Gendered disinformation regarding Ukrainian women journalists.

Content analysis using big data methodology

Methodology

We carried out content analysis of the information environment in Ukraine and Russia (media, social media, radio, television) with the use of Big Data technology for the presence / absence of gendered disinformation targeting Ukrainian women journalists during Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine.

This study uses the information and analysis service Attack Index, which allows processing of large volumes of information from open online sources. The service helps to identify the degree of information spread or danger of information flows on selected subjects. Content analysis using Big Data technology allowed for a search for messages by topic on the web; tracking information flows, narratives, events, as well as the dynamics of publications.
The analysis included over 500,000 information pages in Ukrainian and about the same number in Russian (media, social media, radio, television) found by the Attack Index service between February 24, 2022, and August 2023 using queries "Ukrainian" "women journalist" (in Ukrainian and Russian) and some names of Ukrainian women journalists (e.g., Iryna Sampan, Nataliia Moseichuk, Sara Ashton-Cirillo etc.).

Analysis results

General context of the information environment. In the analyzed period, Russian information space saw an intensification of negative attitudes to the ideas of feminism and gender equality.

Screenshot 1.
Top 20 Russian sources publishing negative materials regarding feminism and gender equality
The existence of an information operation aiming to render the ideas of feminism and gender equality in Russia destructive is evidenced by the spread of negative information with the keywords "feminism / feminist," "gender."

The tonality of information dynamics by the indicated keywords is mostly negative (red).
The following destructive narratives exist in the Russian information space:

"Feminism is an extremist ideology,"
"Gender is a threat of liberal pro-Western terrorism and extremism."

Examples:

A draft law to recognize feminism as an extremist ideology developed in the State Duma (2023.04.05, 13:46, Putin Today);

Feminists accused of trying to "stand out somehow" (2023.04.05, 17:30, Govorit Moskva);

Time to think about the threat of liberal pro-Western terrorism and extremism (2023.04.05, 13:46, Putin Today).

In addition, several anti-gender TV projects have been created, including The Alphabet of Traditional Values. Unity of Russian Peoples (Katekhon, hosts: Konstantin Malofeyev, Archpriest Andrey Tkachev, Aleksandr Dugin).

The Russian media consolidate the following line of associations:
feminism – sexual deviations – pro-Ukrainian views (nationalism) – terrorism.

For example, here is the post of user neo_centrist in the ru_polit community on LiveJournal (a popular blogging platform with a mostly Russian audience) of April 5, 2023:

The Ukrainian information environment, on the other hand, has narratives that differ from the Russian ones regarding this subject:

"Feminism is a movement of strong women," "The history of Ukrainian feminism is much older than the communist traditions," "The gender-based approach is about equal opportunities and universal human values."

Examples:

**What do we (not) celebrate on March 8? How this state holiday became the most controversial one in Ukraine, and will it be able to overcome stereotypes?** "Day of a Ukrainian Woman," 2023.03.08, 07:31, New Voice);

**The history of Ukrainian feminism is much older than the communist traditions: Zabuzhko about Ukrainian feminists** (2023.03.08, 20:34, Vikna-STB);

**Unbreakable, tenacious, cruel, and determined: movies about strong women** (2023.03.08, 09:56, JetSetter.ua);

"Glory to Ukraine" chanted at a women's rally next to the Russian embassy in Moldova (2023.03.08 19:36, Zmina.info);

**Feminist celebrities: which famous women in Hollywood advocate for equal rights** (2023.03.08,13:31 TSN.ua).
The tonality of information dynamics in the Ukrainian information space for queries "feminism / feminist," "gender" is mostly positive (green color).

Information is disseminated mainly by objective sources:

6 The quality of editorial policies of the sources have been ranked by rik.org.ua experts based on open sources. This includes https://imi.org.ua/monitoring and others. In addition, the expert methodology accounts for political influence, paid articles, disinformation, propaganda, and other factors which significantly impact the editorial policy. Thanks to machine learning, the overall characteristics of each service user request are calculated.
Aggressive attitudes towards issues of gender and feminism in the Russian information space lead to a manipulative use of this topic in PSYOPs in conditions of the full-scale aggression, in particular against Ukrainian journalists. We have recorded a number of destructive narratives which align with the narratives of the Russian information field.

The narratives "Supporting LGBT communities is a treason of Ukraine," "Journalists who support gender equality and diversity are enemies of Ukraine" are built on cognitive dissonance: a combination of markers of intolerance inherent in the value system of the Soviet Union / Russia ("shooting list", "people sick with homosexuality and other deviations", "gender uncertainties"), with markers of tolerance of democratic countries ("LGBT community," "tolerance," "equal rights and opportunities").

Narratives form the image of women activists and media workers as enemies of Ukraine, supporting open calls for physical violence against them.
In particular, a picture of the entire team of Cukr was published with the full names of journalists, with a caption "Enemies of the people. Shooting list 2024."

"Recently, we wrote about a local publication that helps and sponsors people sick with homosexuality and other deviations. They got offended and complained to the prosecutor's office. Here are the faces of those who destroy our common victory and want to turn Ukraine into an LGBT Soviet Union. Some people are sitting in trenches and killing the orcs, while others are worried about gender uncertainties."

Example:
a Sumy publication Cukr was threatened with destruction of the newsroom after they published a material about the life of the local LGBT community. The Commission on Journalistic Ethics condemned pressure on the media and urged the National Police of Ukraine to investigate the pressure on the newsroom and to find the perpetrators. The publication about the Cukr newsroom in a Telegram channel was characterized by emotional, offensive, obscene language, urging for physical violence against journalists.

In particular, a picture of the entire team of Cukr was published with the full names of journalists, with a caption "Enemies of the people. Shooting list 2024."

"Recently, we wrote about a local publication that helps and sponsors people sick with homosexuality and other deviations. They got offended and complained to the prosecutor's office. Here are the faces of those who destroy our common victory and want to turn Ukraine into an LGBT Soviet Union. Some people are sitting in trenches and killing the orcs, while others are worried about gender uncertainties."

A publication in the anonymous Telegram channel "Sumy. The Essential" of July 14, 2023.
Ukrainian media and NGOs came to the defense of Cukr.

Screenshot 8.
Top 20 Ukrainian publications that supported the Cukr newsroom
Narratives about Ukrainian women journalists containing gendered disinformation

Narrative "Leading Ukrainian women journalists can make a career only through their relationships with men."

This narrative is built on a combination of negative markers characterizing women journalists as hostile towards Russia and residents of the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine ("Russophobe," "Nazi," "anti-Russian statements," "applaud burning alive," "hatred towards the pro-Russian east of the country," "bully [pro-Russian individuals]") and markers of sexism: the use of men for career ("helped her get a job on the channel," "married a financier," "hunting for men").

For example, the Russian publication Life.ru writes the following in its article of June 28, 2022:

“Moseichuk is an experienced Russophobe. The TV host allowed herself to make anti-Russian statements long before the special military operation. She applauded Odesa residents burning alive in the House of Trade Unions, bullied [pro-Russian individuals] in her shows, instilled hatred towards the pro-Russian east of the country in her shows. Nataliia Moseichuk was skilled at hunting for men. In one interview, Moseichuk let it slip that it was Illia Raievskyi who helped her get a job on the 1+1 channel. At the end of the aughts, she finally married a financier.”

Background: Anchor of the United News telethon Nataliia Moseichuk reacted live to a report on another bombing in Ukraine. She pointed out the responsibility of the military. In particular, Moseichuk said that the wives of Russian occupiers should be "afraid and understand that, eventually," they will be widowed. She also recommended that the fiancees of Russian pilots "find black handkerchiefs."
Thereafter, on 26.07.2023, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the aggressor country, Russia, put Nataliia Moseichuk on the wanted list for "calls for violence against Russian pilots and their families." The reason was that she "expressed threats to Russian pilots and their families on air" as well as "an inhumane position and actual threats."

The artificial nature of the information attacks is illustrated by the dynamics – the smear campaign against Nataliia Moseichuk lasted between 7 and 30 days.
Similarly, this narrative combines a variety of **lexical markers with different semantics into a single series**: a person working for the benefit of special services (**SBU agent**), a person of a particular sexual orientation (**lesbian**), a person who provides sexual services (**prostitute**), a person who provides paid services (**including those of a sexual nature**) of providing company to rich clients at various events (**escort worker**), a person who advocates for gender, political, economic, and social equality between women and men (**feminist**).

**Background:** The narrative was formed in Russia and transferred to Ukraine after the Ukrainian Channel 5 released a calendar with the channel’s journalists posing as models. The women posed naked and were photographed with military paraphernalia. At first, the calendar could be purchased exclusively at auctions, then it became publicly available. The channel noted it was to mark the launch of a volunteer project to raise funds for the Ukrainian army: media workers planned to collect UAH 1 million to purchase walkie-talkies.
Ukrainian society had mixed reactions to the initiative. The positions of opinion leaders on the calendar were divided: some considered it daring, but some called it sexual objectification. This is evidenced by the results of sentiment analysis (tone analysis), which shows the distribution of news by positive (green color) and negative (red color) markers.

Highest-ranking news also showed a variety of perceptions of the calendar by the Ukrainian audience.

**Screenshot 12.**
The results of sentiment analysis regarding the distribution of news by positive and negative connotations resulting from the query "no censorship calendar"

**Screenshot 13.**
Top materials in the Ukrainian information environment resulting from the query "no censorship calendar"
Military correspondent, member of NGO Women in Media Iryna Sampan became a key figure, a kind of trigger of this media conflict. She signed the statement of Women in Media against the project.

In her interview "On the Information Front: How Ukrainian Women Journalists Defend Their Rights to Professional Activities," Iryna Sampan explained why the feminist community responded this way:

"This is not a normal way to raise funds, even for the army. Women journalists, military correspondents, editors are involved in the project, and that’s not okay. This is sexual objectification, which may have social consequences. The creators of the calendar approached Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valerii Zaluzhnyi. He left a note: “Our strength is not just in our beauty.”"

Women in Media NGO appealed to various media and legal organizations, as well as to the Government Commissioner for Gender Policy, to ask for a comment regarding their attitude to the project, "full of discriminatory and sexist narratives."

According to Iryna, what followed was "real horror":

"I could not imagine that our society had so little readiness for this discussion. A smear campaign started against me. Like I had no right to speak against girls, especially journalists, undressing. Because I was allegedly not that innocent myself."
The journalist shares how she was attacked by members of a right-wing radical association C14:

This organization goes to feminist and other rallies to carry out provocations. Its members beat women journalists several times. These people tried to find phone numbers of my exes through private Telegram channels and groups to buy my nudes from them. They found my pictures in a swimsuit on an old VK account, from when I was 17 or 18. They started creating my accounts on OnlyFans, a website where you make money by selling your private photos. They created an account about sexual services on Telegram on my behalf and started writing my husband about what I did with whom in the past.

Thus, we see that gender disinformation can be initiated and spread by Ukrainian groups / forces, but unlike the Russian media environment, Ukrainian media do not support these narratives.
Russian propagandists took advantage of this crisis in a Ukrainian media environment and created a generalized portrait of the war correspondent — allegedly an "SBU agent, prostitute, escort worker, feminist, and lover of Zaluzhnyi": in the material of the Russian publication Vzgliad. Delovaya Gazeta of 26.12.2022 "There Is a Proven Antidote against Women SBU Agents," Iryna Sampan is introduced as a typical SBU agent of "an entire network of women special agents," "famed women SBU agents posing as political journalists," "representatives of professions which can have easier access to information and to people (journalists, actresses, representatives of other creative professions."

"Против “женщин — агентов СБУ” есть проверенное противоядие"
Russian media started spreading gendered disinformation about Iryna Sampan, forming the following narratives:

"Since 2014, a special program has been created to train and introduce Ukrainian women to the right men in Russia. Many of the girls worked under the guise of political journalists or public figures, which allowed them to quickly find contact with the necessary officials and politicians in Russia who supervised the Ukrainian issue";  

"up to 90% of Ukrainian agents are escorts, simply prostitutes and a special social category of 'girls who failed to get into an acting school'";  

"provincial party goers without a shred of education, preferably from poor families," "village-born," "escort worker who got into the Institute of Culture and Arts on the third try";  

"found herself at one of the most notorious radio stations, calling for killing Russians," "helping Russians go to hell";  

"graduated from a special 'school of LGBT tolerance' in Kryvyi Rih and was a lesbian and a feminist for a while, even changing her profile on social media to "Mariana Lesbi"";  

"then she recruited Georgians for the anti-Russian 'legion'";  

"later she lived in Dubai, the escort capital of the world";  

"now, 28-year-old Iryna Sampan is the editor-in-chief of the Kyiv radio Army FM, that is, she is essentially one of the main Ukrainian propagandists."
The narrative “Women (war) correspondents are SBU agents, feminists, prostitutes, lesbians, escort workers” was spread by propagandist and biased media in Russia. The regularity of materials (several times a week) is consistent with the scenario of an information operation.

In the Ukrainian media environment, information about Iryna Sampan is primarily represented by objective outlets, which spoke in her defense.
In Ukraine, the narrative against Iryna Sampan was supported by the right-wing radical association C14. Some researchers, human rights defenders, and media believe the organization to have neo-Nazi characteristics. C14 representatives deny these allegations and have refuted the accusation by Hromadske in court. The organization repeatedly attacked left-wing activists, representatives of the LGBT community, and Roma people.

Thus, Ukrainian radical right-wing groups are independent agents distributing gendered disinformation. However, they are not part of the mainstream and do not significantly impact the public discourse.
Narrative "Appointment of an American transgender as an official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a slap in the face of a former Soviet republic residents"

The narrative was created in July-August 2023 after a popular Twitter blogger Sara Ashton-Cirillo was appointed as a speaker of the English-language project by the Armed Forces of Ukraine debunking Russian fakes, "Russia Hates the Truth."

**Background:** Sara Ashton-Cirillo, a transgender woman, began her service in the Ukrainian army in October 2022 after working for non-governmental organizations in the region and as a military reporter for the LGBTQ Nation agency. In the first days of the full-scale war, Cirillo came to Ukraine as a war blogger. According to the media, she was accepted as a medic to the 209th battalion of the 113th Territorial Defense Brigade. The Washington Blade writes that the American worked as a senior military medic near Kreminna. She was wounded by a fragment of an artillery shell in her right hand and face. She was sent to Kharkiv for treatment.

Deputy Minister of Defense of Ukraine Hanna Maliar explained Ashton-Cirillo's appointment to the position of an English-language speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine:

Sara has a large American audience. From June 25 to July 23, Sara's reach on Twitter alone was 28.3 million users. It is clear why enemy social networks were so crazed by hate. However, this only boosted Sara's audience.

This is the topic of an article by Focus magazine: "Diversity in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: How Transgender Sara Ashton-Cirillo Will Fight against Russian Fakes" of 04.08.2023.
Linguistic markers supporting the destructive narrative
"Appointment of an American transgender as an official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a slap in the face of a former Soviet republic residents":

"a face for a Western target audience";

"a transgender journalist from Las Vegas is trendy", "being transgender is fashionable";

"trans Russophobe," "combat transgender";

"last summer, the pervert talked to the BBC and spewed completely insane lies";

"he believes that demonic Russians are going to organize mass castration of Ukrainians";

"Sara Ashton went to Ukraine allegedly as an independent blogger to promote the LGBT agenda; it was she who made it trendy in the West to laud some mythical gays fighting for the freedom of [Ukraine] whom nobody ever saw on the frontline."

The grammatical marker of gender discrimination is the use of masculine and feminine genders in the same text to refer to Sara Ashton-Cirillo:

“After some time, Sara Ashton unsuccessfully tried to run for the Las Vegas City Council with the Democrats. When the special operation started in Ukraine, Sara Ashton introduced himself as an independent blogger who promoted the LGBT agenda. She initiated the promotion of the idea of mythical gays in Western media, who allegedly fight for Ukraine’s freedom, but nobody has ever seen them on the frontline.”
A semantic marker of gender discrimination is naming Sara Ashton-Cirillo by identity (transgender) rather than her position (speaker) or profession (blogger, military servant). Introduction of the destructive narrative "Appointment of an American transgender as an official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a slap in the face of a former Soviet republic residents" in Russian media is corroborated by the data from sentiment analysis: most of the news stories resulting from the query "Sara Ashton" have a negative connotation.
A counternarrative appeared in the Ukrainian information environment – "Ukraine values diversity." Contrary to Russia's efforts to create a wave of hate, Ukrainian information consumers were quite tolerant in regard to the appointment of Sara Ashton-Cirillo as a speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The materials regarding the appointment of Sara Ashton were informative and aimed to stir conversation.
The most cited statements are ones made by opinion leaders who highlight the speaker's professionalism and pro-Ukrainian stance. For instance:

“It is important for Ukraine to influence the West with information, and Sara Ashton-Cirillo can become a powerful weapon of propaganda. Her Twitter account has over 30 million visits per month. No Ukrainian speaker or expert has the same reach. Only the President of Ukraine can demonstrate similar results.”


“What difference does it make what her gender or identity is? She lived and covered the Russian attacks on Kharkiv on Twitter. In North Saltivka, by the way. I think she’s a brave person.”

Andrii Luchkov, journalist, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/crgrp-mkenxro](https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/crgrp-mkenxro)

“I don’t care whether she’s trans or not. I perceive her as a woman because she identifies as a woman. Haters are those who sit at home on the couch, don’t fight and instead look for excused.”

Findings. Technologies of gendered disinformation regarding Ukrainian women journalists

The research has proven the presence of systemic promotion of pro-Russian narratives aimed at gendered disinformation against Ukrainian women journalists:

- "Support of LGBT communities is a betrayal of Ukraine";
- "Journalists who support gender equality and diversity are enemies of Ukraine";
- "Leading Ukrainian women journalists can make a career only through their relationships with men";
- "(Military) women correspondents are SBU agents, feminists, prostitutes, lesbians, escort workers";
- "Appointment of an American transgender as an official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a slap in the face of a former Soviet republic residents."

The following associative connections are constructed in the Russian media environment:

- women journalists who are attributed certain alleged "flaws" connected with gender characteristics;
- key figures of Ukraine (Zelenskyy, Zaluzhnyi, Maliuk) and government and security institutions of Ukraine (the Armed Forces, the SBU, the Office of the President) "discredit" themselves by supporting women journalists, and Ukraine is portrayed as a "failed state";
- the following line of associations is established: feminism – sexual deviations – pro-Ukrainian views (nationalism) – terrorism.
"The trend for praising some mythical gays who fight for [Ukraine's] independence";

"Zelenskyy in a bunker – transgender in the Armed Forces; Maliuk ... for some reason mentioned the 'legend-based' workers among political journalists, effectively clearly disclosing at least one of them. This is not to mention that up to 90% of Ukrainian agents are escorts, simply prostitutes and a special social category of 'girls who failed to get into an acting school'";

"The American transgender Sarah Ashton-Cirillo, who became the official speaker of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for the Western audience, began to repeat the rhetoric of the Third Reich." [sentence in Russian written in the masculine gender]

We have identified narratives based on a cognitive dissonance: combining the markers of intolerance, typical of the Soviet / Russian value system ("Soviet," "defenders of traditional values," "shooting list," "people sick with homosexuality and other deviations", "gender uncertainties," "former Soviet republic" etc.), with markers of tolerance of democratic countries ("LGBT communities," "tolerance," "equal rights and opportunities").

This cognitive dissonance makes recipients of information feel uncertain and confused about perception of information, which is the first step before imposing ideas working in the manipulator's interests.

Narratives form the image of women journalists as enemies of Ukraine and support both open and covert calls for physical abuse against them ("shooting list," "kill feminists").

For example, Life.ru, which is disseminated on territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia conducted a survey "How would you punish TV host Nataliia Moseichuk for calls for violence and Russophobic statements?"
The options were:

a) a long prison sentence;

b) hand her over to the families of the deceased "residents of the Donbas and Russian soldiers"

c) prohibit her from working in the media forever;

d) bring her "to Donbas" and show her what "Ukrainian Nazis" had done.

Such linguistic technologies are used to affect the mindset of information consumers and program their behavior — the person starts choosing a response, thus agreeing with the manipulators.

The media technology of doxxing is also actively used (illegal collection of personal data with subsequent sharing on social media). This technology was used in all the examples cited in the study.

Discourse analysis with the use of Big Data technologies has proven that the identified narratives are introduced into the information environment in a systemic manner: the regularity of destructive messages, 2–3 times a week, shows that it is a systemic PSYOP forming a destructive perception of women journalists, portraying Ukraine as a "former Soviet republic and a failed state," and the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a "perverted institution."

The identified narratives and linguistic markers have a systemic nature, which indicates a high likelihood of a single technical task to discredit Ukrainian women journalists based on their gender and thus exercise destructive influence on Ukraine’s information security and form a negative attitude to European countries and the European system of values.
Other cases of gendered disinformation about women journalists: Polina Vernyhor, Gayane Avakyan, Maryna Mukhina

In addition to the cases described above, it is worth noting similar cases of gendered disinformation about other Ukrainian journalists.

Polina Vernyhor, a war journalist of the online publication Zaborona, which regularly covers the Russian aggression in Ukraine, reported disinformation about herself as part of this study. She received threats on Telegram, she was called a "left liberal," a "traitor" and a "pro-Russian whore."

In addition, the anonymous Telegram channel "Ukrainian news" posted threats that journalist Polina Vernyhor "must be ready to answer for her words," accusing her of "leftism" and supporting the LGBT community. The channel used doxxing, trying to publish allegedly personal information of Polina Vernyhor.
Another example of gendered disinformation was information posted about Gayane Avakyan, a journalist and editor of the Svoi.City network, on the Traitors of Artyomovsk Telegram channel. Information that was published about her was false and discredited her. She was called a "journawhore" and a friend of Serhii Haidai, who was the head of Luhansk Oblast State Administration between October 25, 2019, and March 15, 2023.
Similar phrases were used to another Ukrainian journalist, Maryna Mukhina, a correspondent of the Starobilsk telenewspaper (Luhansk oblast). She shared this for the material "Stories from Ukraine, #Week 11: Why a Ukrainian Editor Regrets Not Knowing How to Shoot" by Geneva Solutions.

Screenshot 29.
Gendered disinformation about journalist Maryna Mukhina
Section 3

Some possible solutions to combat gendered disinformation about women journalists in Ukraine

As the Committee to Protect Journalists indicates in its *Handbook on Journalists’ Safety*, it should be noted that some women journalists are reluctant to report sexual harassment due to fear of acquiring the reputation of reporters incapable of handling dangerous assignments. The same applies to gendered disinformation, making it challenging to assess the scale of the issue, since women are either not well aware of this phenomenon, or consider this subject a taboo, not deserving of public exposure and help.

Therefore, at every level — the state, the police, the newsroom, NGOs — it is necessary to create an atmosphere in which women journalists could identify and report facts of gendered disinformation without fear of being denied future assignments, and being confident they will be able to get the necessary help and support.

When assessing the threats faced by women journalists when they encounter gendered disinformation, multiple discrimination should be taken into account. This includes discrimination based on age, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, place of residence, or origin.
As was mentioned in Section 1, there is essentially no data or research about the nature and scope of gendered disinformation as a phenomenon in Ukraine. One way to combat gendered disinformation is to study it, conduct relevant monitoring and collect sex-desaggregated data.

The handbook *Quick Read: Gender and Countering Disinformation* created for UK Government officials talks about the importance of distinguishing gendered disinformation using the following questions:

- Are gender stereotypes, gender roles, social norms on contentious and emotive gender issues being used as part of the disinformation campaign?

- What is the purpose of this type of gendered disinformation campaign? Is it meant to have a different effect on women compared to men (e.g., to silence women parliamentarians in particular)?

- What are the different communications techniques being targeted at women compared to men? Which communications techniques are used to polarize the debate on a specific gender issue (e.g., fabricated sexualized images of female politicians or bots used to bolster both sides on contentious gender issues)?

- How are the intention and the techniques combined to achieve an impact? How does this impact differ for women and men (e.g., to erode the support for democratic institutions and to discourage women from participating in political life)?

In addition, when combating gendered disinformation, it is important to demonstrate an alternative narrative on gender issues that is in line with Ukraine's commitments on gender equality.

For example, the new media law of Ukraine, which entered into force in March 2023, prohibits sexism and gender-based discrimination in the Ukrainian media. Ukraine also ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (known as the Istanbul Convention), which entered into force on November 1, 2022.
Article 17 of the Convention specifically targets the participation of the private sector and the media in the development and implementation of policies, as well as the establishment of self-regulatory standards to prevent violence against women.

At the European Union level, the Digital Services Act (DSA) was adopted in October 2022. The main principle of DSA is that **anything that is illegal offline should also be illegal online.** Currently, the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine should be working on the development of a document that would implement European legislation into Ukrainian practice.

**On the level of the state, newsrooms, and NGOs, it is important:**

01
To expose myths and fakes regarding gender equality, as well as to publicly condemn gendered disinformation, in particular regarding women journalists.

02
To amplify the voices of trusted women to counter disinformation and strengthen social cohesion.

03
To conduct education and training for the media and journalists to better identify the gendered dimensions of disinformation and understand how to counter it. Accordingly — to provide funds for such events in the budget.

04
To monitor whether newsrooms conduct the necessary events to reduce risks connected to gendered disinformation.

Such a risk assessment may include:

- the option of psychological assistance to journalists who may have been traumatized by gendered disinformation about them;
To include aspects of the gendered dimension of disinformation and to explain how to identify it as part of curricula raising awareness of disinformation, developing critical thinking or digital literacy skills.

To support the development of programs and solutions aimed at reducing the level of a specific gender inequality or issue used in gender disinformation campaigns.

To support further development of programs aimed at combating online harassment of women and girls, as disinformation is also a form of harassment.

To develop a robust and understandable mechanism for women journalists, politicians, activists, and experts to approach for assistance if they are faced with gendered disinformation.

To have such cases properly investigated by law enforcement agencies.

To reinforce the work of women's human rights and media organizations on further research on gendered disinformation in Ukraine.
About Women in Media NGO

Women in the media is a network of Ukrainian women employed in the media operating on the peer-to-peer principle. We empower each other and fight against sexism in newsrooms and in content. Our goals are gender-sensitive journalism and more women in media in decision-making positions.

The initiative Women in Media was created in April 2019 by media professionals Liza Kuzmenko and Viktoriia Yermolaieva, who worked together at Hromadske Radio. It started with a Facebook group, which currently unites about 1,500 journalists, editors, producers, and other media workers.

In September 2019, the NGO Association "Women in Media" was registered. The purpose of the organization is to unite women working in the media to assert gender equality on two levels: equality within the media (equal opportunities and treatment, equal access to positions) and equality in media content, with a special emphasis on fighting against sexism, as well as providing leadership and necessary resources to protect the rights and opportunities of women in all areas of life.
Sources

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