



GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND INTERSECTIONALITIES

IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA.



A policy brief from the PIN study; Countering Information
Disorder in West and Central Africa: Analyzing the Dynamics,
Impacts, Actors, and Strategic Responses

Credits

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Executive summary

Gendered disinformation is being used across Africa as a weapon against freedom of expression and to exclude women from civic discourses and processes. Although this phenomenon is not new, digital technology enables collective and coordinated anonymous targeting of people with disinformation. In the long run, information disorder undermines the fight for gender equality and digital inclusion, widening the gender digital divide and reinforcing structural inequalities. The PIN study in West and Central Africa, using mixed methods and the gendered embeddedness theory, highlights the following gendered and intersectional areas: the influence of information disorder on women's civic engagement; disinformation; religion and sexuality; information disorder, social status and gender stereotypes; and disinformation based on tribal, ethnic, political and conflict aspects. This study recommends the following strategic responses for addressing gendered disinformation: implementing existing policies on information disorder in the different countries; developing new policies or revising the existing ones to better address the gendered dimension. Also, increasing education and sensitisation programmes to promote information integrity and digital literacy. Implementing more advocacy programmes to meaningfully engage women in claiming their civic rights and collectively challenging gender stereotypes. In addition, creating bodies to monitor the information integrity space, provide situational analysis, expert support and prevent the escalation of gendered disinformation.

Introduction

In most countries of West and Central Africa, rural communities lack access to stable electricity or other sources of energy. This is further compounded by little or no internet connectivity. In Cameroon, Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Benin women in rural communities have less access to information and internet services as compared to men. Even in urban settings, internet interruptions make it difficult for both men and women to fully access timely information. Reference group conversations revealed that men in remote areas have access to radio, television and smartphones than women. Social norms, belief systems, cultural values, social gatherings in rural and urban communities facilitate and influence the intensity and diversity of disinformation. .

Information disorder in the mainstream media features in channels like radio, television and print. Digital channels include WhatsApp, Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok. Other factors account for the gendered dimension of information disorder, such as lack of digital literacy, deeply entrenched patriarchal systems and gender stereotypes that are extended to online spaces, mostly to the disadvantage of women and girls.

The gendered embeddedness theory delves into the intersection between gender and other social structures. This theory interrogates how gender as a social category is interwoven to inform disparities in real-world phenomena (Thebaud & Pedulla, 2015).It serves as a key framework for understanding the relationship between gender,other intersectional dynamics and information disorder.

OVERVIEW AND RESEARCH PROBLEM



Technology has ushered in new and more effective strategies to disseminate gendered disinformation leading to an increase in the vulnerability of women, and gender-diverse people online. The digital era has created new spaces for women to express themselves and defend the issues they believe in, without using traditional and male-dominated structures. Notwithstanding, these digital platforms have been turned into weapons against women's freedom of expression. Information disorder in online spaces targeted towards people based on their gender is usually organized to reinforce patriarchal rule and gender bias. It targets users who are outspoken about the negativity of misogyny (Agunwa, N. 2024)



The gendered dimension of information disorder involves the spread of deceptive and inaccurate information and images that propagate gender stereotypes, portraying women as less efficient and less intelligent than men. It also attempts to sexually objectify women's bodies and reinforce falsehoods like 'men are better leaders than women,' 'Women are weaker vessels,' 'men are polygamous in nature,' 'men are natural leaders' 'a woman's place is in the kitchen,' around gender (Jankowicz et al, 2021). This study investigates the gendered and intersectional dimensions of information disorder, analyzing the dynamics and identifying strategic responses through recommendations from actors in West and Central Africa.



Sustainable development goals (5) is aimed at advancing gender equality, which means attaining a society where women and girls are able to reach their potential without being discriminated against in all spheres, socio-economically and politically in digital and physical spaces. With the increase in sensitization programs, there have been major shifts in women's inclusion and public leadership and democratic processes. However, patriarchy, sexism and misogyny remain prevalent and deep-rooted in communities, limiting women's freedom and meaningful engagement in civic spaces.

EXAMINATION OF FINDINGS

Disinformation and women's civic engagement: Information disorder targeted against women, negatively impacts their engagement in civic processes. Findings reveal disinformation directly targeted towards women political leaders, thereby creating hostile political spaces. In the recent 2025 electoral process in Cameroon, the lone female presidential candidate, Hermine Patricia T. Ndam Njoya received little or no attention during political campaigns as compared to the male candidates. Some civilians openly described that she is just a woman, and they cannot vote for a woman to rule the country. Edith Kah walla, a Cameroonian female political leader, was also discredited mainly by the public for allegedly not having biological children and a spouse. This sparked controversy and neglect for her leadership qualities and competence. In Nigeria, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan experienced physical and online attacks directed towards her career and personality for her allegations of sexual harassment against Senate President, Godswill Akpabio. Abdullahi. In the Ivory Coast, media ousting against the state leader, Chantal Nanaba Camara was evident as online users called for a disqualification of her candidature, also fueled by tribalism and ethnic hate. In Ghana, Senegal, and Benin, female politicians and public servants have faced similar backlash and negative criticisms in their communities and from online trolls, causing them to either disengage in their aspirations or work behind the scenes. These findings align with Agungwa(2024), on the weaponization of disinformation on female political leaders limiting their potential to excel.

Information disorder, sexuality and religion: Most communities view same-sex relations as a desecration of the African culture. According to Amnesty International (2024a), thirty-one African nations have criminalized same-sex relations. Other African countries have imposed heavy sanctions to back their anti-gay sentiments (Africa,2023). Findings suggest that any form of information disorder that portrays someone as a homosexual is a high risk. In many instances in Cameroon, Brenda Biya has been bullied on social media due to her alleged stance and practice of same sex relations. Male cross-dressers and comedians like Dorcas Comedy World have also been tagged as homosexual, leading to reputational risk. “ Abuja area mama,’ Nigerian transgender woman was also bullied online and later found dead with severe physical injuries. “Mummy of Lagos-Boborisky” has been harassed online and onsite for displaying homosexual tendencies. Cameroonian female footballer Gaëlle Deborah Enganamouit, experienced online bullying following a leaked sex tape that suggested her engagement in a same sex relationship. Similar scenarios have been recurrent with celebrities in Ghana, Senegal, Ivory Coast and Benin, evidenced by zero tolerance and hate towards celebrities with links to homosexuality. “Online dragging” and demonstration of homophobia in the recent marriage between Cameroonian UK-based LGBT activist, Bandy Kiki and her Nigerian girlfriend featured derogatory messages from the West and Central African Communities, especially Cameroon and Nigeria. This hate on issues of sexuality have especially involved well-known individuals as also cited by Mynigeria (2024), either as real videos or deep fakes online.

Religious fundamentalism also plays a big role in influencing perceptions about sexuality. These perceptions are shaped using religious teachings and doctrines which demonise same-sex relations. Religious leaders encourage believers and their faithfuls to dissociate from people with homosexual links. In Correlation with Van Klinken Adriaan (2016), findings reveal that believers in online spaces and onsite religious gatherings condemn gender equality and feminist movements as evil. Religious fanatics are also popularly known for discrediting women and opposing their participation in leadership, constantly referring to them as “helpers,” and “weaker vessels.”

Information disorder, social status and gender stereotypes: Traditional gender roles embedded in communities have been exported and amplified through information disorder in the form of misinformation and disinformation (Factcheckafrica, 2024). Women who share their perspectives on gender equality are labelled “harlots”, “desperate”, “lonely”, “bitter”, and “delusional” people. Men who openly speak up against misogyny are referred to as “simps” and “weaklings”. Online users have also harassed women who disclosed having their children through artificial and medically assisted methods like surrogacy and using sperm donors. These women are regarded as ‘not woman enough’ for going beyond traditional procreation methods. Nigerian multi-award-winning writer and feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi, was criticised online for having her twin boys through surrogacy. Unmarried celebrities are slut-shamed and labelled as examples of “bad life choices”. This distortion of information most times reinforces stereotypes, which contributes as limitations towards attaining gender equality. The female Ghanaian vice president and former minister of education, Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, was attacked by some Ghanaian TikTok users through disrespectful comments about her physical looks, and hairstyle. Online users also correlated her leadership qualities to that fact that he is a wife and a mother. However, this was not the case for her male counterparts. This exposes societal expectations on femininity and women being harassed for not meeting these standards. It reinforces sexist ideologies and stereotypes on how women should be, while leaving an open check for men. According to Danso and Yeboah (2023), body shaming has a strong negative relationship with female political and civic participation.

Information disorder based on governance issues and socio-political differences: Socio-political crises and issues of poor governance enhance the spread of information disorder. With the recent October 12th presidential elections in Cameroon, men and women, in a bid to exercise their civic duties, engaged in the spread of both misinformation and disinformation. The ongoing Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, internet cuts, the June 2021 to January 2022 X ban in Nigeria, online hate in Ghana, Benin and Senegal rising from differences in opinion on governance issues escalate gendered disinformation. In the Ivory Coast, information distortion mostly results from ethnic and political differences. Social media in Nigeria has proven to be a breeding ground for bullying and electoral violence. The use of fake videos to ruin the reputation of both men and women, especially women, remains recurrent (Agunwa, 2022; Akinyetun et al., 2021).



While gendered dimension and intersectionality constitute a key component of information disorder, it is worth noting that gender is a broader concept which influences ongoing global conversations. This study was conducted within the context of generally conservative West and Central African communities, hostile to gender diverse categories. Based on consultations, using other gender categories could potentially politicize the research as an agenda to impose on the country and its people while risking the lives of researchers. To mitigate this challenge, the gendered dimension of the PIN studies operationally considered women, girls, men and boys as the gender categories.



Recommendations

- -Implement existing policies on information disorder in the different countries and develop new policies or revise the existing ones to better address the gendered dimension of disinformation.
- -Increase education and sensitisation programmes to promote information integrity and digital literacy.
- -Scale advocacy programmes to meaningfully engage women in claiming their civic rights and collectively challenging gender stereotypes.
- -Create bodies to monitor the information integrity space, provide situational analysis, expert support and prevent escalation of gendered disinformation.
- -Encourage emotional intelligence, mental wellness to help people control their emotions and respectfully share their opinions.

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