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# Summary & Recommendations: Gendered Disinformation in South Asia

A joint study by Chambal Media, Digital Rights Foundation,  
Meedan and The Quint

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Partners



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Supported by



Drawing on 450 unique cases targeting women and LGBTQ+ people, we developed a methodology designed to expose the unique contours of online gendered disinformation in South Asia and inform contextually appropriate approaches to countering its proliferation.

This project is a pilot study led by Meedan, a technology nonprofit, to understand how gendered disinformation manifests in South Asia, with India and Pakistan serving as the two primary countries of focus. This study was conducted from March 2023 to October 2024 and was supported by the Sexual Violence Research Initiative. Collaborators included Digital Rights Foundation, a digital rights non-profit and research organization in Pakistan; Chambal Media, a rural-feminist media network; and The Quint, a leading fact-checking group in India.



## What is Gendered Disinformation?

**Gendered disinformation** is a subset of **gender-based violence** which is distinct in its purposeful use of false, gender-based, misogynistic, and sexualized narratives to malign and discredit women and LGBTQ+ people.

**UN leaders**, the **US State Department**, the **National Democratic Institute**, and **Brookings** have identified gendered disinformation as a significant threat to the rights of women and non-binary people, and to national security.

Irene Khan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, has **described** it as “both a strategy to silence the free expression of women and gender nonconforming persons and a form of online gender-based violence in certain circumstances.”

# Our purpose

**Gendered Disinformation** can take many forms, including hate speech, intentionally misleading information, harmful rumors, attacks on character and affiliations, and attacks on both the private and personal life. Gendered disinformation reinforces stereotypes of vulnerability about women and gender non-binary people. Targets of gendered disinformation have self-censored or closed their social media accounts. These kinds of attacks have led to direct and indirect threats to life and have caused public figures to go into hiding.

Powerful institutions have underlined the prevalence of this problem at a global level. But studies of gendered disinformation remain largely confined to countries and communities in the global north. Our initiative, led by partners and experts from India and Pakistan, aimed to explore the unique contours of gendered disinformation in South Asia, and to propose contextually appropriate approaches to studying and countering these dynamics.

## Our approach

With decades of combined experience confronting gendered disinformation online, our team came together to develop a working definition of gendered disinformation, gather cases of gendered disinformation that we had encountered in online spaces and annotate those cases in order to better understand and devise responses to the problem.

Based on available examples of gendered disinformation in India and Pakistan and drawing on a gap assessment of existing definitions, we developed the following working definition in an effort to capture the varied manifestations of gendered disinformation in our countries of focus.

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Nature</b>         | Gendered disinformation is a manifestation of online gender based violence that can also include offline activities   |
| <b>Modus operandi</b> | and that both relies on and promotes misogynistic, sexualized, false, and deceptive narratives influenced by a variety of intersectional social identities such as caste, religion, sect, and gender.   |
| <b>Target</b>         | Gendered disinformation targets individuals based on their gender and sexuality, especially women, gender-nonconforming people, and LGBTQ+ individuals who resist, or are perceived to resist, power structures and social norms.                           |
| <b>Objective</b>      | These online and offline attacks aim to discredit and disempower the targeted groups by spreading false narratives or encouraging self-censorship, resulting in the restriction of their participation in public spaces and their voices being drowned out. |
| <b>Harms</b>          | Apart from these objectives, gendered disinformation can also cause or trigger psychological, physical and social harm and abuse for the targeted individuals and communities.  |

The participating organizations manually gathered, annotated and preserved 450 cases of online gendered disinformation targeting women and LGBTQ+ people. Cases under review fell into two camps: 1) “clearly misogynistic or sexualized claims that are verifiably false or deceptive”; and 2) “gray area and borderline gendered disinformation” where project collaborators disagreed or expressed uncertainty about whether a post fulfilled the criteria.

Below we offer four examples from our dataset that illustrate the unique challenges in identifying and responding to gendered disinformation in the South Asian context.



**TRIGGER WARNING:** *The following section contains slurs, hate speech and sexualized narratives and imagery which may be disturbing for some readers.*



#### Example 1:

### Gendered misrepresentations

**Claim:** This post compares stereotypical attributes of Muslim and Hindu women and claims that Hindu women are “witches, who in the name of reels have spoiled Sanata Dharma (Hindu Dharma).” The image relies on stereotypes to denigrate Hindu women’s marriages, family relationships, and perceived “modesty” in comparison to Muslim women.

**Context:** This is a gendered misrepresentation of Muslim and Hindu women. In the context of India, the post is a deliberate attempt to send a strong message to women about how they ought to behave in public spaces. It also surfaces the misplaced and misogynistic view that the preservation of religious beliefs is somehow dependent on antiquated notions of female modesty and purity.

**Country:** India





#### Example 2:

### Rumors and gossip

**Claim:** *Translated from Hindi, this post reads, "These people are taking full advantage of the fog; love is competing with their dedication to their studies."*

**Context:** This video was shared on social media to defame the young woman seen here. It may seem innocuous and impossible to identify the people in the video. But it constitutes a harmful, misogynistic rumor in a close-knit rural Indian community where everyone knows each other, and where it is considered improper for young women to socialize in this manner.

One of the comments in the post reads: *How will the girl escape from this scam? Her parents have provided her with everything, yet here she is taking advantage of the dense fog to be with her boyfriend.*

**Country:** India



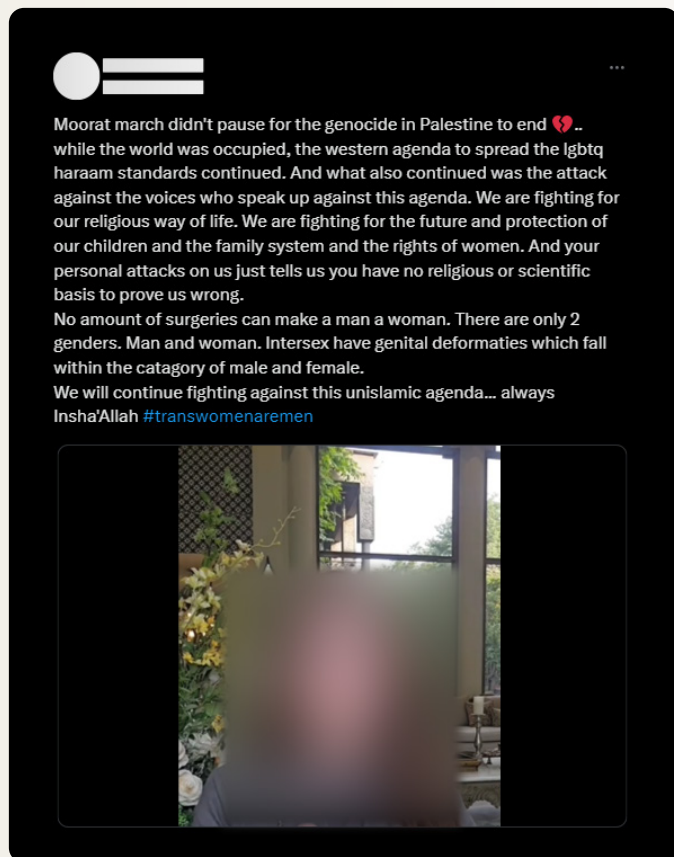
#### Example 3a:

### Gendered disinformation targeting progressive movements

**Claim:** American funded [#Auratmarch](#) traitors are being used against the sovereignty of Pakistan.

**Context:** In what is known as the Aurat march (women's march), thousands of women march on the streets of Pakistan on International Women's day, claiming their rights and challenging patriarchy. This started in 2018 and has continued so far. The post claims that the Aurat march has 'foreign funding' and is driven by a Western agenda that goes against the sovereignty of Pakistan.

**Country:** Pakistan



#### Example 3b:

### Gendered disinformation targeting progressive movements

**Claim:** This post claims that the Moorat March promotes and celebrates homosexuality, which the author claims is part of an un-Islamic Western agenda. The post also conflates trans activism with homosexuality.

**Context:** Transgender communities in Pakistan participate in the **Moorat March** to demand respect for their rights and identities. The claims in this post came from a prominent social media figure and represent part of a targeted campaign against the transgender community. They surfaced amid a court battle over a federal law that was written to protect transgender people's rights.

**Country:** Pakistan



#### Example 4:

### Mobilizing gendered disinformation to oppress marginalized racial, ethnic and religious communities.

**Claim:** This post promotes the so-called love jihad narrative and contends that it is responsible for the deaths of Hindu girls.

**Context:** The woman in this photo was misidentified and presented as a victim of love jihad, a misogynistic and Islamophobic narrative that alleges Muslim men in India are actively luring Hindu women into marriage with the aim of converting them to Islam. The lower right photo suggests that the woman was killed.

**Country:** India



## Desired impact and future studies

Our dataset is not meant to offer a representative sample, or to reflect the overall prevalence of gendered disinformation in South Asia. Our intention, instead, was to identify the various dimensions of gendered disinformation in the region and to study how it is perpetuated and experienced in unique and hyperlocal contexts.

Our methodology is intended to provide a model for community-driven studies of gendered disinformation and other types of harmful content. It is our hope that the insights outlined in this report will help drive practical responses by technology platforms and further studies by researchers targeting the problem of gendered disinformation in our two countries of focus and beyond. We also hope to develop future studies with much larger, more representative datasets that might enable us to prototype a classification model for this type of content.



## Recommendations for social media companies

**Social media companies must make their data more accessible for independent researchers in academic and community-driven settings alike.** Our study was strictly limited by the fact that we could not undertake systematic data collection due to a combination of technical and financial barriers. We are deeply concerned that major tech companies have walled off sources of social media data (such as the Twitter/X API and CrowdTangle) that once helped fuel vital socio-technical research on online harms. We join calls to make this data truly accessible for public interest research purposes.

For researchers and civil society groups, reduced access to platform data has been compounded by the withdrawal of companies like Meta and Google from close dialogue with key civil society groups tracking harmful online speech in recent years. We hope to see this trend reverse.

**Social media companies should genuinely engage with community organizations that are defining and classifying gendered disinformation through face-to-face consultation and long term dialogue on these issues.**

**This engagement can help companies:**

- **Improve approaches to monitoring harmful speech and moderating violative content in complex socio-political contexts:** Our methodology can help to inform a more holistic, network-based approach to monitoring and content moderation that will prepare companies to respond to situations in which offensive but non-violative content opens the flood gates to content that unequivocally stands in clear violation of company policies and can cause real-life harms.
- **Uphold company commitments to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights:** Meta and Google (owner of YouTube) and TikTok have made public commitments to adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Meta has also committed to upholding the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, key aspects of which intersect with the UNGPs. Shifting their content moderation practices to place greater focus on these network dynamics would help them to live up to these commitments and stem violative content that disproportionately harms women and LGBTQ+ people.





## Future engagement for research communities

We hope that our methodology inspires further research on gendered disinformation online, both by community groups, and by academic researchers.

### **Recommendations for sociotechnical researchers**

We would welcome future opportunities to collaborate with academic research groups that are interested in genuine, equitable sharing and joint analysis of datasets like this one. For such collaborations to be effective, we recommend that academic and community-based researchers co-design methods by which to ethically collect, label and preserve data that can help fuel academic research and grassroots advocacy work alike.

### **Recommendations for community organizations undertaking related research projects**

We urge other community organizations to draw on our methodology to replicate or iterate on our study. We also hope that other community organizations will explore and invest in research and testing that can use this kind of knowledge to inform the design of community moderation and norms-setting tools.