# MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Content

Introduction

In June 2021, a Zenica-based online outlet, which does not disclose its authors, drew readers in with a provocative headline: "Take a look at the dirty dance of councilwoman Tufekčić." The article promised scandal, but the attached video delivered nothing of the sort. Instead, it showed councilwoman Emina Tufekčić mildly swaying to the rhythm at a private birthday celebration. Despite the video's innocuous content, the article painted Tufekčić as unfit for public office, suggesting that if her political career faltered, she could always fall back on her so-called "dancing talent."

This piece is a textbook example of gendered disinformation—a tactic designed to deter women from participating in the public sphere by weaponizing false or misleading narratives rooted in gender and sexuality. While Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen academic and NGO reports on the media's portrayal of women, and some research specifically targeting disinformation, the first comprehensive study on gender-based disinformation was only published in March 2024. The study aimed to "create a foundation for future research by providing an initial diagnosis" and to identify ways the topic could be explored in greater depth. It expanded the scope to include not just women but also LGBTIQ+ groups and themes.

The findings were troubling but not surprising. Gender and identity-based disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina mirrors globally recognized patterns of anti-gender discourse. Such disinformation serves a dual purpose: it undermines women by exploiting conservative societal assumptions about gender roles and sexual norms, and it advances political, social, or economic agendas through gendered narratives. While the study refrained from claiming clear temporal trends due to its limited three-year scope, it predicted an uptick in gendered disinformation during election cycles. The research also highlighted a significant portion of disinformation laced with anti-Western narratives.

Several factors make Bosnia a fertile ground for the spread of gendered disinformation. The regulatory framework of the online space is in its infancy, with policymakers only beginning to consider how to transpose the Digital Services Act (DSA) into an already fragile legal framework. There are no comprehensive mechanisms to address gender-based violence, and even its most extreme form—femicide—is met with inadequate protection from law enforcement. Victims often report feeling powerless, a sentiment echoed by Tufekčić, who not only faced disinformation but also online threats of sexual violence. When she turned to the police for help, their response was dismissive and unhelpful.

Reporting Diversity reports confirm that hate speech targeting women is rampant, making it the most common category of hate speech online. Disinformation frequently intertwines with hate speech, using patriarchal norms to attack women's appearances, sexualities, or deviations from traditional gender roles. This patriarchal culture is deeply normalized, while gender equality is often dismissed as an "imported" Western concept. The media environment remains particularly susceptible to foreign influences, especially from Russia, where anti-gender discourse is a key element of broader disinformation campaigns.

This report analyzes disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past five years, drawing on fact-checking analyses from Raskrinkavanje.ba and the Reporting Diversity database. It also includes insights from interviews with local politician Emina Tufekčić, a frequent target of disinformation, and fact-checker Nerma Šehović.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

This analysis examines 66 incidents of gendered disinformation recorded between 2020 and 2024. The data highlights notable trends in both the frequency of cases and the types of disinformation disseminated across various topics and formats.

Temporal Distribution

The frequency of gendered disinformation has shown an upward trend over the years. The highest number of cases occurred in 2024, accounting for 23 incidents (34.8% of the total). This was followed by 12 cases in 2023 (18.2%), and 11 incidents each in 2022 and 2021 (16.7% each). The fewest incidents were recorded in 2020, with 9 cases (13.6%). This increase suggests a growing prevalence of gendered disinformation in recent years, potentially influenced by shifting political landscapes and social dynamics.

Desinformation by the year
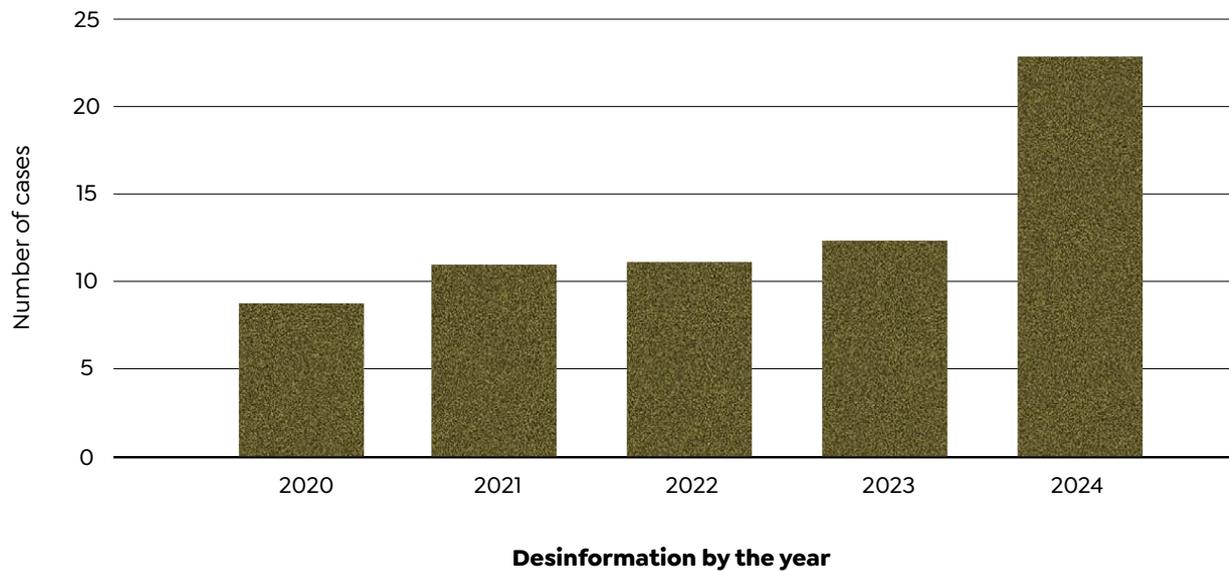
However, a more comprehensive analysis would need to be conducted, spanning a longer period, to definitively confirm trends. There might be confounding variables influencing these numbers. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic dominated media coverage in 2020 and 2021, along with a significant volume of disinformation related to the disease. This could have been the primary focus of fact-checkers during those years, potentially affecting the recorded instances of gendered disinformation.

Topical Distribution

When analyzing articles, the most dominant topic was identified and the article was then placed under that category. The topics most frequently targeted in gendered disinformation were LGBTQ+ issues, political participation, women's health, and gender-based violence:

- **LGBTIQ+ Issues:** 16 incidents (24.2%)
- **Political Participation:** 15 incidents (22.7%)
- **Women's Health:** 13 incidents (19.7%)
- **Gender-Based Violence:** 12 incidents (18.2%)
- **Professional Achievement:** 6 incidents (9.1%)
- **Miscellaneous Topics:** 4 incidents (6.1%)

These findings indicate that disinformation disproportionately targets topics that intersect with broader societal debates on rights, representation, and personal autonomy.
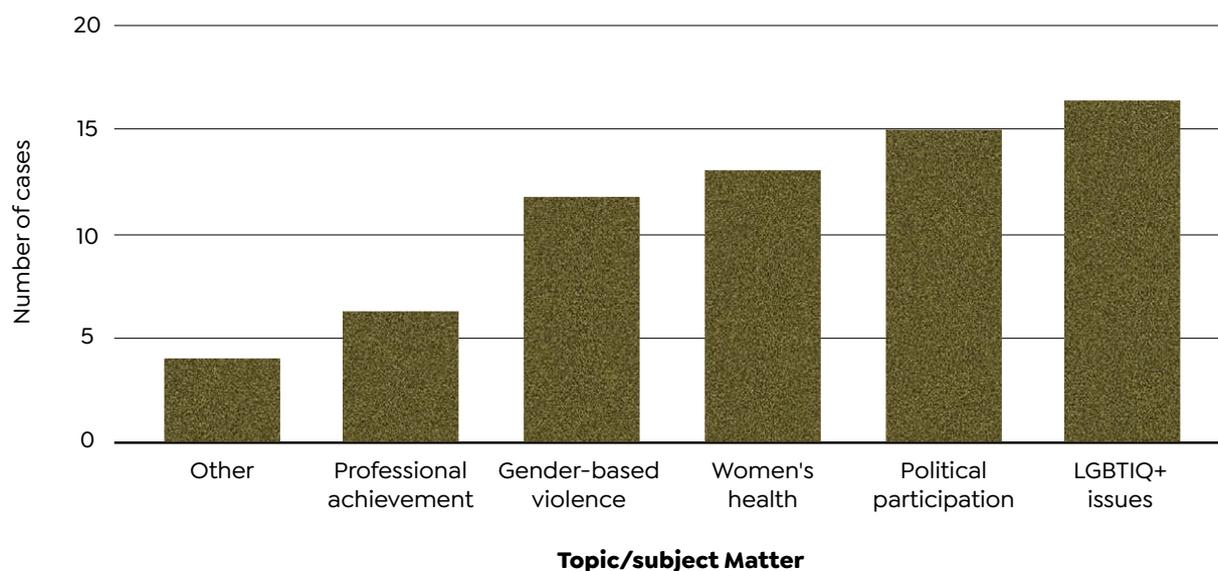
Content Formats

Gendered disinformation was disseminated across various content formats, with text-based content being the most prevalent:

- **Text-Based Content:** 27 incidents (40.9%)
- **Visual Content:** 24 incidents (36.4%)
- **Video Content:** 15 incidents (22.7%)

The dominance of text-based content suggests that traditional articles, social media posts, and reports remain primary vehicles for spreading disinformation. However, the significant presence of visual and video content reflects the increasing role of multimedia in manipulating public perception. This could also potentially reflect the propensity of fact-checkers for text-based content.
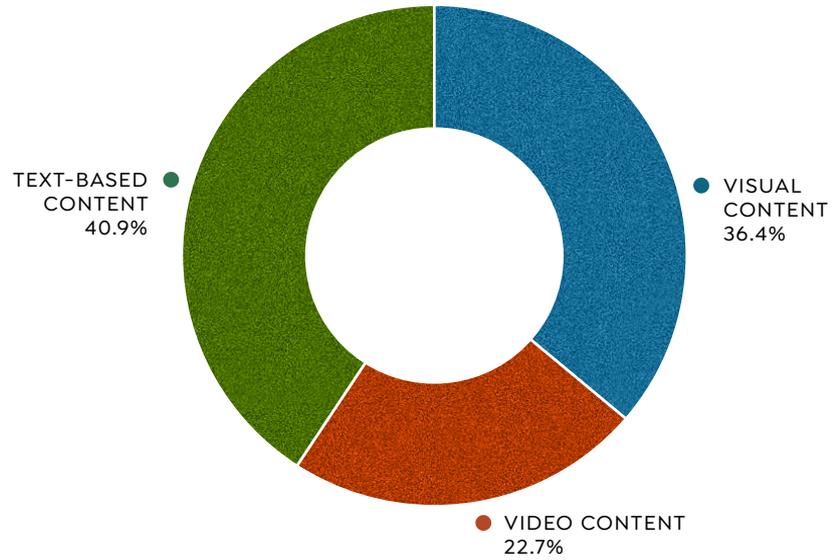
Types of Disinformation

The disinformation tactics varied across the incidents, highlighting different strategies to distort information:

- **Misleading Content:** 17 cases (25.8%)
- **Fabricated Content**: 16 cases (24.2%)
- **Manipulated Content:** 16 cases (24.2%)
- **False Context:** 10 cases (15.2%)
- **False Connection:** 4 cases (6.1%)
- **Satire/Parody:** 3 cases (4.5%)

Misleading, fabricated, and manipulated content collectively accounted for 75% of all cases, illustrating that outright falsehoods and intentional distortions are common tactics in gendered disinformation.
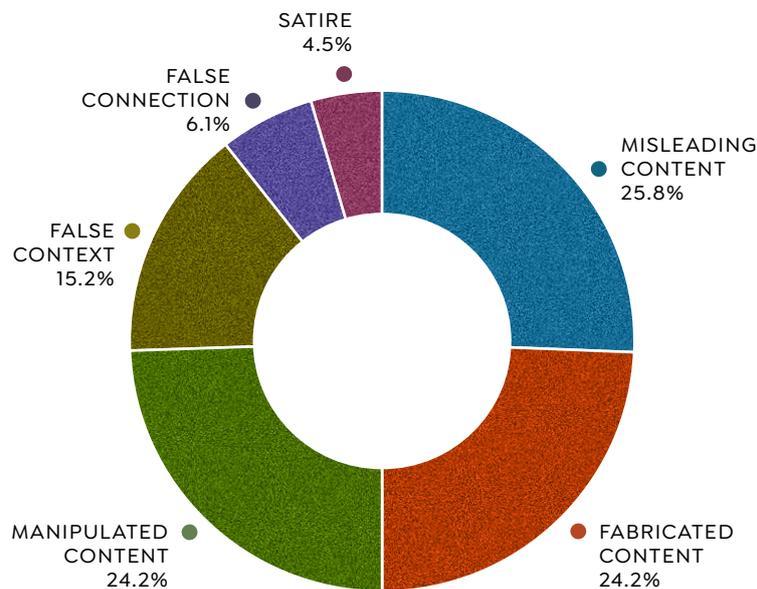
Qualitative Analysis

Event correlation

One of the biggest catalysts for gendered disinformation was election period. For example, a female candidate in local elections was misrepresented in the media as wearing a short skirt during a campaign rally. This sexualized imagery was entirely fabricated by the journalist's interpretation. The tactic employed seems very similar to the one used to undermine Tufekčić, who was mentioned in the introduction.

Advancements in women's and LGBTIQ+ rights also triggered disinformation campaigns. For instance, United Nations discussions on gender mainstreaming within the contract for the prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity were distorted. These discussions were falsely portrayed as efforts to criminalise non-gender-sensitive language. Similarly, the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality in Serbia sparked disinformation, suggesting that individuals could face jail time for not using gender-sensitive language.

Visual elements

Visual manipulation was a common tool in gendered disinformation. A notable case involved an image of an Italian politician, altered to depict her wearing provocative clothing. This image, although originating in 2014, resurfaced in 2021 as part of broader efforts to discredit women in politics, using sexualization. This particular example also had elements of anti-Western propaganda, since it was often shared with comments about Italy.

Recurring narratives

Several recurring narratives emerged from the data. Women in public life were frequently sexualized and trivialized. For example, a professor and politician referred to a political analyst as a "starlet" in a post on his X account, sharing her photograph alongside two women frequently mocked in public discourse and criticized for their perceived immorality. This framing not only undermined the analyst's professional credibility but also introduced sexualized connotations to discredit her.

Gender-based violence narratives were also manipulated. The case of Serbian actress Danijela Štajnfeld, who accused a prominent actor of rape, serves as a key example. Serbian tabloids launched disinformation campaigns against her, alleging ties to "American agencies" and suggesting financial motives behind her accusations. As Salkanović and Šehović note, public discourse surrounding this case focused on dissecting the victim's statements and behaviors, perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes while minimizing the severity of sexual violence.

Disinformation often promoted anti-Western sentiments by portraying Western female politicians as amoral and subversive to traditional values. These narratives framed women leaders from Western countries as corrupt, morally bankrupt, and intent on undermining cultural norms in the Balkans, or acting as active enemies of the system. Such portrayals were used to reinforce patriarchal ideals and to position Western values as threats to local traditions. This type of disinformation frequently aligned with broader geopolitical strategies aimed at fostering distrust of Western institutions and ideologies.

Additionally, health-related disinformation was prevalent, accounting for nearly 20% of the sample. This included false claims about the dangers of mammography, harmful effects of HPV vaccines, and disinformation about abortion intended to dissuade women from seeking the procedure.

Narratives were frequently imported, translated from other languages, and tailored to fit the local context. A significant portion of disinformation originated from or was related to neighboring Serbia, reflecting two key factors: the widespread popularity of Serbian media outlets in Bosnia and the strong identification of a segment of the population with narratives and directives coming from Serbia. This transnational flow of disinformation could also be pointing at the fact that gendered narratives are not isolated incidents but part of a broader regional and global network of disinformation.

Linguistic analysis

The linguistic characteristics of the analyzed texts vary in intensity depending on the disinformation context, employing a range of rhetorical devices, hyperbolic language, and emotional manipulation techniques to influence readers' perceptions.

One prominent feature is the use of humor and sarcasm to downplay serious issues or discredit individuals. For instance, a reported incident (not included in the sample) in the Reporting Diversity reports highlights a famous female author making bizarre jokes about femicide, exemplifying how gender-based violence is normalized and trivialized in both language and culture. In an interview, Emina Tufekčić also pointed out that humour plays a significant role in the dissemination of disinformation, citing the persistence of jokes about blondes and stereotypes related to their intelligence.

The article referenced in the introduction that targets Tufekčić employs sarcastic language to ridicule her political career. Phrases such as "pokazala je i talent za ples" ("she's also shown a talent for dancing") and "ako odustane od politike, zasigurno bi se mogla baviti" ("if she quits politics, she could certainly pursue…") shifts the focus from her professional role to her personal life. This sarcastic framing diminishes her political credibility and invites readers to dismiss her career achievements.

The text further employs juxtaposition to undermine her competence, contrasting her supposed "talents" with implied political shortcomings. For example, the phrase "Osim talenata, Tufekčić je… pokazala i da ne vlada najbolje informacijama" ("Aside from her talents, Tufekčić has also (…) shown she's not well-informed") subtly casts doubt on her authority without offering a balanced critique. This rhetorical strategy creates a dissonance between her personal life and professional responsibilities, leading readers to question her capabilities based on irrelevant personal details.

Additionally, the text employs hyperbolic language to evoke moral judgment. The phrase "dirty dance" exaggerates the nature of her actions, implying inappropriate or provocative behaviour without providing evidence. This form of exaggeration is designed to trigger an emotional reaction from the audience, further distorting perceptions and undermining the subject's professional integrity.

Overall, these linguistic techniques—sarcasm, juxtaposition, hyperbole, and ridicule—work collectively to manipulate the reader's understanding, promoting inaccurate and misleading perceptions of the individuals targeted by disinformation.

Case studies

Case study 1: Political/electoral context

Prior to the September 2022 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a photoshopped image of an alleged election billboard featuring reality TV personality Senada Nurkić, known as Maca Diskrecija, circulated on social media, falsely claiming she was a candidate for the SDA political party. Nurkić was not a candidate in the elections for any political party. The billboard, originally created as satire in 2016, resurfaced six years later as a piece of disinformation. This manipulation exploited misogynistic stereotypes to discredit both the political party and women's participation in politics.

By associating a female candidate, or women's political involvement in general, with a figure known for her controversial public persona, the disinformation played on stereotypes framing women as unserious, incompetent, or fame-driven rather than merit-based. The tactic blurred lines between legitimate female politicians and entertainment figures, casting doubt on the credibility of actual candidates. The recurrence of this visual in both 2016 and 2022 illustrates a persistent strategy to delegitimize female political participation by framing it as a spectacle, while simultaneously ridiculing Nurkić herself, implying that her involvement in political life could only be perceived as a joke.

Additionally, though not technically disinformation and thus not included in the sample, an incident from the 2020 elections further illustrates the objectification of women in politics. A candidate from Tuzla attracted significant media attention for her physical appearance, with interviews focusing on superficial comments despite her skilful deflection of journalists' clickbait questions. This example shows how media representation often reduces women in politics to their physical traits, undermining their professional capabilities.

Case study 2: Trans women and disinformation

A significant portion of the disinformation sample (16 cases, or nearly a quarter) concerned LGBTIQ+ issues, with a predominant focus on trans women (14 cases). Many of these narratives falsely claimed that prominent women, such as Michelle Obama and Brigitte Macron, were transgender. Although the language used was often derogatory and mocking, the disinformation appeared less about directly targeting trans women and more about promoting anti-gender ideologies and attacking liberal political agendas.

For instance, one case involved the distortion of a doctor's statement regarding trans women's breast milk being of equal quality to that of cisgender women. This statement was manipulated into claims suggesting that the British government declared trans women's milk superior to that of "biological women." Such narratives exploit trans identities to fuel broader cultural and political conflicts, reinforcing transphobic rhetoric and undermining gender inclusivity.

Notably, seven of these cases (44%) occurred in 2024, indicating an intensification of public discourse surrounding trans topics. This surge may be partially attributed to "Operation Overload," a large-scale disinformation campaign targeting journalists and fact-checkers with fake content aligned with a pro-Russian agenda. This campaign included disinformation about figures like Macron and events such as the Olympics, intertwining trans-related narratives with geopolitical aims.

Another illustrative case of the instrumentalization of trans issues for agenda-setting involved a juxtaposed photo of two monuments: one depicting a pregnant woman with children, and the other featuring a figure

with both female and male characteristics. This comparison was framed as representing monuments to mothers in Russia versus the EU, often accompanied by implied or explicit moral judgments. The second monument, however, was an artistic interpretation of the "ideal being." As noted in the fact-check article: "In narratives about the alleged Western devaluation of the family, the motif of the mother is often used to emotional manipulation. LGBTIQ+ motifs are also used as a representation of the Western threat to the "traditional family". In this particular case, both motifs were used to create an image of the traditional family values of the East, which are being undermined by Western trends."

Case study 3: New technology

Image-based sexual violence is on the rise in the Balkans. However, the analysed sample did not include such content, likely because many cases have yet to become public, with most revelations emerging through investigative journalism. That said, the use of deepfakes was noted in an incident involving Greta Thunberg. A BBC interview with Thunberg was manipulated to create a deepfake video in which she allegedly promoted an "eco war" and bombs that would supposedly be harmless to the environment. This serves as yet another example of how women are instrumentalized in attacks on the so-called "liberal agenda."

Disinformation Campaigns Against Feminism and Feminists

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, overt anti-feminist rhetoric is not widely accepted in mainstream public discourse. Public figures seldom express open hostility toward feminism unless they occupy fringe positions. For example, in July 2022, the editor-in-chief of the fringe online outlet *Dialogos* posted a status on X claiming that feminism was invented "so that ugly women can have a place in society." This statement, however, was met with predominantly negative reactions, underscoring the limited public acceptance of explicit anti-feminist sentiment.

Nevertheless, some influential figures propagate persistent negative narratives about feminism. Danijal Hadžović, an editor at one of the country's largest media outlets, *Dnevni avaz,* has consistently posted disparaging content about feminism and feminists on his social media accounts. While his approach and angles vary, the tone remains unfailingly negative, contributing to the broader stigmatization of feminist movements.

One of the recurring narratives frames feminists as "elites" who allegedly achieved their status through identity politics rather than merit. Marija Runić, in her article in the "Textbook of Anti-gender Acting in Bosnia-Herzegovina", notes that feminists are often portrayed as having leveraged equality struggles to secure privileged positions in society. It is interesting that "feminist" is often equated with "feminist activist".

Another prominent disinformation narrative presents feminism as a "foreign import" that threatens traditional values. This trope often draws on conspiracy theories with origins outside the region. A long-standing conspiracy theory claims that the Rockefellers invented feminism to turn women into consumers and create a society of capitalist slaves, focusing on work and consumption rather than family values. While this narrative is imported from the American context, it has found resonance locally. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, leaning on narratives from neighbouring Serbia, feminism is similarly accused of attempting to dismantle family structures by "removing men from families," supposedly making women more vulnerable to systemic exploitation.

Despite these narratives, Runić points out that anti-gender attacks on feminism in Bosnia-Herzegovina may not be as overt as in other regional countries. The division among anti-gender actors along ethnopolitical lines hinders cohesive cooperation between groups, limiting the scope and intensity of coordinated anti-feminist campaigns. As a result, attacks on feminism tend to remain individual, imported, or framed negatively duge to perceptions of feminists' higher economic status rather than organized opposition.

Countering Gender-Based Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Combating gender-based disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires comprehensive strategies that address its deep-rooted social, legal, and technological dimensions. Legal reforms, institutional accountability, civil society support, and media literacy are essential to reducing its spread and impact. Insights from fact-checker Nerma Šehović from Raskrinkavanje and disinformation target Emina Tufekčić highlight key approaches: strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing media regulation and transparency, fostering solidarity networks among women in public life, ensuring law enforcement responsiveness, and promoting media literacy as a critical defence against harmful narratives.

Legal and institutional mechanisms are critical in addressing gender-based disinformation. However, Bosnia and Herzegovina's legal framework lacks clear definitions for many concepts related to hate speech and online violence. The regulation of online spaces remains insufficient, and the country faces challenges in aligning its laws with new European Union (EU) regulations, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA). Tufekčić pointed out that the attacks targeting her came from an online outlet with undisclosed ownership and anonymous authorship. Despite EU recommendations, Bosnia and Herzegovina still lacks a law ensuring media ownership transparency, and the broader regulation of the media sphere remains severely inadequate.

The country does have a self-regulatory body—the Press Council—but it failed to recognize breaches of journalistic ethics in Tufekčić's case. The Council argued that, as a public figure, she must be prepared for public scrutiny of her private life. While social media platforms' self-regulation has shown some effectiveness, it falls short of providing a comprehensive solution, especially due to its volatility. Although Meta's independent fact-checking program, according to Šehović, allowed verified information to reach a wider audience and warn users about false claims, its recent discontinuation in the U.S.—and potentially in other regions—poses a significant setback in combating disinformation, including gender-based narratives that spread rapidly on social networks.

"The new moderation policies of this company, which will now weaken rules against hate speech targeting these groups, could also negatively affect the fight against gender-based disinformation and narratives targeting women and LGBTIQ+ people," Šehović warned.

Despite these challenges, Tufekčić acknowledged the support she received from organizations like Raskrinkavanje, as well as women's NGOs such as Medica, Centar ženskih prava, and the Westminster Foundation. These organizations provided both personal empowerment and public advocacy. Additionally,

her long-standing professional relationships with media outlets helped mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns against her. This collaboration between civil society, media, and affected individuals represents an effective model for resisting gendered disinformation. However, as a politician with media connections, Tufekčić's experience is not comparable to the experiences of those without such networks. She emphasized the importance of networking and solidarity among women in public life to combat disinformation:

"Everyone should work on networking and empowering other women, politicians, and journalists, rather than just doing their job and wondering how they ended up in that situation. This networking is absolutely necessary; isolation in any profession cannot bring anything good to anyone." By fostering strong networks, women can collectively resist targeted attacks, ensuring that no one faces disinformation campaigns in isolation.

Tufekčić also stressed the need for educating police officers to recognize and appropriately respond to gendered disinformation and threats. Law enforcement's lack of sensitivity often places an additional burden on victims seeking justice. Beyond police training, raising awareness among women about their legal rights is crucial. Empowering women with knowledge of available legal recourses can enhance their resilience against targeted disinformation campaigns. Reflecting on her experience—where she had to be persistent and resourceful, contacting multiple people and organizations to ensure the perpetrator who threatened her with sexual violence was punished—Tufekčić believes that young women need to learn from such examples to navigate the system effectively. Ultimately, the perpetrator received a six-month suspended sentence.

Both Šehović and Tufekčić underscored the critical role of media literacy in countering disinformation. Tufekčić noted that general illiteracy and uncritical consumption of information contribute to the proliferation of gendered disinformation and attacks on women. Similarly, Šehović emphasized that media literacy is the most important tool against all forms of disinformation, including gender-based narratives:

"In a time when we are flooded with information and messages from all sides, it is more important than ever. Besides mastering the tools and skills needed to verify the factual basis of the claims we encounter online, it is important to critically think about the content we consume. In this sense, critical reflection on the narratives presented to us regarding the human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people is necessary to effectively combat gender-based disinformation and the political and social agendas they serve."
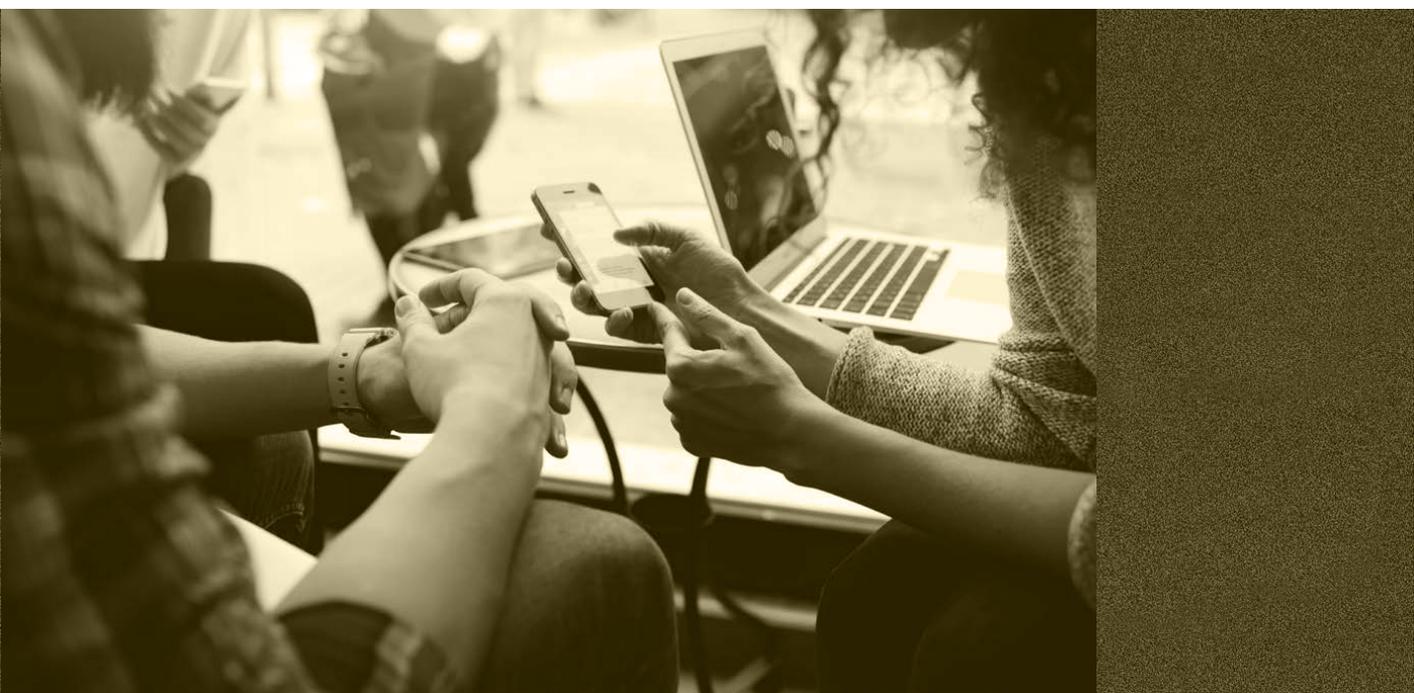
Conclusion

Gendered disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply intertwined with the country's post-war political and media landscape, the persistence of patriarchal norms, weak regulatory frameworks, and external geopolitical influences. While gender-based violence remains a critical issue with limited legal and institutional responses, the rapid expansion of digital spaces has introduced new challenges in combating gendered disinformation. The slow progress in aligning Bosnia's legal framework with European regulations, such as the Digital Services Act, leaves significant gaps in tackling online gender-based attacks. However, even existing legal tools are not being properly enforced, indicating that the core issue lies in deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and systemic shortcomings rather than legal gaps.

Political participation remains one of the primary triggers for disinformation targeting women, particularly during election cycles. Women politicians, activists, and journalists are subjected to systematic attempts to undermine their credibility, often through sexualized narratives or fabricated scandals. At the same time, Bosnia's susceptibility to foreign influence—particularly from Russia and Serbia-fuels the import of anti-gender narratives that frame feminism and gender equality as imposed by the West and designed to erode traditional family values. These narratives, often disseminated through digital propaganda networks, align with broader anti-Western sentiment and serve to delegitimize women's rights movements.

Disinformation related to women's health, including false claims about reproductive rights, vaccines, and medical procedures, remains a persistent issue. Such narratives not only spread disinformation but also pose direct risks to women's physical well-being. Additionally, attacks on LGBTIQ+ identities have become a central theme in gendered disinformation, with a disproportionate focus on trans women, mirroring global trends while also reflecting regional political dynamics.v

Despite these challenges, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to resist disinformation campaigns by building solidarity networks, strengthening advocacy efforts, and increasing public awareness. However, legal protections remain insufficient, and law enforcement responses are inconsistent, often dismissing threats against women as trivial. Without comprehensive institutional reforms and greater investment in media literacy initiatives, gendered disinformation will continue to undermine the participation and safety of women in public life.

In an era where AI technologies enhance the believability of disinformation, the priority is no longer just debunking falsehoods. Instead, it is essential to foster a culture where women are empowered and stand in solidarity with one another. As Emina Tufekčić aptly states: **"We're not here just for ourselves. You can't stay silent in the face of someone else's injustice and then expect others to stand by you when it happens to you."**

Reporting
Diversity
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