

MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS **SERBIA**

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Introduction

In July 2024, an assassination attempt on U.S. President Donald Trump in Pennsylvania quickly made global news. In Serbia, instead of focusing on the political implications or security breaches, tabloids and online portals used this opportunity to claim women were “unfit” to be a part of Trump's security team as criticism of Secret Service failures was directed at the fact that some of the agents present were women who “did not cope well”. The portal of the daily tabloid *Informer* ran the sensational headline “Look who the US Secret Service sent to protect Trump”, suggesting that women being a part of the security team was scandalous.

This narrative quickly gained traction across multiple media outlets, reinforcing deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. Speculations that women were too emotional, too slow, or simply “unfit” for the job followed, raising doubts about whether women should be entrusted with protecting high-ranking political figures. While the actions of women agents were analysed in detail, the steps that male agents took were not examined, nor were they used to support claims that their gender determines their professional capabilities.

This case exemplifies how gendered disinformation operates. Targeting women by distorting facts, reinforcing gender norms, and weaponising harmful narratives through media manipulation. The “disinformation” in gendered disinformation refers not only to outright fabrications but also to a broader spectrum of information disorders, including misleading and manipulative content designed to undermine gender equality. Apart from women, gendered disinformation often targets gender minorities and the LGBTIQ+ community in general, intertwining sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.



Research on women's representation and portrayal in Serbian media, both in academia and civil society, has long highlighted the role of media manipulation in shaping harmful narratives. However, specific research on gendered disinformation as a distinct phenomenon remains limited. A pioneering effort came only last year when [Novi Sad School of Journalism \(NNŠ\) published a report](#) identifying key discourse strategies of gendered disinformation. Through nine case studies, it outlined how stereotypes and prejudices, ad hominem insults, dehumanisation of the LGBTIQ+ and feminist movements, misinterpretation of regulations and laws, misuse of science and pseudoscience and other discourse strategies are weaponised to spread harmful gender-based narratives. The report also provided concrete recommendations for journalists on how to counter these trends in reporting on gender and gender-based violence. The rise in anti-gender narratives, strongly fueled by disinformation, was also highlighted in the Reporting Diversity Network's (RDN) latest [Monitoring report](#), as well as in a study on [online narratives against "gender ideology"](#) by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy.

Throughout RDN's media monitoring that started in late 2020, harmful and hateful narratives targeting women have prevailed each year. Most dominant narratives include harmful, sensationalistic reporting on gender-based violence, narratives reinforcing gender stereotypes and the use of sexist tropes for entertainment and commercial purposes. As noted in the latest Monitoring report, the significant rise in anti-gender narratives in Serbia was intricately connected to anti-feminist narratives, undermining established women's rights and the fight to expand them.

Building on these insights, this paper, as part of regional research, seeks to deepen the understanding of how gendered disinformation in Serbia operates by identifying its key narratives, main generators, and the types of information disorders that sustain it. While employing a more qualitative approach, the research draws from multiple sources:

- A systematic search of relevant keywords across three verified fact-checking portals in Serbia - Fake News Tragač, Raskrikavanje and Istinomer
- Extracting data from RDN monitoring findings, analysing cases with manipulative elements targeting women and gender minorities
- A desk analysis of anti-feminist discourse
- Expert interviews with Vesna Radojević, investigative journalist and editor at Raskrikavanje, and Ivan Subotić, editor-in-chief of Fake News Tragač, to explore counter-narratives and potential responses to gendered disinformation.

By examining these elements, this research aims to shed light on how gender-based disinformation operates in Serbia's media landscape, addressing a critical gap in understanding how gender is weaponised in contemporary media discourse.

Analysis

Quantitative overview

For this research, we identified **30 unique cases of debunked gender-based disinformation in the past five years on Serbia's three fact-checking portals**, all verified members of the International Fact-Checking Network. Fifteen cases were found on portal Raskrikavanje, nine on Istinomer and seven on Fake News Tragač (FNT). One of the cases was debunked twice, both on Raskrikavanje and Istinomer.

The systematic search conducted for these portals included relevant keywords including all grammatical forms of the words: woman, female, gender, feminism, abortion, rape, femicide, equality, violence, reproductive, marriage, childbirth, maternity hospital, pregnant, mother, virgin, girl, housewife, sister, daughter grandmother, wife, misogyny, patriarchy, transgender as well as terms for a woman minister (ministarka), member of Parliament (poslanica) and politician (političarka). Many more texts containing these terms were found, however, only examples with a clear gender aspect were selected.

Through the continuous RDN media monitoring, we found another 19 unique cases of gender-based hateful and harmful content that includes some type of manipulation or the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As neither RDN nor this research methodology includes fact-checking, and as many of these examples include claims that are almost impossible to prove as true or false, the quantitative data shown here only reflects cases of gendered disinformation that have been debunked by verified fact-checkers. These “hard to prove” cases that are most likely based on manipulation include, for example, a claim by gynaecologist Vanja Milošević, who said in an interview in May 2022 that “these days it's much easier to have an abortion than to register a car” or a claim by the Minister of Family Welfare and Demography of Serbia, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski. In July 2024, she said that “for twenty years, there has been a campaign against the birth of children in Serbia, and it is part of the global agenda. That's why obstetric violence, bad conditions in maternity hospitals, and bad food are emphasised, and that's why it's persistently insisted on.”

However, it is important to emphasise that these 19 cases account for around 21% of all cases of gender-based hateful and harmful content that has some elements of manipulation recorded through RDN monitoring. This may be indicative of how frequently information disorders fuel hateful and harmful discourse targeting women and gender minorities.

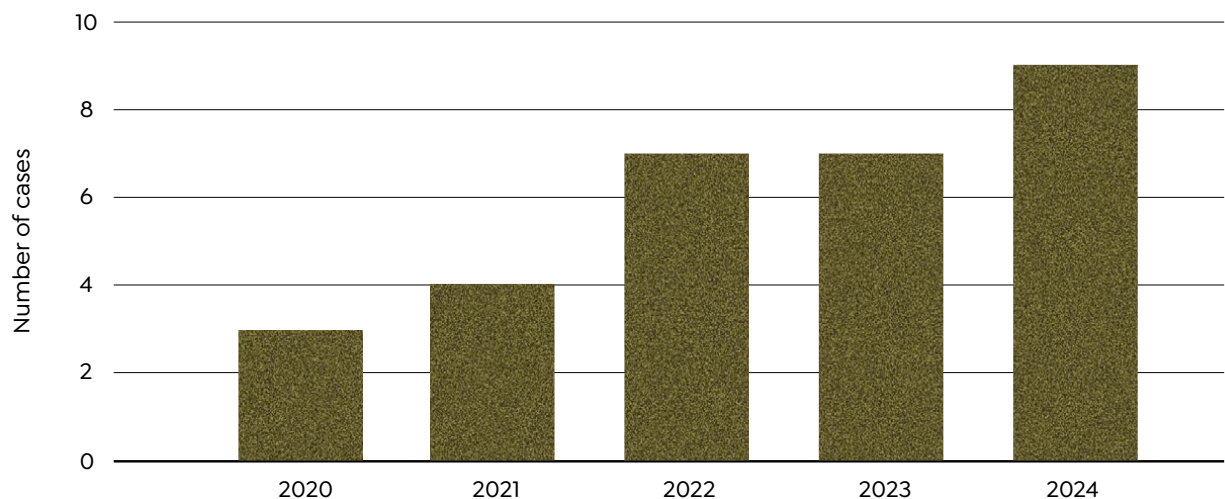
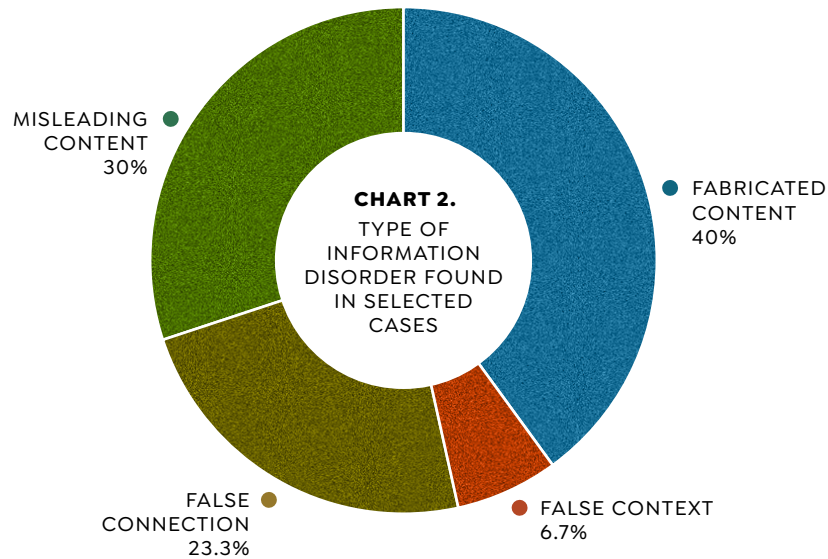
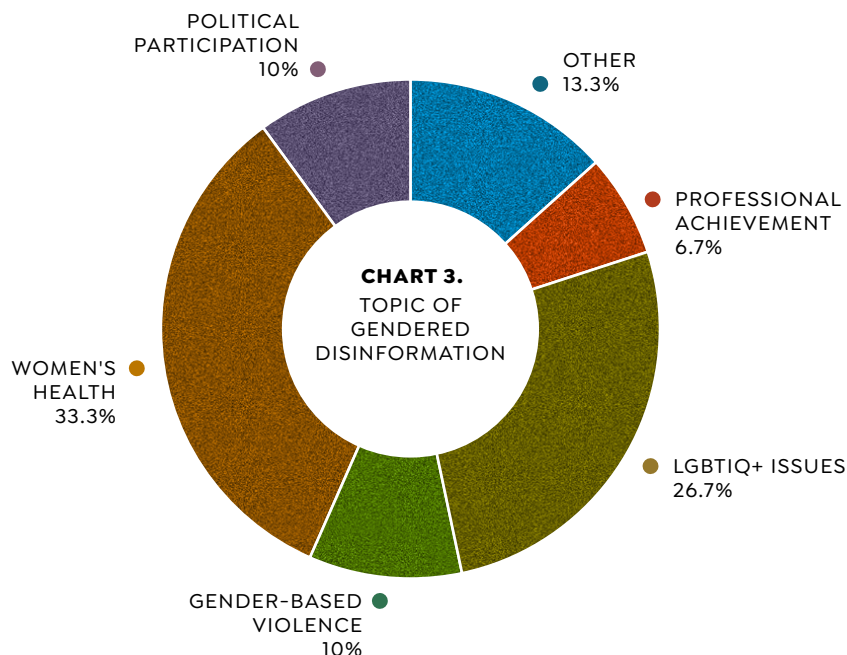


Chart 1. Number of gendered disinformation cases debunked per year

A clear trend of **increase in the number of gender-based disinformation cases is noticeable each year**. Out of the 30 identified cases, three were found in 2020 and four in 2021. This doubles in the next two years, with seven cases found in 2022 and 2023 and nine unique cases found in 2024. This may be indicative of the increasing amount of content including information disorders targeting gender, but it also may be a result of fact-checkers' increased focus on this issue. This may be due to the rise in anti-gender and anti-feminist narratives or, as a third of these cases refer to women's health hoaxes, it may relate to the vaccine panic and overall proliferation of health-related conspiracy theories during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.



When it comes to the type of information disorders found in the selected cases, **most content (40%) is fabricated**, meaning it is not in any way based on fact and is created to mislead and cause harm, **while almost a third (30%) is misleading content**, based in facts, but selected and presented in a biased or inadequate way to support an argument. The remaining third of cases can be accounted for as either false connection (23.3%) - when media try to “hook” their audience, usually with a bombastic headline or a strong visual that cannot be connected to the facts presented in the rest of the content or false context (6.7%) - factual content manipulated or contextualised to create a misleading narrative.



A third of all analysed cases (33.3%) debunked women's health hoaxes. More than a quarter (26.7%) refer to LGBTIQ+ issues, 10% of cases cover women's political participation and gender-based violence, while 6.7% of cases refer to women's professional achievement. Other cases (13.3%) include examples of debunked media content on why women “look old”, signs that a woman has “just had intercourse”, fear-mongering on supposed fines if one does not use gender-sensitive language and manipulated data supposedly proving single mothers are to blame for many social issues in youth.

As for the type of content containing information disorders targeting women, **a vast majority was text-based (83.3%), and the rest (16.7%) was speech-based content.** However, even though selected cases do not include manipulated photos or videos, visual content is often used to fuel gendered disinformation. In many cases, non-augmented visuals are misinterpreted in the text, creating a false narrative of what is shown.

Qualitative overview

In the 10 cases of debunked disinformation targeting women's health found, the most prevalent narratives were those on a supposed huge number of abortions in Serbia and unfounded claims on how crucial healthcare such as COVID and HPV vaccines are unsafe and lead to infertility and pregnancy risks. Both topics were used to enhance narratives on organised attempts for the “disappearance of our nation” and imply women are to blame. Apart from the fact that these narratives are based on disinformation and manipulation, as well as used to target women and confirm their patriarchal roles in society, they also simplify the complex social, economic and political issue of population decline in Serbia.

Two texts debunk a dangerous claim that [“mammography increases the risk of breast cancer”](#), which is particularly dangerous as this is a key method for early detection of breast cancer and other breast diseases. [Social media posts debunked](#) in these cases used hyperbolic and emotionally charged language such as statements that mammography is “the biggest organised crime against women” while citing either misinterpreted data, failing to put correct data in the right context or simply fabricating nonexistent data to support the claims they made.

Health-related hoaxes and conspiracy theories are often presented as legitimate information and made to look as if they are coming from verified sources through the use of medical terminology, as was the case with a Viber message shared in anti-vaxxer groups that claimed: [“the effectiveness of the HPV vaccine has not been proven”](#). This same message included a logo of the citizens' association “Doctors and Parents for Science and Ethics”. The logo is similar to the logos of medical organisations or institutions, but this association opposes the use of vaccines, claiming that they cause various diseases and disorders. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the HPV vaccine being available for free for children and youth since 2022 in Serbia, have been huge trigger events for this type of disinformation and manipulation.

Pseudoscience discourse like this may deter women from seeking crucial healthcare, making it a threat to public health. Claims such as one by Branimir Nestorović, child pulmonologist and politician known for many unfounded claims on health issues, published on the front page of daily Srpski telegraf stating [“women give birth to children with genes of their former lovers”](#) are not based on fact and are meant to shame women for the number of sexual partners they had and assert their patriarchal roles in society. These claims often have underlying misogynist and sexist narratives, promoting traditional gender roles and favouring childbearing as a woman's main purpose while shifting focus from their general health. What is especially concerning is that these hoaxes about women's health often come from within the medical community, as doctors who promote such theories are provided space in traditional media and quoted online in viral social media posts, giving false credibility to such statements. In some cases, key generators of this type of disinformation are people who falsely present themselves as medical experts.

Narratives present in the 8 identified cases related to LGBTIQ+ issues mainly boil down to misinterpretations of efforts for gender-inclusive policies. Ensuring equal rights for LGBTIQ+ people is seen as a promotion of a “global agenda” and the imposition of “Western values” that threaten the “traditional family” and especially children. In 4 out of 8 cases, children are presented as “the main target”. For example, one book for teenage girls mentions, only in one sentence, that “having gay or bisexual feelings is not something to be ashamed of”, which was interpreted as [“a promotion of paedophilia and LGBT in children”](#) among social media users. The proposal of a new “self-determination” law in Germany for transgender people resulted in headlines on portals Srbin info and Nulta tačka unfoundedly claiming [“Germany allows CHILDREN to change gender without parental consent”](#). New laws adopted or proposed in other countries that regulate LGBTIQ+ rights are common triggers for this type of gendered disinformation and further spread of anti-gender narratives, as well as the Pride march happening annually in Belgrade or other attempts to ensure equal rights for sexual and gender minorities in the country and the region.

Another notable example is [a lesson on gender stereotypes in a high-school textbook](#), which daily Večernje Novosti “saw as a huge danger, especially for ‘Serbian children’: they write that this is actually a story about raising ‘non-binary babies’ and a path to total ruin. The ‘NATO empire’ that is allegedly behind such ideas is also mentioned, as is “transhumanism” as the ultimate goal - replacing human beings with artificial intelligence”, as Raskrikavanje reports. Efforts for gender inclusivity are seen as the “promotion of perverted ideas” or the so-called “gender ideology”, imposed from the West.

Visual elements play a huge role in cases of anti-gender and anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives fueled by disinformation. Even though no visual manipulations were found in the cases analysed, photos of people who do not fit into traditional gender representation, for example, a man in drag¹ or a boy wearing a skirt, were used to amplify the “shock” effect among conservative audiences. A [photo of Femmy Otten's 'And Life Is Over There'](#), a Hague sculpture of a human being whose upper body represents a woman and the lower body represents a man, was wrongfully interpreted on social media as the “Monument to the European Mother” and accompanied with allegations by self-proclaimed antiglobalists that it represents “a symbol of decadence” and the breakdown of “normal”, traditional values. The photo of this sculpture, even though it does not represent the mother, was compared to a Russian sculpture of a pregnant woman with two children holding her hand on social media with the comment “East and West”.

1. Drag - entertainment in which performers caricature or challenge gender stereotypes (as by dressing in clothing that is stereotypical of another gender, by using exaggeratedly gendered mannerisms, or by combining elements of stereotypically male and female dress) and often wear elaborate or outrageous costumes. (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

Case studies

Women in politics: reduced to their looks

Gendered disinformation has been a persistent tool for discrediting women in politics, particularly during electoral cycles. No matter where they stand on the political spectrum, their previous work in office or proposed policies, women politicians are usually discredited with sexist comments about their appearance, which are used as arguments as to why they are not fit for their roles. In some cases, disinformation is used to maintain these sexist narratives.

One such example was a viral social media post claiming [a pornographic performer is a member of the Serbian Parliament](#), which was later debunked. The comment sections under these social media posts are not only flooded with sexist and misogynist comments but also photos of Serbian women politicians that enhance this narrative. As Raskrikavanje writes, upon being met with comments that this claim is not, in fact, true, an X (then Twitter) user replied with a photo of MP Dijana Radović from the Socialist Party of Serbia, wearing a tight red dress. Radović's outfit choice was a topic of discussion on social media, including many sexist comments.

Another case involved a widely shared post falsely stating that [a group of women pictured in a nightclub were members of the local parliament in Smederevska Palanka](#). Raskrikavanje confirmed that the women in the photo were actually television host Daša Stanošević, former reality show participant Tamara Đurić, and her sister Aleksandra. While Stanošević briefly worked as a municipal PR officer in 2017, none of them have ever been MPs in Smederevska Palanka. These narratives fit into a broader pattern of disinformation aimed at portraying women in politics as unqualified or morally compromised. As Raskrikavanje notes, the trope of "starlets in public office" is a recurring theme in the Serbian public sphere, often guaranteeing virality regardless of accuracy.

A striking visual comparison in one such post juxtaposed the nightclub image with a photo of Finnish government officials - three women dressed professionally, in all black, with much less skin showing and wearing less makeup. Here, it is implied that how women present themselves is connected to their professional capability or performance as public officials and that women who do not conform to conservative standards of appearance and behavior are unfit for governance.

Elections in Serbia frequently trigger similar sexist posts on social media, later repackaged into clickbait headlines on portals of daily tabloids, reducing newly elected women MPs and government officials to what they wear and how they look. This pattern of gendered disinformation serves a strategic function. By attacking women's credibility and reducing them to their perceived sexual appeal or personal choices, it discourages women's political participation and reinforces existing biases against women in leadership.

The case of Imane Khelif: How women athletes are always on trial

Algerian boxer Imane Khelif won Olympic gold in August 2024 amid media scrutiny that overshadowed her athletic achievements in a global moral panic over whether she was truly a woman. Sensationalist media reporting and online abuse that went viral globally was led by sexism, transphobia and racism and fueled by gender-based disinformation. In Serbian media, headlines and narratives mirrored these biases, questioning her identity rather than focusing on her matches.

In a more [detailed version of this case study](#), Reporting Diversity Network analysed over 100 texts mentioning Khelif on Serbian online portals where this topic reached the highest engagement – Telegraf, Sportal, Sportklub and Mondo. Following global patterns, Serbian media used manipulations and shared unverified information, with sensational headlines calling Khelif a “proven biological male” and “a man who beats women” while presenting her opponent as a victim instead of an athlete who simply lost a match.

Apart from the public debate on Khelif’s sex and gender being a severe invasion of her privacy, most of these claims are also almost impossible to fact-check, as they would require insights into her personal medical information. For this reason, [Fake News Tragač stated](#) that while they “unequivocally condemn all sensationalist and potentially inaccurate news”, they “do not delve into intimate topics such as those in which one’s sexuality, anatomy of their genitals, hormone count and chromosomes are debated”, and advised other media outlets to do so as well. Nevertheless, as shown in this case study, the same media outlets on different occasions published claims that Khelif is male, female, intersex, has high levels of testosterone and has a disorder of sex development. Mere logic and basic knowledge of biology indicate that all these claims cannot be true simultaneously.

Visual elements in texts and photos shared on social media portrayed her as more masculine and not fitting into the unrealistic societal standard of what a woman “should” look like while presenting her opponents as more feminine looking or closer to the perfect standard of femininity, rooted in patriarchal views of womanhood, eurocentrism and white supremacy. This culminated in a racist illustration, which presents Khelif as a monster and Carini as a small, thin and dainty woman – a reference to Beauty and the Beast.

The language used in analysed texts often painted a similar picture, as tabloid portals described Khelif’s opponents as “attractive blonde” and “divinely beautiful”. Many articles were illustrated by photos of Khelif taken during her fights, or of her in sportswear, with a few exceptions such as a text with a sexist headline “Boxer claimed to be a man has shown an incredible transformation: Here’s what she looks like with makeup on”, published by Telegraf and Sportal. Other women boxers were portrayed as more feminine through photos of them in bathing suits, tight clothes and dresses, wearing make-up and having their hair done.

Questioning revoking women's rights amid concerns over the supposed huge number of abortions

Sensationalist speculation about the number of intentional terminations of pregnancy in Serbia has resurfaced repeatedly over the years in Serbian media discourse, often exaggerated to astronomical proportions. In right-wing online spaces, abortion is framed as the primary cause of the country’s declining birth rate, commonly described as the “extinction of the nation” or the “white plague”. This rhetoric not only misrepresents the causes of demographic shifts but also fuels discussions about restricting reproductive rights.

Inadequate social policies, brain drain and other social and economic issues related to the population decline are often sidelined or even completely disregarded, while women who have abortions are seen as the main cause of the problem. Certain media outlets amplify these claims, granting a platform to public officials, doctors, and sociologists who advocate for restricting abortion access, further legitimising the idea that reproductive rights should be revoked.

The resurgence of anti-abortion discourse in Serbia coincided with restrictions on reproductive rights elsewhere. In 2021, Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal banned nearly all access to abortion, and in June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending federal abortion protections. These events reignited debates worldwide, including in Serbia, where the right to abortion has been guaranteed for the past 50 years.

Apart from that, right-wing politicians have used abortion statistics, or lack thereof, as a political tool, making unverified and exaggerated claims to push these narratives. During her 2023 election campaign, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, now Minister of Family Welfare and Demography, claimed that [100.000 abortions are performed every year in Serbia](#). Similarly, Saša Borojević, founder of the Family Alarm initiative promoting “traditional family values”, alleged that there were [11 million abortions in Serbia in the past three decades](#).

Istinomer analysed available data from the Institute of Public Health, Dr Milan Jovanović Batut, which recorded approximately 320.000 abortions between 2005 and 2021. While the actual number may be somewhat higher due to unregistered procedures in private clinics, Istinomer’s analysis shows that even the largest projected data would be significantly lower than 11 million. As of December 2024, Saša Borojević is the editor and host of the TV show Conspiracy Theory on B92 television, a station with a license for national coverage.

Disinformation campaigns against feminism and feminists

Anti-feminist discourse often occurs in Serbia’s public sphere, particularly within right-wing portals and online spaces. However, it is not limited to fringe outlets, as prominent figures, including public officials, frequently propagate anti-feminist narratives, which are then amplified through mainstream media. Since the start of its media monitoring in late 2020, RDN has observed numerous such examples. While these statements are often framed as personal opinions, they frequently contain manipulative elements that serve to discredit the feminist movement by portraying it as radical, excessive, or as a threat to Serbian “family values”. These narratives reinforce patriarchal norms and undermine efforts for gender equality.

One of the most persistent narratives claims that feminism has evolved from a movement advocating for gender equality into one that promotes women’s superiority and misandry, delegitimising feminist efforts as irrelevant or harmful to society. Such arguments are not confined to online commentary but are echoed in mainstream media. Actress Ljubinka Klarić, for instance, stated in an interview for Insajder TV that gender inequality no longer exists in Serbia and Europe, dismissing systemic barriers that continue to affect women, especially those outside privileged social and economic circles. “The time has passed when women were oppressed, forced to sit at home and take care of children, had no right to vote and so on. I think that women today have become much more aggressive than men to the detriment of that feminism” Klarić said.

Author Mirjana Bobić Mojsilović expressed similar views in an interview for Una TV, stating that “the only good thing feminism brought is women’s right to vote” before accusing the movement of “killing the alpha male” and “destroying the family.” By reinforcing patriarchal gender roles and minimising the ongoing fight for gender equality, such statements frame feminism as an elitist movement disconnected from the realities of everyday women. Excerpts from these interviews were widely shared online, generating an even larger audience.

Similar narratives present feminism as an imported ideology from the West. This aligns with broader anti-Western sentiments and nationalist rhetoric, framing feminism as a force that seeks to erode traditional Serbian values. Especially concerning is the fact that high-ranking public officials and Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) representatives are often the main generators of such rhetoric. For example, in 2023, Serbian

Patriarch Porfirije publicly attacked feminists in response to their advocacy for gender-sensitive language. Using derogatory language, he called them "wretched, miserable women" who are "destroying the essence of our being when they should be taking care of it," reinforcing patriarchal gender roles of women as caregivers. Following this statement, the SPC issued a press release further escalating the rhetoric, directly targeting Commissioner for the Protection of Equality Brankica Janković and former Minister of Mining and Energy Zorana Mihajlović while explicitly opposing the Law on Gender Equality. This law was adopted in 2021, enforcing equal rights, equal participation and balanced representation of women and men in public. After a strong campaign against this law, led by right-wing groups and SPC, culminating in a one-month period in June 2024 after its implementation started, the Constitutional Court suspended it.

Counternarratives

Serbia has legal mechanisms to counter disinformation and hate speech, but they are rarely enforced. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), originally intended to be an independent institution, largely lost its credibility due to years of inaction, failing to implement media laws or sanction outlets that continuously violate them. While efforts have been made to align Serbian regulations with the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), social media regulation remains limited.

Moderation on social media platforms is also insufficient. Harmful content violating platform guidelines is rarely removed automatically, as these mechanisms often don't work best in Serbian and other regional languages. META announced the suspension of its independent third-party fact-checking program for Facebook and Instagram in January 2025 and the shift to a user-driven verification model, similar to X's Community Notes, which further weakens efforts to counter disinformation and hate speech.

In such a climate, independent fact-checking initiatives and civil society organizations play a crucial role in debunking disinformation, monitoring media, advocating for law enforcement, and running media literacy programs. However, these efforts face limited reach and significant challenges.

Investigative journalist and editor at Raskrikavanje, Vesna Radojević, and Ivan Subotić, also journalist and editor-in-chief of Fake News Tragač, highlight key trends in gendered disinformation in Serbia. Radojević notes that mainstream media often trivialise important issues such as gender equality in their reporting due to a lack of investment in journalists' skills. The state of Serbian media is important to take into account when discussing gendered disinformation. "It's not unusual to see feminist movements and women's rights depicted as an attack on the 'traditional family' and 'Serbian values,'" she explains. She also points out that women are simultaneously portrayed as sexual objects and targets of moral panic, depending on the narrative being pushed. Subotić agrees that narratives on 'family values', women's reproductive rights and feminist activism are common topics, as is any type of political engagement or activism, which is often used to target women in the public sphere. He mentions a "well-known example of tabloids attacking student Mila Pajić because of her activism. In certain texts, the tabloids unjustifiably declared her to be the lover of certain professors or a hysterical person, which are typical harmful narratives that sexualise and target women."

Both of them identify an online space of right-wing social media channels, portals, and Telegram groups as a key source of gendered disinformation. While these narratives often circulate within closed online spaces, some eventually reach mainstream media. "A small clique of portals push ultra-right narratives and have a small but loud audience, such as Srbin.info, Borba za istinu and Vaseljenska. This type of misinformation

sometimes leaks into the mainstream media where newspapers with a long history – Večernje Novosti and Politika – are leading the way”, says Subotić. Radojević adds that tabloids routinely spread degrading narratives and minimise violence against women, while right-wing portals play a major role in spreading anti-LGBT propaganda.

Beyond continuous fact-checking and debunking false claims, experts stress the need for education, legal reforms, and holding relevant institutions accountable to combat gendered disinformation effectively. Subotić calls for stronger media regulations, advocating for special legal measures against gender-based defamation and disinformation targeting vulnerable groups. He highlights that fines for misinformation are minimal compared to the benefits of sensationalism, saying, “Spreading lies in Serbia through the media is still not adequately punished. It is still more profitable to lie and pay a fine than simply not spread lies in the media”.

Radojević underscores the role of education, particularly in media, politics and human rights, as a crucial preventive measure. However, she warns that without institutional enforcement of media ethics and legal standards, counter-efforts remain ineffective. She also points out that the government actively supports media outlets that thrive on disinformation and hate speech. Grassroot initiatives and feminist counter-narratives remain crucial for countering gendered disinformation, however, systemic changes in media policy and their implementation are key for fighting this phenomenon in Serbia.



Conclusion

Through a limited number of cases, this research paper provides insight into the key narratives driving gender-based disinformation in Serbia and how they operate. Our findings reveal that gendered disinformation serves as a political tool to target women, reinforcing patriarchal norms, delegitimizing women in public life, and fueling hostility toward the LGBTIQ+ community and feminists.

Moreover, these narratives actively undermine efforts for equal rights. The suspension of the Law on Gender Equality in Serbia followed a campaign rooted in disinformation and manipulation, allowing conservative groups to derail legal protections for women's rights by trivialising and distorting its purpose. Similarly, LGBTIQ+ rights are often framed as part of a "global agenda" and an imposition of "Western values," threatening the "traditional family" and, in particular, children.

A significant portion of gendered disinformation in Serbia revolves around women's health hoaxes, including the manipulation of abortion rates and the fabrication of health risks of mammograms and HPV vaccines. Despite repeated debunking, pseudoscience narratives persist, posing a serious public health risk by discouraging women from seeking essential healthcare. Additionally, such disinformation could influence public policy, potentially leading to restrictive measures on women's reproductive rights and healthcare, especially considering global trends after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending federal abortion protection.

Women in politics are routinely discredited, particularly during electoral cycles, where they are portrayed as incompetent and morally corrupt based on sexist tropes. In Serbia, the narrative of women public officials being unqualified "starlets" has persisted over the years, especially on social media, even when it is entirely fabricated.

Visual manipulation, a common tactic in gendered disinformation, is present in Serbian media as well. Selective imagery reinforces gender roles and stereotypes, often sexualising women before subjecting them to moral policing. Similarly, content on (usually against) queer rights is frequently illustrated with images designed to shock conservative audiences, further amplifying hostility.

The sensationalist, emotionally charged language and fear-based messaging of gendered disinformation make it highly persuasive and shareable, increasing its virality and resistance to fact-checking efforts. These discourses are often cooked in the same kitchen - the right-wing online space or a network of social media channels, fringe portals and Telegram groups. Later, they are, on occasion, repackaged into mainstream media content and even promoted by public officials, further legitimising these harmful narratives.

Anti-gender and anti-feminist narratives, often fueled by disinformation, are rising in the country, posing a direct threat to women's safety, public participation, and equal rights. While fact-checking remains essential for debunking false claims, it does not prevent their recurrence. A systemic response is necessary, including stronger platform regulations, institutional accountability, and policy reforms to curb the spread of gender-based disinformation.



**MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
SERBIA**



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