

MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

ALBANIA

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Co-funded by
the European Union

 **Norway**



**SMART
Balkans**
civil society for a more inclusive
and modern Balkans



**Reporting
Diversity
Network**

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Publisher: Albanian Women in Audiovisual and
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K2.0



Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) is established by Media Diversity Institute. Project partners include Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, Albanian Women in Audiovisual, Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0, Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro, Innovative Media.



This publication is funded by the European Union and the “SMART Balkans – Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans” regional project implemented by Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA).

The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the project implementers and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA), Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) or Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM).



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Introduction

In a society where women are killed with alarming frequency and where the media persistently reports such tragic incidents as “crimes of passion” rather than femicide, speaking of rape as a “moment” in which women supposedly surrender themselves to sexual pleasure is, in itself, nearly a crime. In 2023, lawyer Spartak Ngjela publicly described rape as an absence of consent and consent as a matter of morality, going so far as to state: “If she has not given her consent, at a certain point she may feel pleasure, but later she goes and files a complaint.”

This statement circulated widely across all Albanian media platforms, disseminated with the scandalous content of a lawyer who is broadly recognised by the public without raising critical questions about the weight of such a declaration, its implications for victims, or the potential harm it may inflict on future generations. Worse still, it contributed to the relativisation of rape as a crime, presenting it not as an act of violence, but as an “involuntary act that may include pleasure,” thereby neutralising its gravity.

This is merely one example among many similar media narratives that have circulated in Albanian public discourse over the past five years. While they may initially appear as conventional news items, these reports often evolve into disinformation campaigns, perpetuating gender stereotypes, normalising hate speech, and reinforcing discriminatory rhetoric. Such narratives not only undermine the principles of gender equality but also serve to consolidate deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. They reproduce and legitimise historical representations of women as inherently different and, by implication, inferior to men across social, cultural, political, and intellectual domains.

In Albania, such discursive patterns are widely prevalent and deeply embedded in public communication. Alarming, citizens may have become inadvertently habituated to these narratives, an outcome shaped in no small part by the pervasive use of social media. The digital ecosystem now grants virtually unlimited access to an overwhelming number of media outlets—over 900 currently active in the Albanian media landscape. These include around 60 local and national television channels, newspapers, radio stations, and online portals. However, despite this apparent diversity, Albania's media environment remains highly concentrated in the hands of a few major owners with strong political affiliations, who control more than half of the audience and nearly 90% of the market.¹ This fragmented and largely unregulated media environment not only accelerates the spread of gender-biased and discriminatory content but also fosters the normalisation of harmful ideologies, making them appear as part of everyday discourse rather than subjects of critical scrutiny.

Scholarly research on the representation, inclusion, and portrayal of women in the Albanian media has long highlighted the manipulation of public opinion by unidentified or unaccountable social actors through the dissemination of harmful and divisive narratives. While gender and media have been recurring areas of academic inquiry, in-depth studies focusing specifically on gendered disinformation remain relatively scarce. In September 2023, the organisation *Faktoje* published the findings of a pioneering study on gender-based disinformation in the media and its consequences, particularly the intensification of hate speech and the escalation of both verbal and physical violence against women and other vulnerable communities such as LGBTIQ+. The study's findings were neither unheard of nor unexpected; rather, they confirmed what many observers had already sensed, namely, that disinformation campaigns, especially since 2022, have become increasingly entrenched across both traditional and digital media platforms.

1. Balkan Investigative Network, “Media Ownership Monitor,” www.mom-gmr.org/en/countries/albania/

In the media monitoring report covering the period from January 2021 to April 2022, published by the Albanian Media Institute within the framework of the Reporting Diversity Network (RDN), hate speech and discriminatory discourse were most frequently directed at individuals and communities based on ethnicity (38.5%), gender (20.5%), and sexual orientation (12%)². A subsequent report by the same institute, based on monitoring conducted throughout 2022, revealed that 81.8% of the recorded incidents of hate speech in Albania during that year targeted women and girls. In its most recent report, spanning January to December 2023³, Albanian Media Institute once again identified gender (41%), ethnicity (38%), and sexual minorities (11%) as the three most systematically targeted groups in both traditional and digital media.

These evolving data trends point to a deeply troubling trajectory: gender has emerged as an increasingly central axis along which hate speech and discriminatory narratives are propagated. The intensification of such discourse reflects not only enduring structural inequalities but also a growing normalisation of misogyny in public and media spaces, with far-reaching consequences for gender justice.

The intensification of disinformation campaigns targeting women in Albanian media –alongside the persistent concerns raised by media monitoring experts within the framework of the RDN regarding ethical breaches, misrepresentation, image exploitation, and the re-victimisation of survivors, particularly women– has been a driving force behind the development of this regional report. These systemic patterns of gendered misrepresentation, coupled with widespread journalistic malpractice, signalled the need for a deeper, more interdisciplinary investigation into the mechanisms and impact of gendered disinformation in the region.

Prior to engaging with the structural dimensions of the issue, the research undertook a foundational mapping phase, aimed at establishing a reliable evidentiary base. This phase drew from several key sources of information, including:

- A systematic review of content using gender-specific keywords across the Albanian fact-checking platform *Faktoje*;
- The Reporting Diversity Network database and analytical reports produced by RDN-affiliated organisations operating in Albania;
- A content analysis of feminist discourse in Albanian media, with a focus on longform and investigative journalism, especially that published by *Reporter.al*;
- An in-depth expert interview with investigative journalist Ola Xama, offering thoughtful perspectives on how gender, media ethics, and disinformation overlap and influence each other.

To capture the broader socio-digital dynamics of gendered disinformation, the research also incorporated qualitative observation of user-generated content, including comment threads on selected articles, short-form video content (e.g., Instagram and Facebook reels), and podcast episodes that have either consciously or inadvertently contributed to the dissemination of disinformation narratives. This multi-source approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation functions across both traditional and digital media ecosystems and how it reproduces gender-based harm within the public sphere.

2. www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Raport-Monitorimi-pe%CC%88r-gjuhe%CC%88n-e-urrejtjes-ne%CC%88-Shqipe%CC%88ri.pdf
 3. www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Media-Monitoring-Report_Albania_ENG.pdf

Analysis

This study identified 53 distinct cases of gendered disinformation disseminated through Albanian media between 2020 and 2025. These cases serve as illustrative examples of the structural and rhetorical patterns through which disinformation operates, revealing not only its content and mode of circulation but also the key actors involved in its propagation and the target groups it seeks to influence, stigmatise, or exclude.

The research employed a systematic keyword-based approach to data collection, focusing on terms associated with gender, identity, and power. Keywords included: *woman, girl, mother, daughter, grandmother, sister, gender, reproductive health, abortion, war, mistress, femicide, crime of passion, equality, violence, misogyny, childbirth, motherhood, leader, politician, journalist, parliamentarian, patriarchy, isolation, display, marriage, crime, immorality, and infidelity.*

This extensive search generated a large corpus of media content published over the past five years. However, to maintain analytical rigour and relevance, only those articles that demonstrated clear indicators of gender bias and disinformation were selected for inclusion. The filtering process prioritised content where narratives explicitly distorted, decontextualised, or weaponised gendered language or imagery to misinform the public, reinforce patriarchal ideologies, or undermine women's agency and credibility.

Complementing the broader media analysis, the extraction of 10 documented cases of gendered disinformation from the RDN database provided a critical evidentiary foundation for deepening the analytical framework of this study. Among these cases, one of the most striking and revealing was the recent, highly orchestrated disinformation campaign directed against Blerta Tafani, who, at the time, held the second-highest leadership position within the Albanian Public Broadcaster (RTSH). This case stands as a powerful indicator of the intensity and sophistication with which gendered disinformation operates in the Albanian media landscape, transcending professional critique and breaching fundamental ethical and moral standards.

The articles that constituted this campaign circulated widely across multiple media platforms, proliferating narratives steeped in hate speech, misogyny, and gendered stereotyping. Tafani was not assessed on the basis of her professional qualifications or institutional role, but rather targeted through multiple, intersecting dimensions of her identity: as a woman, a mother, a spouse, a journalist, and a leader. Each of these identity markers was weaponised in ways that sought to delegitimise her presence and authority in the public sphere.

This case illustrates the extent to which disinformation campaigns, particularly when gendered, can serve as tools of reputational erasure and institutional destabilisation. Perhaps most concerning, it exemplifies how Albanian media outlets can act as active participants in such campaigns, often without verifying facts, and in doing so, suspend the obligation to truth in favour of sensationalism. The deliberate manufacturing and circulation of such narratives reflect not only a collapse in journalistic ethics but also a broader societal discomfort with women in positions of power, an issue that demands urgent scholarly and institutional attention.

Quantitative overview

During the content analysis phase, a series of recurrent patterns emerged that, in different analytical contexts, might have been overlooked or dismissed as isolated incidents. However, a close examination of the 53 selected articles revealed distinct thematic clusters that reflect the mechanisms through which gendered disinformation is constructed and disseminated within Albania's media landscape. These narratives operate across multiple sociopolitical dimensions, reinforcing stereotypes, moralising gender roles, and targeting non-conforming identities. The articles reviewed can be categorised as follows:

- **6 articles** focused on gendered disinformation in times of crisis, disproportionately portraying women from conflict-affected regions as victims or destabilising figures;
- **5 articles** circulated transphobic narratives that questioned the legitimacy of successful women in leadership or athletics, insinuating that their achievements were only possible because they were “formerly men”;
- **6 articles** were part of coordinated disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting women in political roles;
- **13 articles** addressed women's health, particularly reproductive health, often employing misinformation, stigmatising language, or moral judgements;
- **2 articles** presented unsubstantiated claims about Albanian women allegedly working as escorts abroad, relying on sensationalism rather than verified reporting;
- **2 articles** portrayed men as victims of blame by their female partners in relation to reproductive health decisions, subtly reversing narratives of accountability;
- **4 articles** framed women as the primary cause of infidelity and familial breakdown, reinforcing patriarchal norms around marriage and domestic responsibility;
- **3 articles** depicted young women and girls as morally deviant, reinforcing narratives of sexual shame and control;
- **2 articles** sensationalised the private lives of female public figures, reducing them to objects of public consumption rather than subjects of professional recognition;
- **5 articles** focused on motherhood, frequently essentialising maternal roles or reducing women to reproductive identities;
- **5 articles** targeted marginalised communities, particularly women and gender-diverse individuals within the LGBTIQ+ spectrum, often through discriminatory or dehumanising language.

Collectively, these thematic clusters provide a critical lens through which to understand the pervasiveness and adaptability of gendered disinformation in the Albanian media landscape. The recurrence of such narratives across diverse domains ranging from health and reproductive rights to political participation, morality, and identity demonstrates the strategic deployment of disinformation to reinforce normative gender hierarchies. Far from being incidental, these narratives serve as mechanisms of symbolic and social regulation, often producing tangible harm for the individuals and communities they target, particularly women and gender-diverse groups.

The temporal distribution of the articles reveals a gradual but noticeable increase in the presence of gendered disinformation in Albanian media over the last five years. In late 2020, approximately **6 articles** were identified, followed by **7 articles** in 2021. The trend intensified in **2022**, with **10 articles**, and reached a peak in **2023**, when **15 additional cases** were documented. In **2024**, the number slightly declined to **10 articles**, while **the first half of 2025** already shows the emergence of **6 articles**, indicating that the volume may again rise by year's end.

This trajectory suggests a growing normalisation and frequency of gendered disinformation.

Qualitative overview

Regarding the content of the analysed articles, a clear pattern emerges: there is a marked tendency to disseminate narratives focused on women's health, particularly reproductive health. Many of these articles convey alarmist or stigmatising information, often targeting women who deviate from traditional, patriarchal gender norms that have shaped public discourse in Albania for decades. This tendency reflects a broader media strategy that uses health-related narratives to reinforce gendered moral codes and regulate women's autonomy over their bodies.

In parallel, there is an increasing prevalence of stories that feature women from conflict-affected regions, often framed within romanticised yet deeply misleading narratives that strip these women of agency and complexity. Additionally, in cases where women have achieved notable success, particularly in male-dominated fields or through visible leadership, media portrayals frequently resort to transphobic insinuations, portraying them as men who have transitioned to become women, rather than recognising their accomplishments as legitimate or independent of gender binaries.

The typology of disinformation identified across the corpus of 53 articles further supports these trends:

- **15 articles** contained fabricated content (completely false information);
- **10 articles** involved false context (accurate information presented in a misleading setting or narrative);
- **15 articles** fell under misleading content (misrepresentation or distortion of facts);
- **13 articles** were classified as false connection (where headlines or visuals bore little or no relation to the content).

These findings illustrate how various forms of disinformation are employed not only to distort reality but also to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and sustain a media environment that remains hostile to women's autonomy, diversity, and public visibility.

When examining the treatment of marginalised communities, particularly LGBTIQ+ individuals, a recurring pattern emerges in which political actors instrumentalise these groups for partisan gain. Specifically, political parties and figures have used LGBTIQ+ identities as rhetorical tools to discredit or attack their opponents, often framing inclusion or equality agendas as threats to the so-called "traditional family unit."

From **a visual standpoint**, a significant portion of gendered disinformation campaigns is accompanied by imagery that depicts women in various roles, often in ways that hypersexualise or objectify them. These visual elements serve to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and reduce women's identities to their physical appearance. In parallel, the headlines attached to such content are frequently sensationalist or provocative, deliberately crafted to generate clicks and maximise audience engagement, regardless of ethical considerations.

In cases involving alleged infidelity by women, the media often go further by disseminating video footage or still images taken from private recordings, frequently shared without the consent of the individuals involved. This practice not only constitutes a severe violation of privacy but also contributes to the re-victimisation and public shaming of women, reinforcing a media environment in which gendered surveillance and moral judgment are normalised.

Case studies

Case Study 1

Women in Politics

In Albania, women engaged in politics, particularly those in senior positions or policymaking roles, are routinely subjected to disproportionate scrutiny and unfounded accusations that target both their personal and professional lives.

Disinformation campaigns often revolve around insinuations of alleged “hidden connections” with informal power networks, implying that women’s career advancement stems not from competence or merit but from presumed intimate associations with male political figures. These narratives frequently rely on sexist tropes that reduce women to their physical appearance, undermining their intellectual, academic, and professional credentials.

A prominent example is the misrepresentation of a video featuring Majlinda Bregu⁴, in which she outlined the challenges hindering Albania’s accession to the European Union. The footage was distorted and circulated alongside disinformation, further amplified by hateful rhetoric and a lack of content moderation across social media platforms operated by television outlets.

Ms. Bregu was targeted with baseless allegations concerning her professional achievements, supposed misuse of public funds, and corruption. Additionally, personal attacks were extended to her family, with images highlighting her daughter’s lifestyle—despite Ms. Bregu’s long-standing withdrawal from domestic politics and her current leadership role in a regional organisation.

Such disinformation efforts often aim to erode women’s credibility and influence in public life. They include the strategic exposure of private information, particularly emphasising physical appearance. For instance, in 2022, an Albanian online portal published photos of then-MP Grida Duma at the beach, accompanied by the sensationalist and sexist headline calling her “a Real Beast” (*Bisha e Vërtetë*)⁵, even urging women to “take away their husbands” because of Duma’s remarkable physical attributes.

These campaigns frequently exploit personal images taken from women’s private social media accounts without consent, constituting not only a breach of privacy but also reinforcing a culture of digital misogyny. In such environments, professional legitimacy is undermined through gendered scrutiny and objectification.

The intensity of these campaigns often escalates during election cycles. Despite receiving considerably less media coverage than their male counterparts, women candidates remain disproportionately subjected to sensationalist narratives designed to attract clicks rather than inform the public.

In other cases, we observe gender-based disinformation targeting women in politics, disseminated by journalists who openly maintain ties with the central government. Whenever women from the opposition criticise the government, these journalists publicly shame them for their appearance. Public insults often escalate to the point where women opposing the parliamentary majority are mockingly reminded—through irony and sarcasm—that they are first mothers and wives before being parliamentarians⁶. This double standard, applied to shame women for their political stances, is deeply misogynistic and fundamentally problematic, significantly restricting opportunities and space for young women in politics.

4. <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMhA89nhG/>

5. <https://faktoje.al/portalet-te-etura-per-klikime-shenjetrojne-me-gjuhe-fyese-grate-politikane/>

6. [Zonja “Dy metra e gjërë” përballë zotrisë “dy metra i gjatë” - Editorial](#)

Case study 2

New Technology

In October 2023, a sexually explicit video circulated widely across digital and tabloid media, falsely alleged to feature Albanian media personality Luana Vjollca. The incident prompted a surge in media coverage and online commentary, with her name reportedly generating more digital engagement than that of the Prime Minister, Edi Rama. Vjollca publicly refuted the claims, denouncing the video as fabricated. The case exemplifies how gendered disinformation exploits women's public visibility, leveraging sexualised narratives to provoke outrage, clicks, and reputational harm.

However, her statement did little to quell the public debate, as doubts about the video's authenticity persisted. It wasn't until a group of IT experts weighed in, confirming the video was a product of AI-generated deepfake technology, that the narrative surrounding the scandal began to shift. This revelation steered the conversation into new territory, shifting the focus from morality to the emerging threats posed by deepfake manipulation.

The case involving Luana Vjollca underscores a persistent pattern in Albanian media: the tendency to target women in the public eye through sexualised, sensationalist, and often baseless narratives. Female public figures are frequently associated with scandal, criminality, or moral transgression – narratives that not only lack an evidentiary basis but also reinforce discriminatory stereotypes and undermine gender equality. Such portrayals distort women's public image, delegitimise their professional achievements, and create fertile ground for online hate and misogynistic discourse.

In response to the viral video, Vjollca publicly rejected the allegations, calling the footage a fabrication and condemning the media for attempting to discredit a woman who had built her career through professional dedication. She further attempted to disprove the video's authenticity by pointing to physical inconsistencies between herself and the individual in the clip.

Simultaneously, several media outlets circulated unverified claims suggesting the woman in the video had been paid €100,000 for a single encounter in Dubai – an unsubstantiated claim that exacerbated the scandal and contributed to a wider culture of sexualised disinformation targeting women.⁷

In 2023, a manipulated video falsely depicting Liridona Ademaj, who was tragically murdered by her husband, circulated widely across Albanian and Kosovar media platforms. Using deepfake technology, the video created the illusion that the victim was speaking posthumously by overlaying her face onto another individual's body. Faktoje reported that this was achieved through convolutional neural networks capable of reconstructing and replacing facial features frame by frame. The rapid dissemination of the video across social media exemplifies how digital manipulation can be used to exploit personal tragedy, re-victimising both the individual and their family for the sake of visibility, engagement, and profit.⁸

7. [Aludimet për një video intime që po qarkullon në rrjet, reagon moderatorja Luana Vjollca: E turpshme të hidhni baltë mbi jetën e një vajze - Panorama Plus](#)

8. [Video e fabrikuar e Liridona Ademaj bëhet virale në trojet shqiptare - Faktoje.al](#)

Gendered dynamics in deepfake controversies: the contrasting responses of men and women in Albania

In Albanian cases involving deepfake content, such as those targeting male journalists or even the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, the public response has followed a markedly different trajectory compared to cases involving women. Rather than confronting reputational damage, these male figures, like the renowned journalist Blendi Fevziu⁹ have largely used the incidents to spotlight the broader implications of emerging technologies, positioning themselves as informed commentators rather than victims. By contrast, women like Luana Vjollca have been compelled to engage in explicit self-defence, offering personal evidence to refute defamatory narratives and restore public trust. This asymmetry reveals more than just divergent media strategies; it reflects entrenched gendered norms in the interpretation and social reception of digital manipulation. While men can abstract the issue and shift discourse toward technological awareness, women are subjected to intensified moral scrutiny and reputational vulnerability. The differential impact of deepfakes thus lies not only in the technology itself, but in the cultural frameworks that mediate its consequences.

Case Study 3

Visibility without protection: the politicisation of marginalised communities in Albanian media

The issue of marginalised communities in the Albanian media landscape remains largely subject to the agendas of political actors. In most cases, communities such as LGBTIQ+ are included in media coverage only when it serves specific political interests; interests that often reflect ideological battles rather than genuine concern for the rights and well-being of these communities.

Whenever tensions arise, particularly between the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, right-wing media outlets often generate alarmist narratives, warning that the Socialists are undermining traditional family values by promoting so-called "agendas", a veiled reference to policies supportive of sexual and gender minorities.

Conversely, the Socialist Party has shown equal political pragmatism on these issues, especially during times of political crisis. One widely reported incident documented by the RDN, concerned the Tirana Municipality's decision to host the wedding of two women on its rooftop terrace, where even the children of the couple were publicly exposed. This case illustrates how such communities are often used by political parties as a convenient distraction from more urgent national issues.

Disinformation campaigns targeting transgender women are more recent in nature, according to available research, but noteworthy nonetheless. One particularly concerning example occurred during an episode of *Opinion*, one of Albania's highest-rated television programs. The discussion centred on prostitution and escort services, during which it was claimed that courts faced difficulty in determining whether a transgender woman should be placed in pre-trial detention with men or with women. Importantly, the journalist who delivered this report prefaced it by acknowledging that such stories are often sensationalised and widely circulated simply to generate clicks.

⁹ https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cx_Egw_Nn9I/

Feminism in Albanian media: representation, resistance, and repercussions

The portrayal of feminism in Albanian media continues to reflect deep-rooted societal tensions, particularly around traditional institutions such as the family. While public discourse is gradually evolving, feminism is still frequently framed as being at odds with established social norms and gender expectations.

A recurring pattern in media coverage involves prioritising the voices of individuals known for rigid or controversial positions on gender-related matters. These contributors are often given disproportionate visibility in mainstream programming, including but not limited to, high-audience shows like *E Diell*¹⁰ and *Shqipëria Live* on Top Channel, despite offering views that are frequently predictable and lacking substantive insight. Such platforms tend to amplify reductive and adversarial framings of feminism, contributing to the stigmatisation of feminist discourse.

Conversely, those advocating for gender equality and feminist¹¹ perspectives encounter structural barriers within media ecosystems. Their voices are often marginalised, associated with contentious topics or framed through the lens of social deviance, particularly when linked to LGBTIQ+ rights or broader calls for social justice. Media content featuring feminist perspectives is routinely republished without critical analysis, allowing oversimplified or distorted representations to circulate widely.

Observations from recent media monitoring suggest that opposition to feminism in Albania is often rooted in broader efforts to preserve traditional hierarchies, particularly those that position men as dominant figures in both private and public life. This anti-feminist sentiment frequently overlaps with resistance to LGBTIQ+ rights, indicating a wider ideological commitment to maintaining conventional social structures. Moreover, public discourse in Albania tends to conflate categories such as “woman”, “girl”, “female”, “activist”, and “politician,” complicating efforts to engage critically with feminist issues. The term “feminism” is at times invoked inappropriately, used to frame any critique of women or women's issues, thereby diluting its meaning and obscuring its political significance.

Impact and Implications for Feminist Activism in Albania

Anti-feminist disinformation campaigns have created serious obstacles for feminist activism in Albania, contributing to the shrinking of public space for women. Those who speak out—especially in politics, media, or activism—are frequently subjected to online harassment, vilification, and reputational attacks. This toxic environment has led many women to withdraw from public life or resort to self-censorship to avoid backlash.

These narratives don't just target individuals; they reinforce harmful patriarchal norms that reduce women to their biological and domestic roles. Women are often pressured by the rhetoric of the “biological clock”¹² suggesting their rightful place is at home, not in public debate or leadership. Even when women actively participate in these debates, many acknowledge a deeper truth: that the very institutions meant to support them, especially after becoming mothers, often feel structurally opposed to their autonomy.

10. “E di sa fëmijë mund të bëjë një burrë nëse do kishte...” / Befason Alfred Cako, plas deklaratën tjetër të bujshme për femrat | aktualitet.al

11. <https://www.reporter.al/2021/06/07/levizja-feministe-pas-protestave-kunder-kultures-se-perdhunimit/>

12. <https://albeu.com/lajme/30-vjecaret-quhen-plaka-gjinekologu-shokon-me-deklaraten-video/455317/>

Sources and drivers of anti-feminist narratives in Albania

Anti-feminist disinformation in Albania is driven by a diverse constellation of influential actors— including political figures, religious authorities, self-styled bloggers, media personalities, and online networks— who consistently portray feminism as a threat to national identity and traditional norms. Rather than engaging with gender equality as a legitimate and urgent policy matter, feminist movements are often mischaracterised as ideologically extreme or culturally alien.

Mainstream media further contribute to this climate by prioritising sensationalism over ethical journalism, frequently distorting feminist discourse through polarising and decontextualised reporting. Meanwhile, under-regulated social media platforms amplify misogynistic narratives and facilitate coordinated harassment against women in public life—particularly those in politics, media, and activism—cultivating a hostile environment that discourages civic engagement and reinforces gender-based silencing.

Ultimately, these dynamics reveal a deeper cultural and structural issue: in the Albanian context, there remains a critical need to demystify and contextualise feminism. This is especially urgent in a society where femicide and gender-based violence remain disturbingly prevalent, and where the fundamental goals of the feminist movement are still widely misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented.

When the system fights back: Ola Xama on the legal, political, and gendered barriers to combating disinformation

Journalism in Albania has become a high-risk profession, with truth often carrying a heavy price. In 2024, over 11 cases of aggression against journalists were reported, a number that reflects the growing dangers in the media landscape. Journalists now operate in an “unsafe battleground” where physical attacks, legal harassment, online threats, and economic pressures are commonplace, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship.

Ola Xama, a leading investigative journalist in Albania, has been at the forefront of exposing critical national issues, but her work has often been met with disinformation campaigns. These attacks have deeply impacted her personal and professional life, eroding her credibility through fabricated stories designed to discredit her. Xama reflects on the personal toll, noting the psychological distress these campaigns cause and the collateral damage to her family, especially given her public visibility as a woman in a male-dominated profession.

Disinformation campaigns targeting women journalists are often rooted in sexist rhetoric, focusing on physical appearance or fabricating relationships with male figures to undermine their professional achievements. In Albania, any success by a woman is frequently attributed to male sponsorship, rather than her merit. Xama points out that these tactics have grown more aggressive, with offensive language against female journalists becoming normalised, reflecting a broader societal acceptance of this form of digital misogyny.

Despite facing these challenges, Xama has pursued legal action, filing a civil lawsuit to remove false information, though this has only intensified the attacks against her. She emphasises the difficulties of seeking justice, noting that support from local journalist associations has been lacking, with foreign organisations often stepping in to offer solidarity instead. This highlights a systemic issue: local institutions meant to protect journalists are often compromised, and the government itself is implicated in fueling disinformation campaigns against critical journalists.

Xama also questions the effectiveness of efforts to create a safer online environment for journalists, pointing out that any attempt to regulate harmful content could be weaponised by those in power, including the government, which funds media outlets that attack journalists who threaten its political agenda. In this context, the idea of creating a safer digital space is complicated by the government's involvement in the very campaigns that undermines journalistic integrity.

In Albania, the lack of legal accountability and the pervasive climate of fear discourage journalists from challenging disinformation. While some countries see lawsuits as a deterrent, in Albania, legal action often provokes even greater hostility, as the courts are not feared by those in power. This climate of impunity, combined with the pressure faced by journalists, pushes many towards burnout, stifling independent journalism and critical reporting.



Conclusion

Addressing gender disinformation in the Albanian media landscape

In Albania, the media must challenge the entrenched silences that silence women's voices, particularly in the context of gender-based violence. Irresponsible reporting, or the outright dismissal of survivors, exacerbates collective trauma and perpetuates a culture of silence, discouraging women from speaking out. The media, in this sense, becomes not just a reflection of societal values but an active agent in reinforcing gendered harm.

Operating within a conservative, patriarchal framework, Albanian media often politicises gender issues, sensationalising reports on abuse and placing women who speak out under intense scrutiny. The prevailing double standard holds women to a higher standard of credibility, subjecting them to public shame and reputational damage while providing little recourse for their defence.

A critical factor in perpetuating this disinformation is the financial dynamics of Albanian media. Profit-driven media organisations prioritise sensationalism and clickbait, which fosters a culture of disinformation that disproportionately harms women. This financial imperative is often at odds with the ethical standards that should guide responsible journalism, further entrenching gender-based biases and undermining professional integrity.

For meaningful progress, Albanian media must move beyond passively reinforcing these harmful power structures. It is essential to critically engage with how gender-related stories are sourced, framed, and disseminated. This requires a rigorous examination of editorial policies and a commitment to gender-sensitive reporting practices that prioritise accuracy, dignity, and ethical responsibility over financial gain.

The prevalence of gender disinformation, particularly in the political and public spheres, calls for urgent reform. Disinformation campaigns against women in politics, activism, and public service not only discredit these women but also erode democratic participation and societal trust. To combat this, Albanian media must adopt gender-aware editorial frameworks, informed by feminist critical theory and concepts such as Bourdieu's symbolic violence and Foucault's power discourse. Essential reforms include gender-sensitive journalism training, the establishment of robust ethical codes, and independent oversight mechanisms to hold media outlets accountable.

Ultimately, transforming Albanian media into a platform for inclusive dialogue, critical reflection, and social progress requires a fundamental shift in both institutional practices and societal attitudes toward gender. A media landscape that prioritises intellectual rigour, gender equality, and ethical responsibility will create a space where women's voices are heard, respected, and empowered, thus contributing to a more just and democratic society.





**MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION
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