



Gender-Based Disinformation: *A Tool of Hybrid Warfare*

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Introduction

Global interconnectivity is increasing the need for a robust understanding of hybrid warfare. In an era of great power competition, states leverage technology, propaganda, and deception to advance their foreign policy goals. While scholars and practitioners are beginning to understand how states use disinformation campaigns to complement their geopolitical aims, it is unclear how these hybrid warfare strategies use gender norms to influence different identity groups.

This policy brief combines academic research on state-sponsored disinformation with literature on feminist security studies to provide the DND and CAF with policy recommendations on how to address and combat state-sponsored gender-based disinformation. The policy brief is divided into four sections. First, it introduces the issue of gender-based disinformation as a tool of hybrid warfare. Next, it discusses the dynamics of gender-based disinformation. After highlighting three national security challenges, it presents policy recommendations on how Canada should respond to this form of disinformation.

Background: Introducing Gender-Based Disinformation

The political and economic costs of traditional military conflict have increased the appeal of foreign disinformation campaigns (Ang, Anwar, and Jayakumar 2021). Defined as “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country” (Ang, Anwar and Jayakumar 2021, 3), scholars and practitioners often understand state-sponsored disinformation campaigns as a form of hybrid warfare. When paired with other threats, such as cyber-attacks, economic coercion, or military intimidation, disinformation campaigns can become a particularly harmful tool for foreign adversaries to pursue their political objectives.

Disinformation campaigns have different goals. Some seek to influence elections, helping candidates that align with, or are sympathetic to, foreign adversaries’ geopolitical goals (Sarts 2021). In 2016, major social media companies confirmed that foreign actors were using their platforms to spread disinformation about the U.S.



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presidential election (Bradshaw and Henle 2021). Other campaigns seek to undermine the efficacy and legitimacy of a country's military action. After assuming leadership of NATO's battle group in Latvia, the Canadian military was targeted by a Russian disinformation campaign (Berzina et al. 2019).

There are also disinformation campaigns that seek to divide and polarize the public of foreign countries. These campaigns seek to amplify existing social, cultural, and political fault lines (Morale 2022). They may leverage racial tropes and question the credibility of the democratic process, media outlets and law enforcement. By exacerbating pre-existing social cleavages and amplifying public distrust in public institutions, these disinformation campaigns can distract the public from foreign adversaries' foreign policy objectives (Lanoskza 2019). Low levels of public trust and high levels of polarization also make it harder for a country's leaders to condemn authoritarian regimes when they have trouble at home. Finally, some disinformation campaigns seek to win "the hearts and minds" of foreign publics. For instance, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union spread disinformation, suggesting that the US had deliberately created AIDS (Boghardt 2009). By spreading false or misleading information, a state may try to win the support of foreign publics for its geopolitical goals or decrease support for its adversaries.

Although disinformation campaigns are not new, the ubiquity of social media has increased its reach and potential impact (Linn and Kerr 2019). Whereas disinformation once relied on traditional media instruments, such as the newspaper and radio, modern disinformation uses 'big data' to improve its virality and deepen its impact. During its interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia utilized data crumbs commonly used by internet marketers to 'micro-target' social media users with select disinformation based on their specific psychological and socioeconomic markers, as well as their political beliefs (Sarts 2021). "Bot" accounts are also frequently used in foreign disinformation campaigns. Evidence from the Canadian information space suggests that automated and semiautomated bots amplify human-created disinformation on social media, ensuring that the messages created by foreign agents have a greater reach among target populations (McKelvey and Dubois 2017). It is within this context that gender-disinformation operates.

The Dynamics of Gender-Based Disinformation

Gender-based disinformation is also a tool of state-sponsored hybrid warfare. This form of disinformation is characterized by the spread of narratives that evoke traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity to fulfill political, social, and economic goals (Thakur and Hankerson 2022). As academic research consistently highlights how states use identity groups in their foreign influence operations to reduce inter-group solidarity and polarize foreign publics, Canada must understand how and why its adversaries use gender-based disinformation; it must develop policy to respond to the threat of gender-based disinformation in both an equitable and effective manner.

States frequently use two gender-based disinformation strategies. One strategy draws on gender-based prejudices to undermine political or military actors. Consider how norms of masculinity and femininity may be used to influence elections. If a male candidate aligns more closely with a state's foreign policy goals it may use gendered narratives to discredit a female opponent. A report from the EU Disinformation Lab suggests that gender-based

disinformation often inflates the credibility of male candidates by portraying women as being unqualified, overly emotional, prone to lying, and unintelligent. Analyzing the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Bradshaw and Henle (2021) found that these kinds of narratives were quite pervasive on Twitter accounts linked to foreign state actors. Their comprehensive dataset of tweets tied to the Iranian, Russian, and Venezuelan governments identified Hillary Clinton as the target of over 90% of attacks made against politicians. By appealing to gender norms, America's foreign adversaries minimized Clinton's leadership capacity and undermined her presidential campaign.

Similarly, states can appeal to homophobia in their disinformation campaigns. During Canada's participation in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, Russia began circulating reports and photos of the convicted killer and former Air Force Commander Russel Williams in women's clothing to suggest that the "Canadian military is full of homosexuals and shouldn't be counted on by Latvians" (Brown 2017). This kind of disinformation latches onto pre-existing homophobic beliefs and suggests that people like Russel Williams are not uncommon in the CAF. By making local populations feel unsafe in the presence of deployed Canadian troops, NATO's foreign adversaries can further undermine support for international military campaigns.

Relatedly, gender-based disinformation can highlight the hypocrisy of their adversary's gendered narratives. Western states often use the gender-based narrative of "saving women and children" to justify military deployment or intervention (Van Schaack 2011). Gender-based disinformation often seeks to engage with these narratives to delegitimize military intervention. In 2017, after NATO's Enhanced Force Presence in the Baltics, Russian media outlets began spreading disinformation about German troops sexually assaulting girls in Lithuania (Berzina et al. 2019, 44). Although reports of sexual assault must be taken seriously, German intelligence agencies found that there was no reported victim and that the story was part of a fictitious Russian disinformation campaign designed to portray NATO forces as hypocritical.¹

Drawing on pre-existing beliefs through disinformation may also create alliances between a state and the populations of its foreign adversaries. Indeed, gender-based disinformation may seek to increase support from the foreign public for a country's geopolitical agenda. Russia has framed its invasion of Ukraine as a conflict "on gender order" (Kratochvil and O'Sullivan, 2023). In doing so, it has sought international support by presenting itself as the champion of "traditional values." Since its invasion in 2022, scholars analyzing the Kremlin-backed media outlets have noted the increasing salience of disinformation about feminism and gender equality (Kuzmenko and Kompantesva 2023). For instance, several Russian-backed media outlets have spread the idea that feminism is incompatible with Islam (Bradshaw and Helne 2021). Other stories have suggested that "totalitarian feminism" is overtaking Europe. These narratives suggest that Europe is a "dystopia of sexual perversion" with gender-confused children. The core message in this disinformation is that feminism has torn apart families; Russia's invasion of Ukraine is part of its greater ambition to restore Christian values, characterized by the heterosexual family with traditionally masculine and feminine gender roles (Edenborg 2022, 498). By highlighting these two distinct views of gender, Russia seeks to build a conservative alliance with international alliances to generate support, or at least indifference, toward its revisionist geopolitical agenda.

Segmentation is another commonly used gender-based disinformation strategy. Segmentation seeks to polarize and divide societies by separating distinct groups of people and fragmenting pre-existing groups by leveraging internal divisions. Evidence suggests that Russian-backed accounts have spread narratives that attack feminists via Twitter (X). For instance, one tweet read, “Feminists are more likely to rely on petty insults instead of giving valid arguments” (Bradshaw and Helene 2021, 4604). Other tweets linked to Russia presented feminists as “man-hating” ideologues who sought to suppress male rights. These narratives misrepresent feminism and exacerbate pre-existing divisions between feminists and right-wing activists. These narratives seek to exacerbate pre-existing divisions between feminists and non-feminists.

Disinformation campaigns also seek to fragment the feminist movement. State-sponsored disinformation frequently co-opts intersectional critiques of the feminist movement. Tweets linked back to Russia’s disinformation unit reveal how Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) poses as feminists on Twitter, critiquing the movement for failing to represent black feminists, being too liberal to represent conservative feminists, and being biased against poor feminists (Bradshaw and Henle 2021, 4606).

As these examples demonstrate, gender-based disinformation is an important tool that Canada’s adversaries use to promote their foreign policy objectives. Indeed, Russian gender-based disinformation has sought to influence elections, delegitimize NATO operations, polarize foreign publics, and increase support for its geopolitical aims.

National Security Implications

Canada’s foreign adversaries use gender-based disinformation because of its low cost and its potential to cause significant public harm to Canada and its allies. Gender-based disinformation threatens Canada’s national security in three ways. First, gender-based disinformation is a pernicious tool of foreign interference. Because Canada is a strong promoter of democracy and human rights, it is a target for gender-based disinformation. Threat actors can use disinformation to provoke social media users, change voters’ opinions, and impact the reputation of certain candidates in ways that serve their interests. As this policy brief has demonstrated, gender-based disinformation is used to achieve these ends. It is particularly detrimental because it may resonate with certain voters. Indeed, according to IPSOS, one in five men in Canada believe “feminism does more harm than good,” and one in three Canadian men believe that masculinity is under threat (IPSOS 2022). Though more research is required to understand the extent to which gender-based disinformation is prevalent in the Canadian context, Canada remains vulnerable to this form of foreign interference.

Beyond fostering greater social division, gender-based disinformation can undermine women’s impact and participation in Canadian democracy. Given that gender-based disinformation frequently presents women in politics as emotional, irrational, and poor leaders, the extent to which gender-based disinformation resonates with Canada’s public may limit the success of women in politics.

Finally, gender-based disinformation threatens to weaken the military defensive posture of Canada and its allies. While the extent to which foreign state actors manufacture allegations of sexual misconduct in efforts to undermine the legitimacy of military operations is

unknown, empirical evidence suggests that it is a common tool employed by Canada's adversaries to delegitimize NATO operations. Gender-based disinformation works when it is plausible and grounded in "seeds" of the truth. The CAF's culture crisis provides ammunition that Canada's foreign adversaries can use to undermine public trust in the Canadian Armed Forces. Canada's foreign adversaries may selectively report on allegations of sexual misconduct and exploitation or fabricate stories of sexual misconduct that are particularly believable given the number of valid sexual assault allegations against CAF members. The best way to defend against foreign actors instrumentalizing allegations of sexual violence is to end the culture of impunity in the CAF, create robust external reporting mechanisms for victims of sexual misconduct, and foster an environment in which victims feel comfortable reporting cases of assault without fear of formal or informal repercussions. In short, gender-based disinformation may weaken the defensive posture of Canada and its allies by undermining support for NATO operations. These narratives might be less effective if the CAF were a safer place for women.

Policy Recommendations

A review of Canada's disinformation policies suggests that it is ill-prepared to address state-sponsored disinformation of any kind. While NATO's general policies are more robust, their disinformation policies are generally gender-blind, meaning that neither Canada nor NATO are prepared to respond to the threat posed by gender-based disinformation. To better combat gender-based disinformation, Canada should:

1. Communicate to the Canadian public that gender-based disinformation is used by foreign actors to advance their geopolitical aims. Because gender-based disinformation targets civilians, civilians must be aware of its use and effects. Gendered disinformation is often easy to accept because it reaffirms existing gender norms and opinions. Regardless of whether disinformation is debunked, people seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs. The best way to combat gender-based disinformation is to communicate to civilians how, when, and why Canada's adversaries use it. Under the guidance of DND, Public Safety Canada should update their website on foreign interference and disinformation to include data on how foreign actors use gender-based disinformation.
2. Fund further research on gender-based disinformation. This policy brief has summarized the key findings from the academic literature on hybrid warfare and feminist security studies. Although this brief has sought to summarize the implications of gender-based disinformation on Canada's national security, there is little empirical evidence that uses primary data from the Canadian information space to study disinformation and gendered narratives in the Canadian context. The DND should complement pre-existing programs such as the Digital Citizen Initiative to fund academic research on gender-based disinformation in Canada.
3. In their efforts to combat gender-based disinformation, DND should collaborate with feminist civil society organizations to ensure that disinformation policies serve the needs of Canadian civilians and correspond to the narratives used by Canada's foreign adversaries.

4. Acknowledge the role gender narratives play in state-sponsored disinformation strategies. The DND should regularly apply a gender-based analysis to disinformation. Using the pre-existing GBA+ framework while discussing disinformation is the first starting point. While GBA+ training is standard practice in the CAF, further training should include modules on gender-based disinformation and its implications for CAF readiness.

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Endnotes

- 1 Within the context of the CAF's cultural crisis, reports of sexual assault perpetrated by CAF members may be particularly believable. Sexual assault and misconduct within the CAF only benefit Canada's foreign adversaries. As reports of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian soldiers in Ukraine spread, Russia can highlight stories of sexual misconduct by Canadian Forces to claim that even Western countries with purportedly feminist foreign policies have members of their armed forces who commit acts of sexual violence. Canada must take reports of sexual assault and misconduct in the CAF seriously and end impunity.