



Violence Against Women in Politics as an Erosion of Democracy

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Abstract

This article examines violence against women in politics (VAWP) as a significant form of democratic erosion, focusing particularly on the role of gendered disinformation and digital harassment in undermining women's political participation. It argues that democracy cannot be fully realized while women continue to face systemic exclusion, intimidation, and attacks designed to silence their participation in public life. Drawing on recent scholarship and contemporary examples from Spain—including cases involving Irene Montero, Rita Maestre, and Isabel Díaz Ayuso—the study analyzes how sexist disinformation, sexualization, fake images, and online harassment are used to undermine women's credibility and discourage their political engagement. The article also considers the role of social media platforms and emerging technologies such as deepfakes in amplifying these attacks. Ultimately, it argues that combating violence and disinformation against women is essential for protecting democratic institutions, ensuring equal political representation, and strengthening inclusive citizenship.

Keywords: violence; social media; women in politics; online harassment; Spain

Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental principle for strengthening democracy, as it guarantees the equitable participation of all citizens in political, economic, and social spheres. Various international organizations and academic literature maintain that a full democracy cannot exist while forms of gender-based discrimination and exclusion persist (Andersen, 2023; Piconne, 2017; Post, 2006). Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a necessary condition for achieving peaceful, sustainable, and democratic societies. Therefore, promoting policies of equality, equitable access to education, and participation in decision-making strengthens democratic legitimacy and fosters a more just and inclusive citizenry. However, various forms of violence against women in politics seriously threaten equal participation and severely erode democracy. Violence against women in politics constitutes a form of democratic erosion because it limits the full exercise of political rights and restricts equal representation in decision-making spaces. Mona Lena Krook (2017) argues that violence against women in politics (VAWP) is a global phenomenon that threatens democracy by restricting women's participation as candidates, voters, activists, and leaders. The author explains that women in politics experience physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and symbolic violence designed to discourage their involvement in public life and reinforce traditional gender roles. Krook emphasizes that these attacks undermine democratic institutions because they silence women's voices, weaken political representation, and violate fundamental human rights and equality principles. The author concludes that addressing violence against women in politics is essential for building inclusive and robust democracies.

Gender disinformation refers to false information directed through social media platforms against specific individuals based on their gender, often perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices; it is a form of online violence primarily directed against women. Jankowicz et al. (2021) provide this definition: "A subset of online gendered

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abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malicious intent, and coordination.” (2021, p. 1). This type of disinformation is particularly insidious when directed against women in the public sphere, including politicians, journalists, or activists, with the intention of discrediting and undermining their credibility (Di Meco and Wilfore, 2021; Mocerri, 2021). In addition to posing a danger to democratic participation, some authors consider this phenomenon a serious security risk, as in some cases it incites violence (Di Meco and Wilfore, 2021; Blatnik, 2023).

Social media platforms play a significant role in the spread of gender disinformation, acting as amplifiers of this harmful content because their business model favors the promotion of the most eye-catching content, which generates the most attention and data. Four key factors contribute to this: the prioritization of harmful content on the platforms, the massive and real-time dissemination of this content, the limited or flawed moderation of such content, often protected by anonymity, and the creation of ideological bubbles (Gutiérrez, 2024). Platform algorithms tend to favor content that generates the most attention, regardless of its veracity or social impact. This often results in the amplification of sensationalist or controversial information, including gender disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Social media platforms enable the instant and large-scale dissemination of information, making it easy for disinformation to spread rapidly before it can be verified or refuted. Many platforms lack effective moderation systems to identify and remove harmful content; moreover, online anonymity can encourage toxic behaviors without consequences for the perpetrators (Gillespie, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Furthermore, recommendation algorithms tend to expose users to content that reinforces their existing beliefs, creating echo chambers that can amplify misinformation and gender biases (Pariser, 2011).

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but the ease of its creation and massive, real-time dissemination on online platforms has transformed it into a global problem, as it is used as a weapon to manipulate beliefs, emotions, and opinions for political, military, or commercial purposes. The use of deepfake technology for disinformation, which can create realistic but fabricated audiovisual content using artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, exacerbates this problem (Cerdán Martínez and Padilla Castillo, 2019). Deepfakes are versatile AI applications that can be used positively in content creation; however, the potential for their misuse has been increasing. The rise of deepfake technology represents a real threat to participatory citizenship, primarily through the creation of synthetic audiovisual media for identity theft, gender disinformation, and hate speech.

María Pilar Rodríguez, Miren Gutiérrez and María J. Pando (2026) affirm that Kamala Harris serves as a primary example of gendered disinformation, where false or misleading narratives are used to discredit female leaders and deter them from public life. The disinformation directed at Harris includes sexist attacks and hypersexualization, which aim to undermine her professional authority by reducing her to

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a sexual object or suggesting she reached her position through inappropriate means. Additionally, she has faced coordinated accusations of being politically extremist or incapable, with campaigns spreading rumors about a lack of preparation or professional experience to question her competence. Attacks also include false associations with controversial figures to damage her integrity and judgment. These orchestrated efforts, spread through various social media platforms, create a hostile environment that can lead to personal discredit and self-censorship, ultimately discouraging other women from participating in the political sphere.

Cases in Spain

While disinformation and VAWP are frequently aimed at feminist and left-leaning women, research confirms that these issues negatively affect all women. For example, in Spain, several recent cases confirm that disinformation and VAWP are frequently used against women in politics. The article titled "She Looks Like She'd Be a Filthy Pig in Bed": Online Misogyny and Denigration of Women Politicians" (Lacalle et al., 2025) summarizes the main results of a study about the disparagement of women politicians in Spain. The thematic analysis of 1,245 comments spontaneously posted on the Burbuja.info forum reveals that the commenters feel entitled to humiliate and disparage the eight female politicians embattled by the hate speech posts. While the main targets of this form of harassment have been women representatives of left-wing parties, the focus of the disparaging attacks has been the female body.

Irene Montero is a representative case. She is a prominent Spanish politician and a key figure in the Podemos party. She currently serves as a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and is the Vice-Chair of The Left group in the European Parliament. She was Minister of Equality (2020–2023), and during her tenure, she championed several high-profile and often controversial legislative initiatives, including the "Trans Law" (expanding LGBTQ+ rights) and the "Only Yes Means Yes" Law (centering consent in sexual assault cases). Let these three instances serve as an example of the many others that Montero has suffered.

¹

Some of the ideas presented in that recent article are included here

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1. In 2022, A Facebook post in July shows an image of Irene Montero, Ione Belarra, and Isabel Serra with their breasts exposed and messages written on their bodies such as "my breasts are not your business" and "the breast that offends is the one that is not for sale." The image was fake .



2. In 2023, in a Facebook post in April she was accused of consuming cocaine. The "white line" you see on the table is not cocaine, but the zipper pull of a toiletry bag. Nevertheless, disinformation spread and the image appeared in X with the same meaning.



2

All examples of Irene Montero and the images are taken from:

<https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20231120/bulos-falsedades-sobre-irene-montero/2461390.shtml#:~:text=VERIFICARTVE-,No%20son%20Montero%2C%20Belarra%20y%20Serra%20ense%C3%B1ando%20los%20pechos%2C%20es%20un%20montaje,-%22Y%20pensar%20que>

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3. In many cases, Montero has been accused of making statements that were simply not true. They include, for instance, the information provided on March 2021, when users on X circulated an image of the Minister of Equality holding a digital clock, accompanied by the headline: "Irene Montero calls Saturday's time change a sexist act." The image also included a quote attributing to Montero: "Heteropatriarchy is robbing women of an hour of rest." It was false.



There are many other examples, but Montero's case is far from an exception. In March of 2026, Rita Maestre, spokesperson for Más Madrid in the Madrid City Council, has reported that she has been suffering harassment for about a year after someone published her address online in anonymous ads offering sexual services. In a message posted on social media, Maestre explains that for months men have been coming to her home, ringing the doorbell or knocking on the door, sometimes at night and in some cases intoxicated, after having obtained her address through online channels. The councilwoman has linked what happened to a form of digital violence and has indicated that it is political harassment directed against her "for being a woman, for being left-wing and for being a feminist."

While it is true that left-wing female politicians and those who define themselves as feminists suffer the most attacks, other female politicians such as Isabel Díaz Ayuso have seen their bodies sexualized with fake images and have been attributed statements that they either did not make, or that have been manipulated and distorted. She is a prominent Spanish politician from the conservative People's Party (PP), serving as the President of the Community of Madrid since 2019

³

<https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20260305/rita-maestre-denuncia-sufrir-acoso-difundirse-direccion-anuncios-sexuales-internet/16966751.shtml>

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While male politicians simply ignore these facts, or, even worse, in some cases promote them, Catalan politician Gabriel Rufián has repeatedly denounced the sexualized attacks suffered by female politicians and has compared the attacks he himself suffers for being a Catalan nationalist and leftist with those directed at women, highlighting the fact that in his case there has never been explicit sexualization.

Conclusion

The systematic targeting of women in the public sphere through violence and disinformation represents a severe threat to the stability and legitimacy of modern governance. Gender equality serves as a cornerstone of democratic strength, ensuring that all citizens can participate equitably in the social and political life of their nations. However, as various international organizations and academic scholars have noted, a full democracy is impossible to achieve as long as gender-based exclusion and discrimination persist. Violence against women in politics (VAWP) acts as a primary driver of democratic erosion by restricting the exercise of political rights and limiting equal representation in decision-making spaces. This global phenomenon manifests as physical, psychological, sexual, and symbolic violence specifically designed to discourage women's involvement in public life while reinforcing restrictive, traditional gender roles.

A particularly insidious dimension of this hostility is gendered disinformation, which utilizes false or misleading narratives to deter women from participating in the public sphere. Characterized by coordination, falsity, and malicious intent, these campaigns aim to discredit women by attacking their professional authority through hyper-sexualization and sexist narratives. High-profile leaders such as Kamala Harris serve as primary examples of this tactic, facing coordinated efforts to

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In Spain, the prevalence of online misogyny and the denigration of female politicians confirm that these issues negatively affect women across the political spectrum. The social impact of these coordinated attacks is profound, as social media platforms often act as amplifiers for harmful content due to business models that prioritize high-engagement, sensationalist data over veracity. This environment fosters ideological bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing biases and amplify gendered misinformation. Beyond the immediate psychological harm to individual victims, these phenomena represent a serious national security risk by inciting physical violence and manipulating public opinion for political or commercial gain. Ultimately, addressing violence and disinformation against women is not merely a matter of human rights; it is a fundamental requirement for building robust, inclusive, and peaceful democratic societies.

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