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Online Gendered Disinformation: cross-country policy brief (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy)

*A project conducted within the Gender-Ed Coalition project,
and financed by Creative Europe CREA-MIL*

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Objectives of the policy brief

The purpose of the report is to identify the “good practices” that exist within the four European partners (Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy) on the topic of online gendered disinformation as a threat to achieving inclusive environments on social media platforms (and other media), with a high Media and Information Literacy (MIL) component. The data gathered will hopefully contribute to a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between the EU countries competence frameworks and their legitimising values, especially in terms of the various actors involved in the process. Four major areas are considered that might yield pertinent answers: 1/the types of projects (scale, target public), 2/ the competences frameworks (standard setting tools, themes, legitimising values), 3/ the capacity-building forces and instruments (public policies, funding, evaluation) and 4/ the major stakeholders (media, networks).

The main objective was to gain some insights of what is currently being undertaken, in the absence of any major mapping exercise to survey the field of gender disinformation in Europe, though it does not aim at covering all countries and all initiatives.

The report provides an overview of the main trends, coming out of a selection of 20 featured projects across the partner countries (5 projects per country). The projects were identified through a questionnaire elaborated in close cooperation with the partners and completed by the national experts who are part of Gender-Ed Coalition. The main dimensions of the questionnaire aimed at identifying the types of projects and their scale, the competence frameworks and their legitimising values and

The analysis of “good practices” as a case-study approach was adopted as it is the most likely to yield concrete results in the case of issues like MIL or Gender education that are optional and cross-cutting, with no baselines for evaluating them.

For the purpose of this study, “good practices” are defined as projects involving strategies and/or activities that have proven to be effective, sustainable and/or transferable, relying on resources and materials that have been shared and tested, with desired results, to be found via a dedicated website, to ensure that public awareness exists about them and that they are not a “one-shot” experiment (Frau-Meigs et al, 2019). They therefore reflect what is visible, with an online display, due to the focus on gendered disinformation via social media; they do not necessarily show the full range of existing strategies and actors

themes, the capacity-building forces and the main stakeholders and their networks. The experts were also asked to provide information about their national context (historical, legal and policy milestones about gender and disinformation) as well as to provide a set of recommendations coming out of their analysis, to foster awareness and promote change in the general appreciation of online gendered disinformation

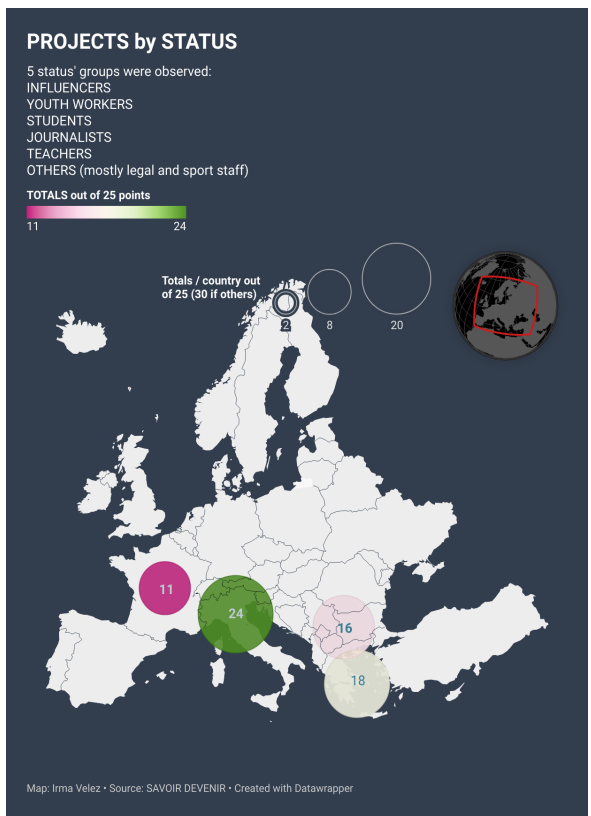
Key findings

In spite of the variety of projects and of national contexts, some strong trends emerge from the cross-country analysis, along the four dimensions considered, when applied to gendered disinformation.

1/ the types of projects (category, scale, target public)

Out of the 20 cases examined, the most common category of projects is “resources” (15) by far, followed by “end-user engagement” (9). These two together show the focus on providing front-line support to all kinds of citizens, including seniors. Most projects targeted youth, in spite of the lack of curricular base, with much less emphasis on younger children. The status of the main professionals involved is teachers, journalists and youth workers, with a surprising lagging behind of influencers. All projects (20) address women and most of them also target men (16 out of 20). Less than a third (6 out of 20) address as well either LGBTQI and/or nonbinary public.

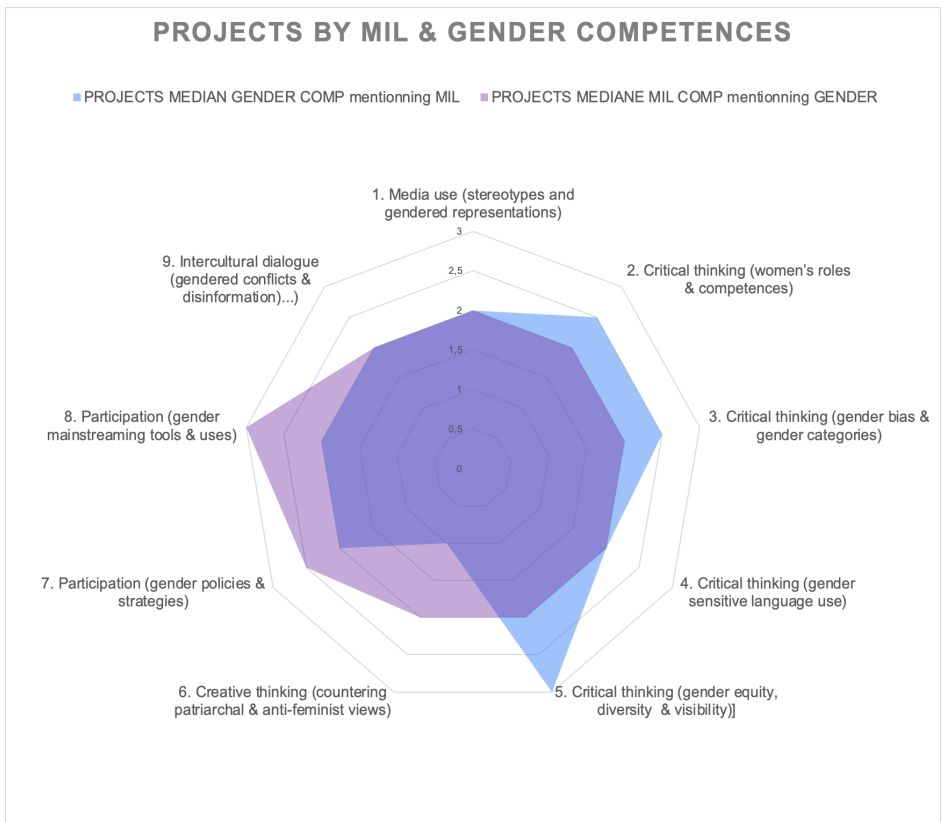
The projects correspond to significant good practices and show a variety of configurations across initiatives and across countries, that confirm the complexity of the issue of gendered disinformation and the diversity of correlated issues (health, education and social justice). A lot of projects showed a lot of



overlapping categories which points to their complexity. The combination of categories is very heterogeneous across projects showing no consensus nor preferred way to lead projects. It may point to a dissipation of energy and a lack of clarity (about objectives, dissemination purposes, ...).

2/ the competences frameworks (standard setting tools, themes, legitimising values)

No specific reference to competence frameworks was mentioned in the 20 projects examined. They are not clearly visible neither in the descriptions of the projects nor in the

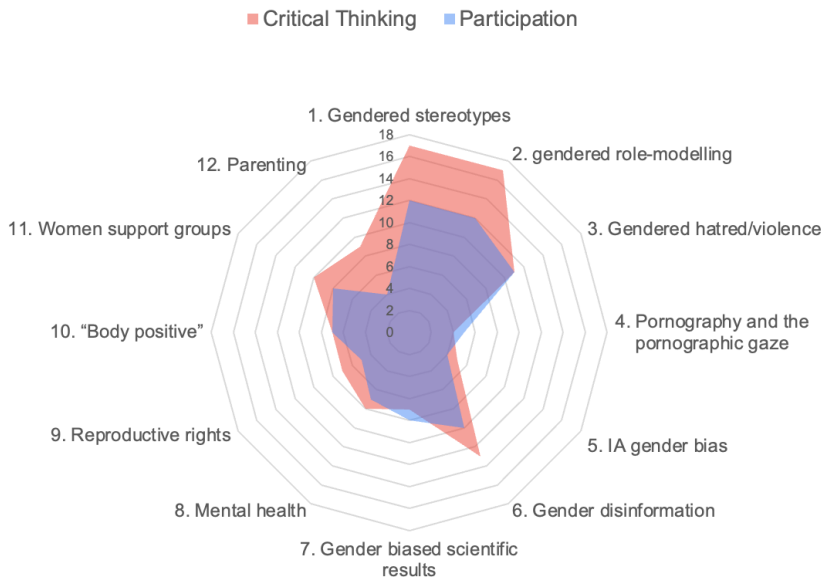


training methods described. The specific competences targeted were mentioned without sustaining rationale, and some had to be inferred and left to the discretion of the experts. Accordingly, no existing curriculum either in MIL or in Gender education was mentioned in projects directed at schools.

“Participation” was the leading competence for MIL-based projects whereas “Critical thinking” was the leading competence for Gender education-based projects. The most significant projects also feature “Intercultural dialogue”, including competences around challenging hate speech and online disinformation.

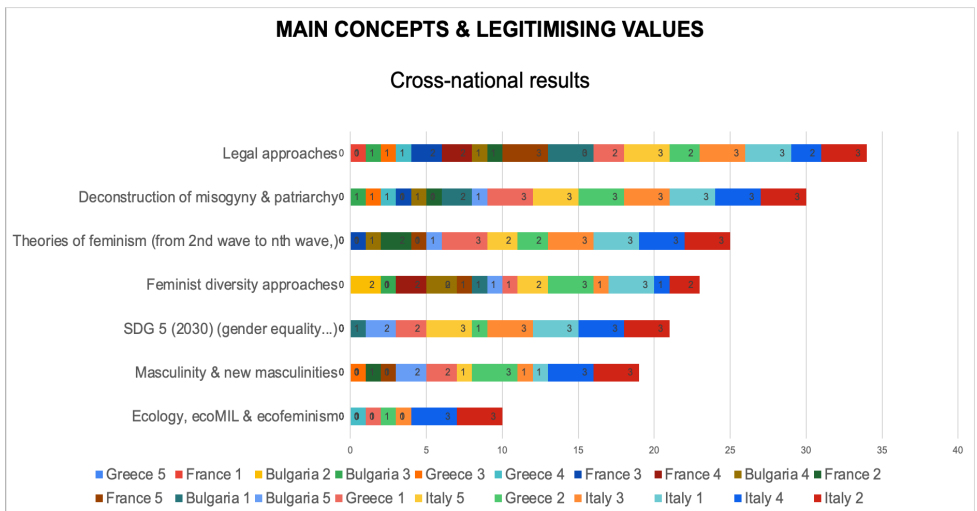
THEMES BY CRITICAL THINKING & PARTICIPATION

CROSS-NATIONAL RESULTS



The main disinformation related themes most likely to be treated in the projects were “Gendered role-modelling”, “Gendered stereotypes”, “Gendered hatred/Violence” and “Gendered disinformation”. The themes least likely to be treated in the projects were: “Pornography and the pornographic gaze”, “Reproductive rights” and “AI gender bias “. When crossing critical thinking and participation by themes there is a significant amount of overlap between MIL projects and Gender education projects, which points to a potential blended development along the most outstanding competences.

As for legitimising values, the two leading categories are “Legal approaches” and “Deconstruction of misogyny and patriarchy”. The least mentioned categories are “Masculinity and new masculinities” and “Ecology & ecofeminism”. The legitimising values show some alignment with the dominant themes, in particular “gender-role modelling” and “misogyny and patriarchy”. The “legitimising values” show a measure of discrepancy with competences, in particular due to the weakness of “creative thinking (countering patriarchal and anti-feminist views)”.

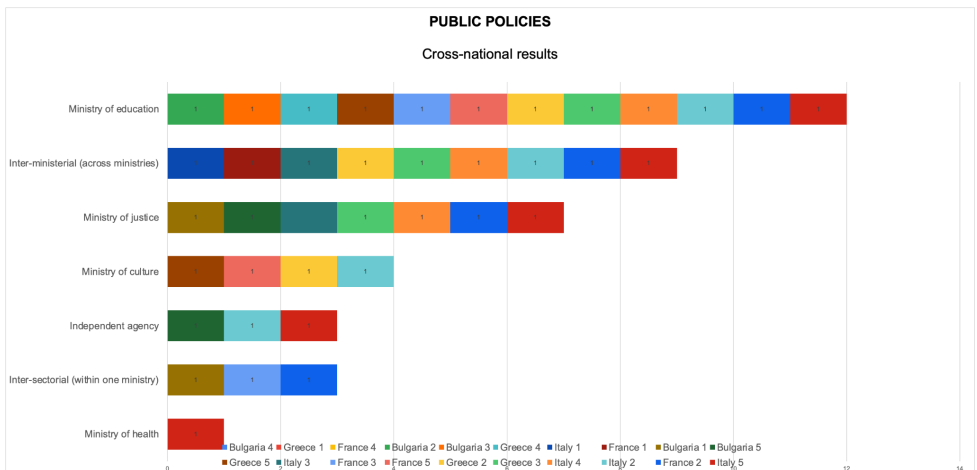


Both Gender Education and MIL are weak in terms of ideological and theoretical explanations and justifications; even if they are underlying, they are not made visible and are covered by “legal” terms. The most important Gender competences to deal with media and disinformation (critical thinking in its three dimensions (5/ gender equity, diversity & visibility, 3/ gender bias & gender categories & 2/ roles & competences) seem to reflect

a 1960s second wave feminism approach that can be seen as a successful appropriation of women’s rights in society and deconstruction of systemic misogyny. However, the absence of creative thinking (“countering patriarchy and anti-feminist views”) points to a weakness across all projects. It shows the mass and social media are not being used to disenfranchise women fully and their structurally biased production system and functioning are not fully deconstructed and criticised. Feminism and the role of media seems a-historical, with no or little mention of feminist waves and the link to media use (and structural impact on each new wave). This also is reflected in the technology blind (no study of AI bias for instance).

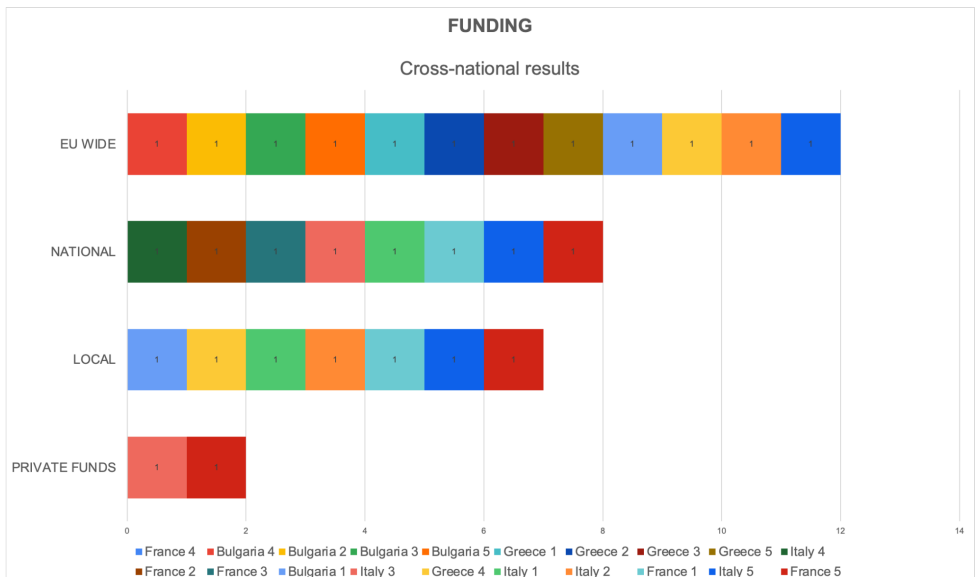
3/ the capacity-building forces and instruments (public policies, funding, evaluation)

The capacity-building forces tend to rely on EU directives and policies. The public policies in presence tend to be dominated by the sector of education (12 out of 20 projects) and inter-ministerial entities (across several ministries, 9 out of 20 projects). The least present public policy relates to health (1 out of 20 projects) while justice (7) and culture (4) lag behind. Most projects deal with more than 2 policy sectors (and inter-sectoral entities) which calls for complex project management and accountability. This is congruent with the multistakeholder results, that show a mix of heterogeneous actors and entities.



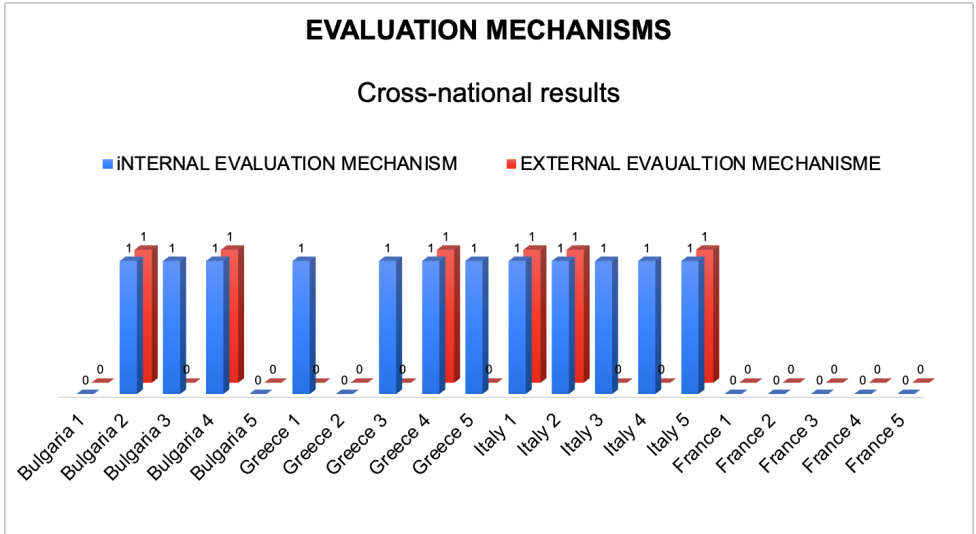
The relative absence of the ministry of culture is not congruent with the role of media as engaged stakeholders and shows a lack of leadership, concern and shared vision between the public and private media sector. Considering the importance of fighting gender-based violence, the relative presence of the ministry of justice shows some coherence with the project competences that deal with participation (gender mainstreaming tools and uses) and critical thinking (gender equity, diversity and visibility). When justice is mobilised, the projects seem to be boosted by the legal frameworks. However, the relative presence of justice shows a discrepancy as some main themes like “body positive”, “SDGs and human rights “are weakly represented and are not embedded in the questions carried by justice and health.

EU policies also impact more than half of the projects’ funding (12) and their transposition at national level (almost half of the projects-8). This points to the strength of the EU for structuring projects, especially in terms of equality between men/women, to the potential detriment of other issues, including fighting online gendered disinformation. But this also can create dependency and have a levelling impact on national and local projects.



Project evaluation reflects a similar trend. Two thirds of the projects are internally evaluated (12) vs. one third externally evaluated only. There is an overlap of external and internal evaluation, which points at attempts to strengthen evaluation and accountability

(as required by the EU). About a third of the projects (8) are not evaluated at all, which is preoccupying in terms of lack of transparency at public level and lack of proven effective impact.

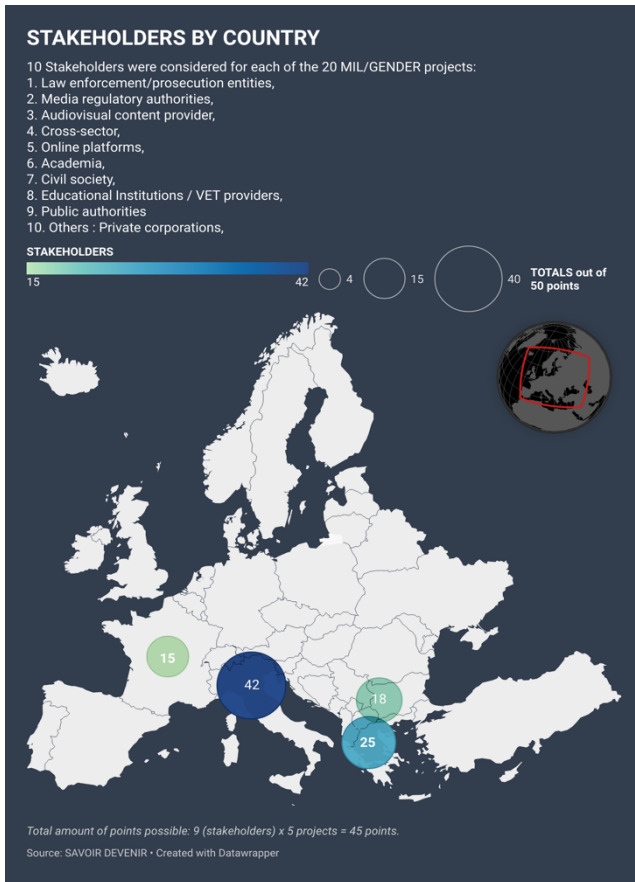


4/ the major stakeholders (sectors, networks, media)

Public authorities and educational institutions are the leading stakeholders, followed by civil society and academia. Media (via Online platforms, Audiovisual content provider, Media regulatory authorities) are moderately engaged (less than half of the projects, 8 and 9 out of 20). Most projects are driven by institutions and policies and present a cross-sector framework. Most projects are heavily multi stakeholder and engage very heterogeneous actors and entities, whose mission is not necessarily MIL or Gender education. Media engagement is very mixed between mass and social media, regular authorities and content providers.

Among the networks, NGOs are present in more than two thirds of the projects (13) and public supported networks are present in almost two thirds of the projects (11). This reflects the dual significance of “good practices”, that can be both bottom-up (civil society) and top-down (public service entities). The private sector is absent but could be acting via foundations and NGOs for some specific projects. Additionally, most projects (13) rely on more than 2 networks and the strong presence of NGOs hints at an international (EU)

dimension of a lot of projects, with potential transfer of practices and resources. These types of actors do not necessarily have a statutory responsibility or mission on MIL or Gender education but still have a motivation for the issue.



Concerning social media, about half of the projects (11) use or target 2 to -4 types of social media, whereas 4 projects do not use nor target any type of media, outside their website. The type of social media use seems to correspond to the target public age, with the prominence of Facebook (for adults and seniors) followed by Instagram and Tiktok (more teen oriented). Most projects show a strong reliance on their websites for disseminating information. There is clearly a huge gap between the subject matter of gender disinformation, the social media impacted by or fostering it and their use or target by most projects.

Social media networks seem mostly used to inform and disseminate rather than being targeted as a source of gender disinformation. This may reflect a MIL tendency to protect users (especially youth) by alerting to risks without exposing youth to social media (due to digital majority). This confirms the results that show the hiatus between participation and critical thinking in MIL and gender education projects.

Public policy recommendations

REC#1 – Establish a much-needed baseline for evaluating projects and competence frameworks, to be used by all EU member states.

REC#2 – Develop and implement a comprehensive MIL and gender competence framework, as the basis of specialised qualification programs for professionals.

REC#3 – Produce a Combinatorial Guide for Gender and MIL education as a means of promoting gender equality and democracy trans-sectionally, in particular for public officials in gender equality and anti-discrimination bodies.

REC#4 – Increase awareness and training in online gender disinformation, clearly detailing descriptors and expected outcomes, in particular via Media Literacy and/or Gender education.

REC#5 – Implement effective evaluation by connecting academia and independent research with project management in the early design of the initiatives.

REC#6 – Provide funding, training, access to data and tools and knowledge sharing aimed at improving research and fact-checking capacities.

REC#7 – Enhance Policy Implementation, so as to bridge the gap between civil society's proactive efforts and the delayed and inadequate responses from public authorities.

REC#8 – Support trans-national research to collect data and information through appropriate monitoring systems and tools (like the Gender-Ed Coalition mapping tool) to inform and inspire other policy makers and key stakeholders

Conclusions

These results point to some strengths and weaknesses of the current situation and possible solutions. While notable progress has been made in addressing gender biases and stereotypes through MIL initiatives across the four partner countries, there remain critical areas that require further attention. The issue of online “gendered disinformation” is not currently the focus of project managers or policymakers. When it is mentioned, it is mostly from within the perspective of other themes and values (such as gender stereotyping, gender-based violence, gender equality). Gendered disinformation is not addressed as a standalone topic, which dilutes any attempt at building a case for it. Besides, the actors and networks that support the projects analysed do not have gendered disinformation as their major mission and seem to tackle it within their larger societal agenda.

These results are all the more preoccupying as they only partly help build resilience among the citizens in the countries analysed. They confirm political, legal and educational gaps to address the potential damages of online gendered disinformation. This report points to the risk of lack of confidence in public policies and tools put in place, if no training of decision makers and policy officers is developed in sectors such as justice, police and health.

These results point to possible solutions. The integration of MIL and Gender literacy in educational curricula of EU member states is crucial. This should afford young people and adults with critical thinking processes to build resilience to the social media messages, image-based sexual abuse, online gender-based violence and gender stereotyping. Developing, streamlining and implementing a gendered disinformation competence framework that combines MIL and gender education characteristics should become a policy priority. Besides this comprehensive framework, enhanced policy implementation, improved transparency in evaluation, and stronger intersectoral partnerships are essential to measure the projects’ impact and advancing these efforts and achieving lasting gender equality. Without concerted efforts of both public and private actors to make such training programs readily available, society at large will be an easy target for disinformation, propaganda, and “fake news”.

Annex 1: transnational report <https://www.genderedcoalition.net/cross-country-report>

Annex 2: national reports <https://www.genderedcoalition.net/countryreports>

Annex 3: Online Mapping of Gender-Ed Coalition Project

<https://www.genderedcoalition.net/goodpracticesmapping>