

Gendered Disinformation in Philippine Politics

A brief report on the harmful narratives affecting Filipino women's social and political participation

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INTRODUCTION

“Timid women shouldn’t challenge men. They should be intelligent but they should keep it to themselves or limit their teachings to the bedroom.”

On the campaign trail before the historic 1986 presidential election, Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was quoted as [saying the above](#) about Corazon Aquino. His campaign was littered with sexist remarks – some of which were said by his wife Imelda, the then governor of Metro Manila. But, sexist remarks were not the only way he attacked his opponent.

Just days before the election, both Marcos Sr. and Aquino appeared in two separate interviews on [ABC News Nightline](#). In this, Aquino told journalist Ted Koppel:

“What they are doing to me now is that they . . . use some of my video shots and they impose it on their [Marcos’ campaign] commercials and then they have somebody pretending to be me and you know, talking as if it were Cory Aquino and there’s nothing I can do about it because media is . . . well, all of television is under the control of Mr. Marcos.”

Nearly 40 years later and after two female presidents, including Aquino, such sexist statements and media-based attacks are still commonplace within the Filipino political arena. This time, however, there is a key difference that has upended the political world and amplified these tactics, sometimes for free: the internet. In this age of disinformation, anyone with an internet connection and device has the ability to target others with a large, unprecedented set of tools that can make or break a politician’s career and even their personal lives.

It just so happens that the people most affected by this are female leaders and other women caught in the cross-fire of political battles.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same due to a key difference. According to the [United Nations \(UN\)](#), *misinformation* is an “accidental spread of inaccurate information” whereas *disinformation* is inaccurate and spread to *intentionally* deceive others to cause serious harm. Gendered disinformation is a type of disinformation and a subset of online gender-based violence that specifically targets women and gender-diverse individuals.

Gendered disinformation about female politicians and other politically vocal women is often based on misleading information, specifically myths about women that tap into old, preconceived notions about gender, politics and who has the right to make decisions. These stereotypical myths are far from the truth and yet they can easily destroy women's reputations and hinder their participation from politics. In the following sections we will outline four myths often used to propagate gendered disinformation.



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These are some of the most wide-spread myths that have often been used against women and that we, collectively, need to look out for during and after election periods including the recent May 12, 2025 National and Local Elections and the upcoming [December 1, 2025](#) Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections.

MYTH 1

WOMEN ARE WEAK AND INCAPABLE OF RUNNING A COUNTRY

False. Disregarding women's credibility and education in connection to their gender is often used to shame and dissuade women from being politically active. This is fueled by the false assumption that women are uneducated and thus incapable enough to fight for their rights.

According to the [2020 Census of Population and Housing](#) conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority, the literacy rate among females (97.1%) was higher than males (96.8%). Similarly, this census revealed that there were more females (25.6%) than males (21.3%) with college or academic degrees. This suggests that women's education rates are at par with men hence it is wrong to say that women are too uneducated to be capable of participating in politics.

Women are being demoted in Philippine politics as a result of patriarchy where male dominance is the norm. Patriarchy has been ingrained in Filipino society since colonization and is a major influence over the ongoing demotion of women in leadership positions and this is not new for Filipino women in politics.

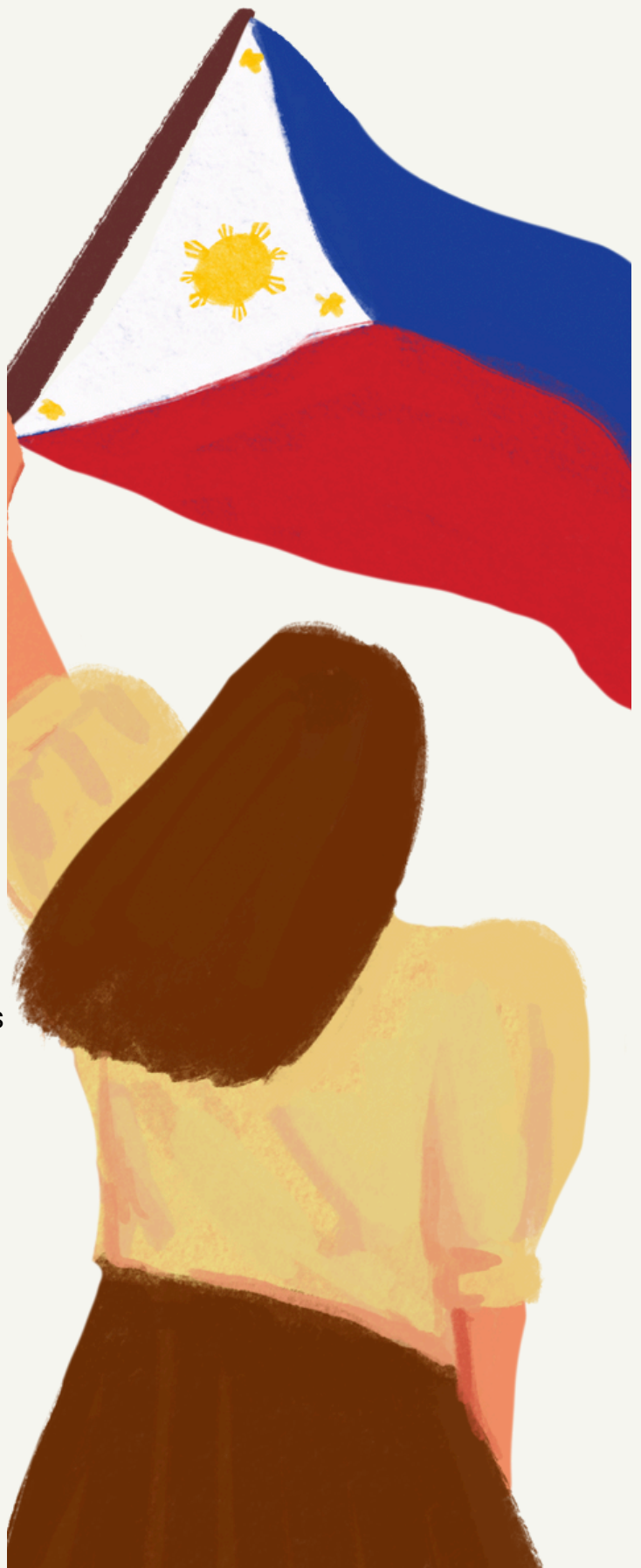
Whenever women run for office or become politically engaged, they are consistently confronted by the question of whether they are fit to be a leader or not on the basis of their gender. Even in the twenty-first century, women are still often seen as weak-willed human beings who are overly emotional and thus, incapable of leading. During the [2022 Philippine elections](#), Leni Robredo, the only female presidential candidate at that time, received these stereotypical remarks from her rivals and the public. Although she [was already](#) the 14th Vice President of the Philippines and a long time human rights lawyer, her intelligence and leadership abilities were repeatedly questioned. During the same election, then-vice presidential candidate Sara Duterte also received misogynistic backlash.

Cases like this are not new within Philippine election periods. In addition to the well-known female politicians affected by this, other politically active women are also heavily scrutinized and shamed for voicing their opinions.

The [#HijaAko](#) (“I am a young woman”) campaign rose to the surface after Frankie Pangilinan voiced her opinion against a victim-blaming Facebook post by the Lucban Municipal Police Station. Pangilinan was then attacked by Ben Tulfo, a television personality and now, a running senator for being overly opinionated and too young to understand the post. Tulfo called Pangilinan “hija”, [a term usually used in a condescending manner to call out young women with opinions](#). Specifically, young Filipino women are often called “hija” by older [men who pose themselves as a “father figure” to infantilize women and diminish their opinions](#) as Tulfo did. Pangilinan responded by reclaiming the term “hija” by creating the campaign #hijaako.

Sexist and gender-based remarks about women are not new and are continually perpetuated by powerful men, hindering women from participating in politics. An example of this is how the former president Rodrigo Duterte often shared his sexist beliefs with the public. Duterte claimed that the [presidency is no job for a woman](#) and that women and men have a different “emotional set-up.” Comments like these, especially those coming from men in power, are constantly shaping the political sphere, hence discouraging women from participating.

Women are equal and as capable as men. Saying that women are too emotional and cannot run a country is untrue. Women should be encouraged to participate in politics as they are half of the population and it is their right to be involved.



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MYTH 2

HARASSMENT IS NORMAL, WOMEN SHOULD GET USED TO IT

False. Harassment has real-life consequences. In an era of disinformation, what is spread online has immense influence over voter beliefs and decision-making. According to a [2024 report](#) from the UN General Assembly, online harassment towards women has a direct relationship with offline violence. The report states that there is a concentrated effort by “anti-rights actors” to push back against women’s rights, which in turn, deter women from expressing their views publicly both online and offline.

For female politicians, online and offline harassment leads to the undermining of their campaigns and their political efforts. Notably, former senator Leila de Lima was a target of both.

In 2016, a video and a Facebook photo were widely shared that allegedly depicted her singing to a drug lord. Both the video and the photo were debunked in a July 2016 [press release](#) from the Senate of Philippines. However, even in 2024, there were still videos circulating that she was “singing and entertaining drug lords in Bilibid prison,” which further smears her political career.

In August 2016, former president Duterte [accused](#) de Lima of having an affair with her ex-driver. Prior to this, the ex-driver was accused of accepting campaign contributions from drug traders, tacitly linking de Lima with criminals just as the debunked photo and video had. This later escalated with claims of the existence of sex tapes that allegedly showed de Lima with her ex-driver, which Duterte’s supporters [threatened to present](#) to the House of Representatives. It was only due to [a resolution](#) spearheaded by the then-standing female senators that prevented the presentation of the alleged videos. As later noted by de Lima, these alleged sex tapes were often used against her while she was in the middle of high level investigations in order to [undermine the work](#) she was doing.

This high-profile scandal dominated the headlines and led to [social media posts](#) that mocked her, ultimately leading to reducing her accomplishments to unverified sexual behavior. This scandal overshadowed the more serious allegations about her supposed links to drug lords and called into question her capability as a senator, particularly as one of the foremost critics of Duterte and his bloody “war on drugs.”

MYTH 3

IT'S OKAY TO SEXUALIZE WOMEN IN POLITICS

False. Women's sexuality has always been used *against* them. Women are objectified in almost all spaces, both real and online. Accusing women of using their sexuality to get what they want and sexualizing them are wrong as these narratives normalize misogynistic behavior against women.

The sexualization of women plays a large part in Philippine politics. When former president Duterte was in power his sexist and sexually-charged remarks were excused as being '[just a joke](#)' meant to make the public laugh. Sexism became normalized during his presidency and similar comments coming from him no longer shock the public with the oft-used excuse that he is "just" being a man. Many women felt misrepresented during his administration.

According to [Rappler](#), the social media campaign #BabaeAko movement rose to the surface amidst the former president's statement that the next Chief Justice shouldn't be a woman. The movement called out the former president's sexist remark against women.

Sexist and sexually-charged comments did not stop after Duterte's administration but rather have encouraged more male politicians to be unafraid of saying similar comments. In the lead-up to the 2025 midterm elections, several politicians came under fire for making misogynistic remarks during their campaigns. After politician Christian Sia was publicly criticized, attention quickly turned to others, including Misamis Oriental Governor Peter Unabia, and Manila city councilor candidate Mocha Uson.

One of the first to come under fire for such remarks was Pasig congressional candidate Christian Sia who made [a sexist comment](#) during his campaign in April 2025 about struggling young single mothers, offering them the option to sleep with him during times of loneliness. Sia then made an apology, but excused his comments as just a joke and then later justified his speech as ["fall\[ing\] within \[his\] freedom of speech"](#). He was [later disqualified](#) in May 2025 for this "joke" alongside a body-shaming comment directed to a former aide during another campaign event.

Meanwhile, Governor Peter Unabia drew backlash for his comment suggesting that [only "beautiful women" should be eligible for nursing scholarships](#). Likewise, in Davao, Representative Ruwel Gonzaga made an offensive remark towards a woman during a campaign event. He was quoted saying, ["Dotdot, susuyuin kita. Bumukaka ka na"](#) which roughly translates to: "Dotdot, I'll court you, just spread your legs".

Male politicians aren't the only ones fueling the fire—even female politicians like Mocha Uson, who was a 2025 Manila city councilor candidate, have also taken part in the sexualization of women. [Uson was criticized for having 'sexually suggestive' jingles](#) in her campaign. The jingles included a play on words for the Tagalog word of female genitalia. She pulled the jingle from the campaign after the COMELEC requested she change it. The sexualization of women is not limited to male perpetrators—it can also be perpetuated by women themselves. These kinds of remarks reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, and must be called out promptly.

AN APRIL OF SEXUALIZED REMARKS

Christian Sia

COMELEC orders Sia to explain this statement made during a campaign event: "Minsan sa isang taon, ang mga solo parent na babae na niriregla pa – Nay, malinaw, niriregla pa – at nalulungkot, minsan sa isang taon, puwedeng sumiping ho sa akin".



APRIL 4
2025

APRIL 7
2025



Peter Unabia

COMELEC orders the Misamis Oriental governor to explain a filmed statement during a campaign event where he stated that the administration's nursing scholarships should be for "yung mga babae, maganda".

Ruwel Gonzanga

COMELEC orders the Davao de Oro gubernatorial candidate to explain this statement said during a campaign event: "Dotdot, susuyuin kita. Bumukaka ka na"



APRIL 8
2025

APRIL 8
2025



Mocha Uson

COMELEC sends a letter to the Manila City councilor candidate to request she alter this sexually suggestive campaign jingle: "Cookie ni Mocha, ang sarap sarap" and "Ang cookie ni Mocha, bawat kagat, may malasakit at saya." to something more "age-appropriate."

Read more:
<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topst>

MYTH 4

WOMEN POLITICIANS ARE BACKED BY DEVILOUS AGENTS

False. There is a long-standing erroneous belief that women politicians cannot stand on their own and are puppets for the “real power” behind them. In the Philippines, that “real power” is often attributed to male family members in political dynastic families (“[benchwarmers](#)”) or falsely linked to state enemies via red-tagging.

‘Red-tagging’, ‘red-baiting’ or simply known as ‘labelling’ is the act of labelling and accusing individuals or organizations “as state enemies, communist terrorists or members of communist front organizations” according to a [2014 article](#) by the International Peace Observers Network (IPON). It is a political tactic that has been used extensively to [restrict and silence dissent](#), particularly activists, journalists and politicians and has led to the death of many.

Red-tagging affected six out of the twelve women candidates that ran for senate this year. On January 9, 2025, the Manila Police District (MPD) charged 18 activists for “[allegedly violating the Public Assembly Act or Batas Pambansa 880](#)”. Of those 18 activists, the female senate candidates charged were: Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) representative France Castro, Gabriela Women’s representative Arlene Brosas, Makabayan President Liza Maza, nurse Jocelyn Andamo, Moro leader Amirah Lidasan and urban poor leader Mimi Doringo.

In February 2025, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) put forth [Resolution No. 11116](#) which explicitly stated that red-tagging, which is defined as ‘labelling’ in the official text, was prohibited during the 2025 election campaign period. Under the same resolution, COMELEC also prohibited gender-based harassment in any form.

While this was a considerable step forward for clean and fair campaigning during this election season, red-tagging was and is still prevalent. On [March 11, 2025](#), senate candidate France Castro posted a letter to the COMELEC Chairman asking for them and the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) to take down AI-generated videos linking her, the ACT Teachers Party-List and Makabayan coalition senatorial candidates to the New Peoples Army, an armed communist rebel group.

Red-tagging is not new, but it has evolved to include various digital tools that now reach a larger audience than traditional media. With the rise of far-right ideologies across the world, it is necessary to see how anti-women agents use existing tools to target and silence women politicians, especially those considered progressive.

WHY WE SHOULD CARE

Gendered disinformation and the narratives they amplify don't simply affect female politicians – they affect every girl and woman. The online harassment and violence that women politicians face is easier to track because of ongoing press coverage, but the harassment targeting regular girls and women rarely make the news. A regular woman often does not have the support or resources to combat this type of targeted harassment and violence. For example, the Ateneo Human Rights Center's [Anti-Red-Tagging Monitoring Project](#) found that the majority of incidents of red-tagging, in which the gender of the individual targeted was known, were primarily young women.

A girl or a woman does not have to be actively political to be targeted as well. In many cases, it is merely being in the proximity to important political matters that can lead to online and offline violence. Take for instance [the rise in online harassment](#) targeting the female relatives of drug war victims and their legal advocates. On [March 20, 2025](#), human rights group Karapatan released a statement supporting the female relatives of drug victims and advocates who are being threatened online by a "mercenary troll army" after the arrest of former president Duterte earlier that month. These women are not politicians, but when obtaining justice is seen as political, so do these women's existence within the public discourse.

The true end goal for gendered disinformation is to completely silence women and force them out of public life, including a decrease or erasure of female politicians. This is something that cannot be permitted if we want a fair and just society that benefits everyone, not just a certain subgroup of people. It also is important to acknowledge that citizens cannot be the only ones who have to combat this. The Filipino government and social media platforms need to do their part in ensuring that girls and women can state their opinions without being tormented by malicious individuals and groups who aim to prevent them from participating in public life.



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CALL TO ACTION

Combating Gendered Disinformation will not progress without a call for action. A proper plan and action would address gendered disinformation. To effectively reach our goal and target audience, we align our call to action with [UNESCO's strategies for combating online gendered disinformation](#), while also contextualizing our approach to address the specific realities and challenges within the Philippine setting.

We call on the **Philippine government body, social media and other platforms** to take part on addressing gendered disinformation by:

1. Enhancing the accountability of digital platforms
2. Provide due process rights for women and girls who are experiencing harassment and threats online
3. Strengthen existing sanctions and hold accountable perpetrators of online gender-based violence and gendered disinformation
4. Secure meaningful transparency of process and data
5. Prevent the removal or blocking of legitimate content
6. Invest in digital, media and information literacy campaigns and education programmes

While we emphasize the importance of taking actions at both the government and social media platform levels, we also want to highlight the significance of **individual and community action**.

In a world growing more reliant on digital technology that provides easy access to online resources, it is important that we take the time to understand and fact-check the information we receive. Our call to action aims to promote more responsible use of social media and strengthen the protection of women in digital spaces. We strive to create a safer, more inclusive online environment for women and girls.

We encourage the public to exercise their right to vote wisely and carefully evaluate the candidates they choose in future elections such as the upcoming December 1, 2025 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections. We hope to consistently raise the question of why it's crucial to elect leaders who stand for rather than disregard the rights of women and other marginalized people. This call to action is to help ensure that elections and policy-making decisions are fair and just for all politicians regardless of gender and that citizens have access to accurate information about candidates' and elected officials' platforms. Women comprise half of the Filipino population and it is a disservice to the democratic process if they are silenced, barred or discouraged from participating in politics. Gendered disinformation has no place in elections nor in politics and there must be mechanisms in place to prevent it from undermining democracy in the Philippines.

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