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MEDUSA



REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Language in New Platforms and Forms of Violence

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: LANGUAGE

Module No.10

by:Innovation Frontiers

Innovation Frontiers
Mind is the limit

Table of Contents

01 Why this subject matters

02 Learning Outcomes

03 Forms of Violence Against Women on New Platforms

04 Platform-Specific Dynamics

05 Language and Narratives of Online Misogyny

06 Impact on Women and Public Discourse

07 What Can Journalists Do?

08 Case study

09 Practical exercises and Checklist

10 Resources



1. Why this subject matter

Digital platforms have transformed communication, journalism, and public debate. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, YouTube, Twitch, Reddit, and messaging apps are now major spaces where political discussions, cultural trends, activism, and news circulate. At the same time, these platforms have become environments where gender-based violence is amplified through harassment, misogynistic language, coordinated attacks, threats, humiliation, sexualization, and intimidation targeting women and girls. Women journalists, activists, politicians, influencers, academics, and ordinary users are disproportionately targeted. Online violence is not “virtual” or harmless: it has psychological, professional, social, and sometimes physical consequences.

Gender-based violence on digital platforms is not simply a “social media problem.” It is a democratic, cultural, and journalistic issue. Journalists have the power not only to document abuse, but also to challenge normalization, amplify informed public discussion, and promote accountability in digital spaces.

Journalists can play a crucial role in:

- identifying and exposing harmful narratives,
- avoiding the normalization of abusive language,
- reporting responsibly on gender-based violence,
- and helping audiences understand how online ecosystems amplify misogyny and hate.

This module explores the forms of violence used on contemporary platforms, the language associated with these attacks, and the responsibilities of journalism in responding to them.

2. Learning Outcomes



By the end of this Module, the learner will be able to:

- recognize forms of online gender-based violence,
- identify harmful language and narratives,
- understand how platforms amplify misogyny,
- report ethically and responsibly,
- and contribute to safer and more inclusive public discourse.

3. Forms of Violence Against Women on New Platforms

Violence does not stop behind closed doors or in face-to-face interactions: in the online world, where people compete for a moment of fame and virality, hidden behind fake names and accounts and the perceived “distance” between them and their victim, gender-based violence flourishes, being rewarded by algorithms made to attract clicks and interactions. Although there are some protective mechanisms in place, like the option to block and/or report accounts, in reality inappropriate and straight-up violent behaviour spreads faster than the platforms’ ability to regulate it.

Some examples of gender-based violence online include:

- Harassment in comments and direct messages,
- Sexualized insults and humiliation,
- Threats of rape or physical violence,
- Doxxing: gathering someone's private, identifying information and publishing it online without their consent, derived from the slang "dropping dox" (documents),
- Coordinated trolling (posting deliberately offensive, provocative, or off-topic messages),
- Non-consensual image sharing,
- Deepfake (highly realistic, AI-generated images, audio, or videos) sexual content,

- Stalking and persistent intimidation,
- Body shaming and appearance-based attacks, and
- Hate campaigns targeting women journalists or public figures.
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Here is a chilling example of online sexual violence: approximately 96% of deepfake videos are pornographic, and many of them depict victims being raped or otherwise sexually abused – with the majority of these victims are female-identifying individuals. The abuse does not stop with adult women: in a UNICEF, ECPAT and INTERPOL study across 11 countries, at least 1.2 million children disclosed having had their images manipulated into sexually explicit deepfakes in 2025.

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4. Platform-Specific Dynamics

Online platforms, especially social media, function based on specific algorithms with the goal of attracting as many users as possible, thus increasing their revenue. Clicks, comments and reposts are all helping the online “buzz”.

Some examples include:

- TikTok algorithmic amplification and viral harassment,
- Meme culture and “ironic” misogyny,
- Livestream abuse in gaming and streaming platforms,
- Hashtag attacks and “swarm” behavior,
- Anonymous or pseudonymous attacks, and
- Influencer-driven misogynistic communities.

Online violence often mirrors offline power inequalities and can silence women from participating in public life.



5.Language and Narratives of Online Misogyny



Types of Harmful Language

For an in-depth look into the language of gender-based violence, please have a look at Medusa Module 3. Some examples include victim-blaming or dehumanizing language, sexualized slurs, mockery disguised as humor, “just joking” rhetoric, gender stereotypes, language minimizing abuse, and coded misogynistic terminology and platform slang.

How Violence Becomes Normalized

As mentioned above, for the platform algorithms the more “reactions” (likes, shares, comments etc.) the better: the goal is to attract users and increase traffic and visibility. This means that people fighting in the comments, or users posting controversial views, favours the platforms’ goals and therefore, the algorithm pushes them, showing them to more people and making them viral, instead of punishing sexist, racist, and overall unacceptable behaviour.

Some examples of how violence becomes regulated include:

- Repetition and virality,
- Meme circulation,
- Influencer rhetoric,

6. Impact on Women and Public Discourse

Consequences for Victims & Wider Democratic Impact

Women targeted by online violence can suffer from immense psychological stress and fear, which can result in self-censorship, withdrawal from public debate, and professional damage.

There are also real safety concerns: in many cases, online threats (especially regarding famous women such as Twitch streamers, Instagram models or TikTok influencers) have turned into real-world violence: the GameGate incident is a good example of that. GameGate was an online harassment campaign in 2014–15 that targeted women in the video game industry.

The attacks were attributed largely to white male right-wing gamers who railed against the rise and influence of women and feminism in the industry. Women that spoke up online were severely targeted, with their private information being exposed, and even received death threats.

The original video-game creator that was the first victim of this campaign had to move houses and stay with friends, as their address was also shared online.

We should mention here that this Module mainly refers to regulated social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitch. There are many platforms, such as 4chan, where the “incel” (“involuntary celibate” men, exhibiting highly sexist behaviours and blaming women for their unhappiness) community thrives unbothered by external checks and consequences.
Overall, online gender-based violence has a wider negative impact: it silences women’s voices, causes reduced diversity in journalism and politics, creates and condones polarization and radicalization, and results in the erosion of respectful public discourse.



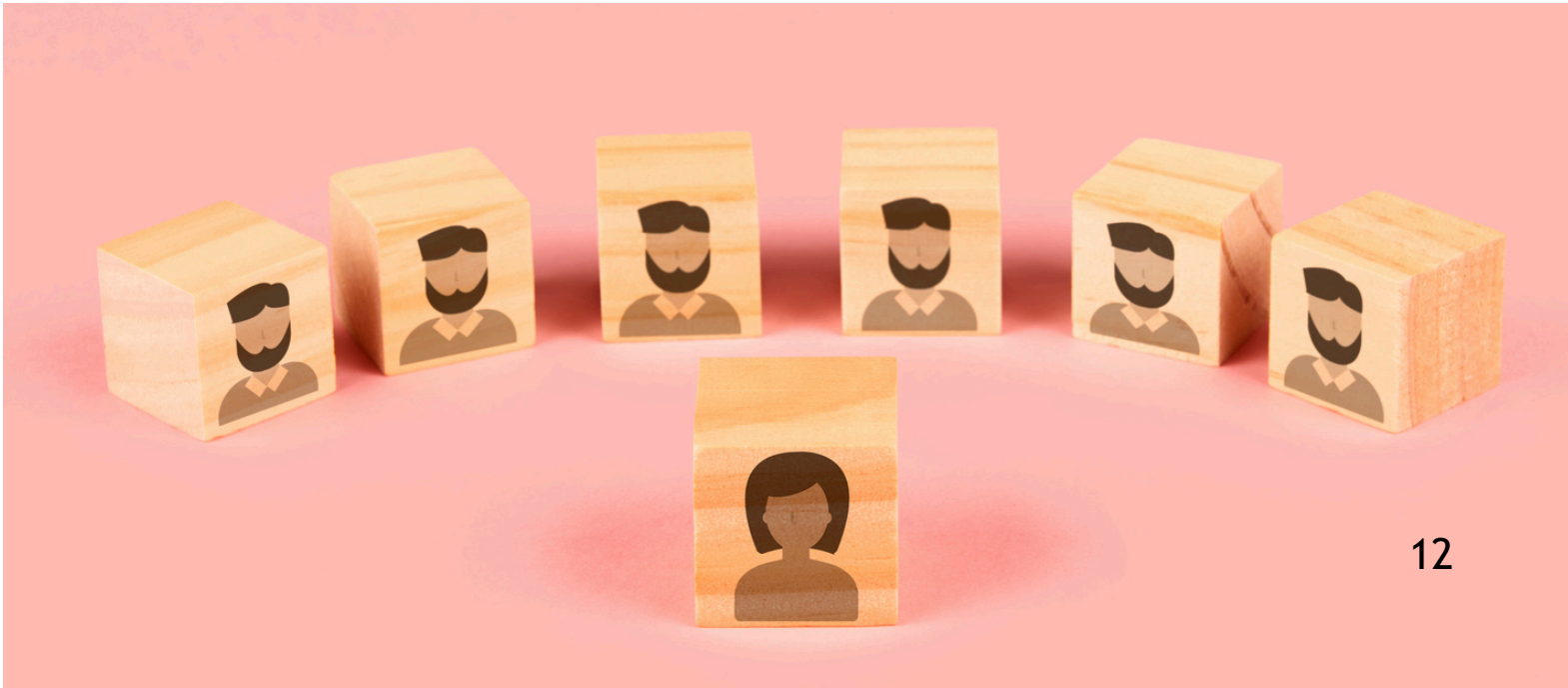
7. What can journalists do?

Report Responsibly on Gender-Based Violence

Apart from all the tips you will find in the rest of the Medusa course, keep these in mind as well:

- Protect victims' privacy and consent when reporting on cases,
- Provide context about platform dynamics and online cultures, and
- Verify digital evidence carefully – A.I. generated content will be harder and harder to spot, so you might need to start using relevant digital tools and always double-check the original source.

Regarding the use of language, for example, instead of: *"She received backlash online"*, you can use: *"She was targeted with coordinated misogynistic harassment and threats"*, and instead of: "*Controversial female influencer*", you should ask: is "controversial" relevant, or is gender shaping the framing?



A good tip would be to always **flip the scenario** before choosing the words: if this was said for a man, would it feel ok?

For example, regarding gym etiquette and a widespread discussion that has been going on lately in the social media sphere: would we ever comment on a man's gym outfit, targeting it as "revealing" and "provocative"? i.e.: "Male gym influencer spotted in revealing shorts and a low-cut tank top, leaving little to the imagination. When did the gym become a place to flaunt your biceps instead of working out? Women report feeling distracted – when will men finally cover up?"

This is an imaginative post description and might feel funny and forced, but after browsing any social media platform for 5 minutes, you will come across much more serious and sexist posts and comments.

Are men's legs in shorts any different from women's legs in shorts, or is our perception biased by the patriarchal and sexist standards that are deeply embedded into our society?



When reporting on relevant cases, you should be careful to not, unintentionally, amplify the perpetrators' voices. You could try to:

- report on hate campaigns without spreading them further,
- not react or post the link of the original post,
- explain platform mechanisms,
- contextualize viral misogynistic trends, and
- analyze how algorithms amplify toxic content.

Support Ethical and Inclusive Journalism – what can Newsrooms do?

Individual journalistic improvement is very important, but systemic change is also very much needed.

Newsrooms should try to:

- create internal guidelines for reporting on online abuse specifically,
- moderate comment sections responsibly,
- support journalists facing online harassment,
- diversify sources and voices,
- include experts on gender and digital violence, and
- adopt trauma-informed reporting practices.

Strengthen Digital Literacy

Journalists should understand:

- how TikTok and other new types of platforms work,
- how online communities organize harassment,
- how misinformation and misogyny intersect, and
- how AI-generated content can be weaponized – check Module 18 for more on that topic.



8. Case study

“A famous influencer and public face in Greece, Ioanna Touni, became the victim of online harassment, when someone filmed her without her consent during intimate moments, and then started to make photos and videos of the incident public. On 11/05/20, Ioanna addressed the Cybercrime Prosecution Service, submitting a "call against unknown perpetrators for violating the provisions of Law 4624/2019” on the protection of personal data. Specifically, unknown perpetrators, users of the website pornhub.com, a) with profile names "g..." and "Z...", uploaded a total of 4 erotic videos on the above website without her consent, in which she is depicted. A On 01/04/26 the two men were found guilty.”

This should have been a simple case of reporting on an online gender based violence incident, but Ioanna became the target of misogynistic attacks online: since she is a woman who “uses” her sexuality as part of her brand image, she shouldn’t be “complaining” when things like this happen... right?

-> Search online for the specific case and find 3 different types of journalistic coverage (1 supportive to Ioanna, 1 indifferent, and 1 misogynistic).

-> Which is the correct approach regarding the specific case and why?

-> Food for extra thought: is the “indifferent” and objective depiction enough? And what dangers may the total supportive approach bring?

->If you are working in a group, discuss with your colleagues.



9. Practical Exercises

01

Discuss a real case of online harassment against a woman journalist

Objective: To understand how platform logic (such as X or TikTok) amplifies coordinated misogynistic attacks, and to practice reporting on online violence without contributing to its virality.
Duration: 40 minutes.
Materials: Pen and paper, or computer.

Instructions:
You have to report on the following fictional scenario: “a woman journalist becomes the target of coordinated misogynistic attacks on TikTok and X after publishing an investigative report”.

Create:

- a short news lead (3–5 sentences),
- and one headline.
- Remember to avoid sensationalism & repeating abusive slurs, to provide context, and to describe the harassment accurately.



Now flip the scenario: if a man journalist has published the exact same report, what would the online coverage be like? What words were likely used in our scenario, and what words would be used now? Make a list with your points.

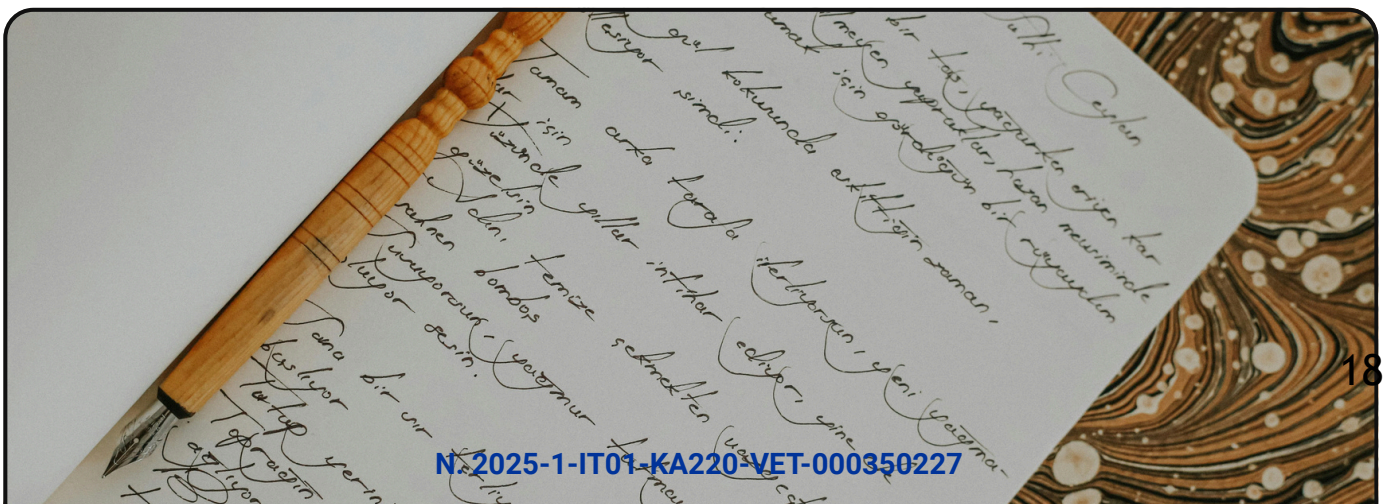
If you can implement this in a group setting, compare your results:

- Which versions were most ethical?
- Which versions unintentionally amplified abuse?

Expected Output: A drafted news lead that correctly contextualizes the algorithmic amplification of the attack, and a comparative analysis of gendered platform harassment.

Discussion:

- How do platform algorithms reward coordinated attacks against women compared to men?
- Why does the harassment look different when the target is a man?
- How can a journalist report on a viral hate campaign without inadvertently giving the abusers more visibility and amplifying their message?



02

Platform Analysis: How Misogyny Spreads

Objective: To analyze engagement-driven algorithms and identify how platforms use "irony" and meme culture to bypass moderation and normalize misogyny.
Duration: 45 minutes.
Materials: Smartphones or computers with internet access to browse social media trends.

Instructions: First, research online for a real TikTok/Instagram trend, viral hashtag, or influencer controversy involving sexist or misogynistic content.

- Try to identify:
- the type of harmful content,
- the role of humor/memes/irony,
- how engagement drives visibility,
- audience reactions,
- and possible real-world consequences.

Expected Output: A breakdown of a viral misogynistic trend, identifying the exact platform mechanisms (algorithms, engagement metrics, memes) that facilitated its spread

Discussion:

- Why did this content spread?
- What role did the platform algorithm play?
- Why did this content spread so fast, and what role did the platform's engagement-driven algorithm play in rewarding this aggression?
- How does "humor" or "irony" help abusers evade platform moderation policies?
- How does this digital dynamic silence women's participation in the public sphere?

03

She should have stayed silent

Objective: To define the newsroom's ethical responsibility in moderating comment sections and managing digital ecosystems to prevent the amplification of victim-blaming**. Duration:** 30 minutes.
Materials: The provided headline and comment scenario.

Instructions:
You read an article with the following headline: “Female influencer sparks outrage after controversial video” and a reader has commented “if she didn’t want nasty comments she shouldn’t have posted online”.

Answer the following questions:

- In this scenario, in both the headline and the comment, how is responsibility framed?
- Does the language normalize harassment?
- How could the wording be improved?
- What are the implications on free speech, democracy, and gender equality?

- Now, rewrite the headline or statement using ethical and gender-sensitive language.

Expected Output: A clear moderation strategy for the newsroom's social media channels, including decisions on when to delete, block, or respond to victim-blaming comments.

Discussion:

- What is the newsroom's responsibility when its own comment section becomes a vehicle for online violence and victim-blaming?
- When is it ethical for a journalist or social media manager to block a user or delete a comment to stop the virality of abuse?
- How does failing to moderate hostile comments impact the democratic participation and safety of women online?



Checklist time!

Before publishing content related to online gender-based violence, or managing the subsequent social media discourse, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I feeding the algorithm and rewarding abusers by using their viral hashtags or linking to their posts?
- Does my coverage explain the platform's role in the harassment, or am I just fueling the sensationalism?
- Are we ready to immediately moderate, block, or delete hate speech and victim-blaming from our comment section?
- Are we taking active responsibility for the digital space we are creating, ensuring it doesn't become a vehicle for further abuse?
- Could the details or visuals in this post expose the targeted woman to doxxing or real-world harm?
- Have I strictly avoided sharing or describing non-consensual images (e.g., deepfakes) just to get more clicks?

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