

# AUTHORITARIANISM AND GENDERED DISINFORMATION

A CASE STUDY OF THE PHILIPPINES

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Global Capstone

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THE GEORGE  
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WASHINGTON, DC

***Authoritarianism and Gendered Disinformation:  
A Case Study of the Philippines***

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# Table of Contents

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<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
Background	3
Current Status	4
Need for Change	5
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Research Findings</b>	<b>10</b>
Enabling Environment	10
Uses of Disinformation	12
Review of Research Findings	15
<b>Alternative Policies</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Recommended Policies</b>	
Policies to Address the Enabling Environment	17
Policies to Address the Weaponization of Gendered Relationships and Reinforcement of Gender Inequality	20
Policies to Address the Consolidation of Authoritarian Power and Weakened Democracy	23
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>26</b>

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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**Authoritarianism:** A system of government in which citizens are excluded from the political decision-making process, primarily through coercive state power and the elimination of civil and political liberties by the state.

**Democracy:** A system of government in which citizens are actively involved in the decisions and activities of their government, and public officials are held accountable to citizens, particularly through elections, engagement of civil society, and provision/protection of civil and political liberties.

**Disinformation:** Information that is –by the distributor– intentionally and knowingly false, inaccurate, or misleading in order to attack, deceive, and de-stabilize conversation.

**Drug War:** A series of policies and violent campaigns by President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines to allegedly counter the social influence of drug dealers and users in the country, which has become an arm of the regime’s wider attempts to consolidate power and crack down on dissenting voices.

**EDSA People’s Power Revolution:** A social movement that took place in February 1986 in the Philippines and entailed mass public demonstrations against the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, eventually ending his 20-year rule of the country and introducing a new era of democracy.

**Enabling Environment:** A set of conditions which impact outcomes, including but not limited to legal, social, historical, political and economic factors.

**Gendered Disinformation:** Direct attacks against women’s and LGBTQ+ identities, digital sexism, and gender-based digital abuse on the internet; definition comes from Paula Herrero-Diaz (see Statement of Purpose for citation).

**Gender Policing:** Enforcement of behavior in line with patriarchal expectations around gender and criticism of behavior that subverts such expectations, often to consolidate power and keep segments of the population in a divided, weakened state.

**Gendered Relationships:** Relationships based on gender and sexuality, whether within the same gender or across different genders, that invoke relative standings of social power, status, and identity.

**Homonationalism:** A system in which nationalist ideology and LGBTQ+ identities align in ways that benefit the state through co-optation of LGBTQ+ rights; term originally developed by Jasbir K. Puar.

**Misogyny:** Hatred of, dislike of, contempt for, and/or prejudice against women, which creates social systems and environments that weaponize gendered relationships to control and punish women who challenge male dominance. These social systems and environments cause gender-based violence, discrimination, hostility, objectification of women, and create other systems of oppression rooted in maintaining traditional gender roles, such as, homophobia and transphobia.

**Red-tag/Red-tagging:** Filipino government blacklisting of organizations and individuals critical of the government, such as journalists and activists, by claiming they are communists and/or terrorists. Red-tagging is a form of revision and discreditation.

**Sexism:** Prejudice, discrimination, behaviors, conditions, or attitudes based on sex and/or gender that are linked to beliefs of traditional gender roles of women and men in society and rooted in the belief that men are superior to women.

**Strongman Governance:** A specific form of authoritarian governance characterized by sexist, hypermasculine, and aggressive control of the state and its activities and frequently drawing on populist narratives that demonize a targeted segment of the population.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Philippines epitomizes the interplay between gender, disinformation, and authoritarianism. This paper examines the mechanisms of gendered disinformation in the Philippines by analyzing the weaponization of gendered relationships in the country's context. Specifically, it examines how the authoritarian state undermines gender equality, or the relations between and within men and women. It then develops a series of targeted recommendations toward U.S. policymakers to address this dynamic.

Analysis of expert interviews and Twitter data revealed key insights into the enablement, use, and impact of disinformation in the Philippines. First, disinformation is enabled by the Philippines' history of colonialism and martial law, high social media usage and low digital literacy, compounding crises, strongman governance, and sexist and misogynist rhetoric from elected leaders. While the first three factors create conditions that generally enable disinformation, the final two factors directly contribute to the prevalence of gendered disinformation. Second, disinformation is used as a tool to confuse, distract, revise, and discredit, with the aim of suppressing dissent. More critically, analysis of Twitter data indicates that disinformation used to discredit relies on the policing of gender to undermine political opposition. Third, this policing of gender results in the weaponization of gendered relationships, which encourages narratives that reinforce gender inequalities. Finally, illiberal actors benefit from an environment marked by gender inequality, as such conditions support hegemonic masculine norms, which in turn consolidate authoritarian power. As a result, President Duterte and his supporters benefit from disinformation that encourages gender inequality and pursue disinformation as a tactic for weakening democratic governance in the Philippines.

Existing policy responses to gendered disinformation in the Philippines face significant challenges, including lack of proper scale and an insufficient self-regulation model for technology companies. U.S. lawmakers are best positioned to enact legislation to combat gendered disinformation in authoritarian contexts. There are several approaches to addressing gendered disinformation that activists have used in the past, including strengthening platform self-regulation practices, content-based regulatory frameworks, and advocating for reforms within authoritarian contexts. However, the research findings indicate that there are more effective approaches to addressing gendered disinformation by reforming U.S. regulatory frameworks.

The concluding policy recommendations address three main factors: (1) the enabling environment for gendered disinformation, (2) how gendered relationships are weaponized, which reinforces gendered inequality, and (3) the consolidation of authoritarian power and the weakening of democratic institutions. These recommended policy responses address both amendments to Section 230 of the 1996 Communication Decency Act and directives for U.S. federal government agencies. All policy approaches to combating gendered disinformation and strengthening democratic institutions in the Philippines can be used as a model in other authoritarian contexts.

# INTRODUCTION

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## Background

On the evening of August 17, 2020, Zara Alvarez left a market in Bacolob on Negros Island in the Philippines to return to her home with her two housemates. Alvarez was the mother of an 11-year-old daughter and the education director of the human rights alliance Karapatan. Described as a prolific human rights activist, she had been placed on a public list by the government of the Philippines in 2018 for alleged involvement with a violent Communist insurgency — a process known as red-tagging. Violent accusations had been circulating against her on pro-government Facebook pages, portraying her as a Communist sympathizer, terrorist, and a dangerous enemy to the state. When she arrived at her road, a gunman appeared and shot her three times, knocking her to the ground, and then fired three more times at her prone body, killing her.<sup>1</sup>

The Philippines epitomizes the interplay between gender, disinformation, and authoritarianism. A populous, struggling democracy led by authoritarian strongman Rodrigo Duterte, the country is in many ways facing the brunt of disinformation, defined as “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is a strong presence of gendered disinformation, which entails “direct attacks against women’s identity...digital sexism...and gender-based digital abuse on the internet.”<sup>3</sup> Gendered disinformation also features attacks against LGBTQ+ identities. This paper builds upon gendered disinformation research by examining the weaponization of gendered relationships in the Philippines’ authoritarian context. Specifically, it examines how the authoritarian state undermines gender equality, or the relations between and within men and women, through analysis of constructed intra-gender hierarchies and sexuality.

This weaponization of gendered relationships points to the importance of understanding gender, particularly gender inequality and sexist

narratives, as a method of policing behavior in line with state priorities. This notion draws on King’s analysis of Foucault’s seminal *Discipline and Punish*, which argues that “gender, specifically, femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control.”<sup>4</sup>

Gendered attacks are highly prevalent in the Philippines’ disinformation ecosystem. President Duterte often uses misogynist rhetoric, such as rape jokes about female politicians, giving orders to shoot female guerrillas in the vagina, and boasting about extramarital affairs.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, cyberspace in the Philippines has given rise to an increase in cyberviolence, including hate speech and cyberharassment against women.<sup>6</sup> Disinformation often accompanies political violence against women, as demonstrated by the vicious online attacks and threats of violence against Rappler CEO Maria Ressa and the 2017 imprisonment of Senator Leila De Lima following her criticism of Duterte’s drug war.<sup>7</sup>

It is essential to note the vulnerability of the Philippine population to disinformation. The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) noted that a staggering 0.1% of Filipino students “displayed skills associated with being able to separate fact from fiction.”<sup>8</sup> Yet the country leads the Asia Pacific in social networking engagement at 90%.<sup>9</sup> Facebook provides subsidized internet access to large segments of the Filipino population and originally tested the service model in the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, 85% of Filipinos go online for news, and the country spends four hours per day on social media — the longest time spent of any country in the world.<sup>11</sup>

Disinformation in the Philippines is both a bottom-up and top-down concern. The population cannot accurately process information, while the government claims to be the arbiter of truth through the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act,” which “penalizes individuals or groups creating,

perpetrating or spreading false information.<sup>12</sup> The country has recently declined in internet freedom rankings, according to Freedom House's annual Freedom on the Net report, enhanced by "COVID-19 emergency provisions limiting free-expression rights and the forced closure of one of the country's largest news outlets, ABS-CBN."<sup>13</sup> During the first three years of Duterte's presidency, 134 human rights defenders were killed in the Philippines, indicating a violent political atmosphere for those speaking out against his regime.<sup>14</sup>

The situation in the Philippines draws on empirical trends in emerging feminist international relations scholarship. Existing literature reveals the critical nexus between authoritarianism, disinformation, and gender inequality. Bennett writes that digital disinformation serves as an anti-democratic catalyst, as "systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions" undermine citizens' confidence in institutions.<sup>15</sup> Hudson, Bowen, and Nielsen theorize the ties between male dominance and authoritarianism as "an interlocking pattern of institutions, processes, and norms" known as "The Patrilineal/Fraternal Syndrome."<sup>16</sup> They argue that the Syndrome, in turn, shapes governance and security, as it fosters "the violent pursuit of dominance as power," encourages violence as a means of resolving conflict, promotes "a predatory economy," and cements corruption as a means of governance.<sup>17</sup>

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## The Philippines provides a valuable case study for examining how disinformation makes use of gendered relationships to reinforce authoritarian power and undermine democratic processes.

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The Philippines provides a valuable case study for examining how disinformation makes use of gendered relationships to reinforce authoritarian power and undermine democratic processes. By analyzing these connections in the Philippine

context, the paper aims to inform U.S. policy to better account for the challenges of addressing gendered disinformation in other authoritarian contexts around the world.

### Current Status

While some policies have been formulated and executed in response to gendered disinformation in the Philippines, these responses face significant challenges. Facebook's efforts to support fact-checking and executive takedowns of general disinformation were insufficient during the Philippines most recent elections in 2019,<sup>18</sup> and the platform has formally declined to fact-check politicians or government officials.<sup>19</sup> Though Filipino news organizations like Rappler are working with Facebook as a fact check partner, the sheer quantity of disinformation on social media platforms dwarfs the efforts to counter it via fact checking alone, leaving false narrative to spread even when information is confirmed.<sup>20</sup>

While Facebook has occasionally taken down swaths of state-aligned bots and trolls, which the Duterte regime has criticized, there is little coordination between major tech companies when interventions like this occur.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Facebook avoids transparency with civil society and researchers regarding the dissemination of disinformation.<sup>22</sup> Efforts to combat disinformation in the Philippines have done little to disrupt authoritarian control, as the Duterte regime appears to have a solid grip on its political power; Duterte's allies continue to win elections, and his public approval remains high.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, the Duterte administration and its allies paid P.R. firms to create targeted disinformation campaigns through "troll armies."<sup>24</sup> In response to these developments, Facebook implemented a digital literacy program in the Philippines.<sup>25</sup> Accounts spreading disinformation have grown adept at "micro-media manipulation," which aims political propaganda at particular groups of voters. In the 2019 election cycle plagued by these coordinated disinformation strategies, every candidate supporting Duterte won a Senate seat, garnering all 12 seats available.

It is important to develop policy solutions that combat online gendered disinformation in authoritarian regimes, such as the Philippines, in order to strengthen democratic values, foster better political information environments, and meaningfully strengthen feminist norms. This paper directs policy recommendations toward U.S. lawmakers, due to their unique ability to influence social media companies headquartered in the United States. While President Duterte supports a foreign policy less dependent on the U.S. and closer to China, the U.S. still wields immense political and economic influence in the Philippines due to the legacy of 48 years of colonial rule by the U.S. and decades of close foreign and military relations.<sup>26</sup> Critically, these recommendations leverage thought leadership on technology company regulation from European countries.

The United States has an opportunity to reinvigorate lackluster regulations over global technology companies headquartered within its borders.<sup>27</sup> Social media companies have historically been subject to little regulation by the U.S. government and have limited liability for content posted on their platforms. This self-regulation model has resulted in tech companies being slow to acknowledge and address authoritarian governments that use their platforms to engage in coordinated disinformation attacks, leaving governments regimes unchecked as they weaponize social media platforms to expand their power and erode democratic norms.<sup>28</sup>

### **Need for Change**

U.S. lawmakers should enact legislation to ensure that social media platforms act responsibly and transparently to support gender-inclusive societies and participatory democracies. A series of policy reforms have been proposed to limit the reach of fake news, disinformation, hate speech, and gendered disinformation on social media platforms. More critically, examining gendered disinformation in Philippines provides critical guidance for policy response. Jonathan Corpus Ong, an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, stated, "I would stress that the Philippines could

preview disinformation innovations in other countries."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, approaches to combatting disinformation in the Philippines could be used as a model to combat disinformation in other authoritarian contexts.

It is also critical to note that disinformation largely stems from and is exacerbated by the technology companies' business incentives. A 2019 study published by The Global Disinformation Index found from a sample of 20,000 websites publishing misinformation "that ad technology companies spend about \$235 million annually by running ads on such sites."<sup>30</sup> "Following the money" in disinformation reveals the ease of facilitating violence through ad incentives and spreading false content, evidenced by Facebook's posting of ads for weapons accessories and body armor "alongside [2020] election misinformation and insurrection talk in 'patriot' and militia groups."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the prominence of automated bot accounts across social media, which contribute to the spreading of disinformation, "constitutes a deceptive practice" in online advertising.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it is estimated that 37% "of all internet traffic is not human and instead is the work of bots."<sup>33</sup>

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For years, activists have appealed to major social media platforms to reform internal policies or better enforce existing policies that address hate speech and prevent coordinated online attacks that harm democratic processes. These appeals include the prompt take down of content that contains threats of physical and sexual violence, hate speech, harassment, doxing, and/or manipulated images or videos of women political leaders.

The U.S. Democratic Women's Caucus recently called for Facebook to enforce its policies and implement reforms to ensure that women political leaders can engage in democratic discourse without experiencing public attacks.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, advocates have urged social media companies to pay particular attention to protecting civic engagement by women leaders, given the disproportionate impact disinformation has on undermining the credibility of women political figures and the role gendered disinformation plays in authoritarian governments' consolidation of power.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, activists have called for hate speech policies to be equally enforced, even if the hate speech comes from a mainstream political party or major political figure.<sup>36</sup>

Activists have also urged social media companies to take down accounts that repeatedly harm democratic processes through inauthentic behavior. A recent whistleblower memo revealed that Facebook has been slow to remove accounts with inauthentic behavior, a Facebook term for bot accounts, and coordinated manual accounts. The whistleblower letter – in addition to significant research from academics, think tanks, and foreign regulators – indicated a serious lack of institutional support and investment in data science personnel dedicated to monitoring, evaluating, and removing accounts with inauthentic behavior and removing fake accounts in coordinated networks. According to the memo, there are 672,000 fake accounts on Facebook and 10.5 million fake engagements on other platforms, but more accurate estimates are difficult to determine due to lack of transparency.<sup>37</sup> Authoritarian actors frequently leverage fake account networks as a tool to spread disinformation and undermine the political process.

The whistleblower memo revealed a lack of interest by senior leadership at Facebook to protect democratic elections and public discourse in smaller countries, while prioritizing civic engagement in the United States and Western Europe.<sup>38</sup> This demonstrates that social media companies fail to recognize the outsized role they play in shaping elections, public discourse, and access to civic information,

particularly in non-Western countries, and highlights the need for tech platforms to take proactive steps to prevent the manipulation of democratic processes. Activists have recognized that self-regulation by social media companies will be insufficient to adequately address the widespread problems of hate speech, threats of violence, extremism, disinformation, and attacks against democratic processes.<sup>39</sup>

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Advocacy organizations working to combat online gendered disinformation have transitioned from calling on social media companies to better enforce policies to advocating directly to policymakers in democratic governments to implement meaningful regulation.

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Advocacy organizations working to combat online gendered disinformation have transitioned from calling on social media companies to better enforce policies to advocating directly to policymakers in democratic governments to implement meaningful regulation. U.S. lawmakers should look to other governments for inspiration on how to regulate social media companies, particularly in the European Union, where many countries have been more inclined to regulate tech. In 2018, the E.U. created the Code of Practice on Disinformation to provide social media and tech companies guidance on taking responsibility for illegal or harmful content on their platforms. However, this attempt at voluntary self-regulation, which included no legal penalties for these platforms, revealed that self-regulation is insufficient.

Many European countries have enacted legislation to regulate social media companies beyond the E.U. Code of Practice.<sup>40</sup> This included the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to set rules on how social media companies can store users' data.<sup>41</sup> Germany implemented

sanctions for illegal content remaining on a platform after the company has been alerted,<sup>42</sup> and in 2018, the NetzDG law required social media companies to establish procedures to review complaints, remove illegal content within 24 hours, and publish reports every six months. The first fine under this law was given to Facebook in 2019 for €2m for underreporting illegal activity.<sup>43</sup> France has moved forward with legislation banning disinformation on elections and created time limits to remove hate speech and terrorist content.<sup>44</sup>

The lack of effective measures regulating social media companies underscores the need for policies that better address the connection between gendered disinformation and authoritarian power. The Biden Administration has an opportunity to take the lead in supporting legislation to regulate social media platforms and to combat gendered disinformation. Such action would hold the Administration to account for its commitments to convene a task force aimed at addressing online harassment, especially of “young people and women.”<sup>45</sup>

# METHODOLOGY

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The research study began with a literature review, followed by a mixed-methods approach that gathered and analyzed qualitative and quantitative data. Mixed methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of disinformation in the Philippines context, particularly in analyzing how gendered relationships are leveraged by illiberal actors.

## Interviews

Qualitative analysis included thirteen expert interviews (see Appendix A). Interview respondents were selected based on their knowledge of disinformation related to governance, gender, and/or the Philippines context. They represented a broad range of sectors relevant to the policy environment, including academia, media outlets, civil society, government agencies, elected bodies, and advocacy groups. Interview notes were later analyzed and coded to determine thematic categories to frame policy recommendations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom, an online video communications platform.

## Twitter

Social media and content-sharing platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, provide both the digital space and tools to create and spread disinformation. As the present study aimed to develop policy recommendations for improving the information environment on these platforms, it was necessary to examine social media data and content to determine the extent to which gender features in disinformation. Examination of social media data also enabled understanding of how disinformation manifests in the Philippine context.

Recent reports from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and Demos supported the examination of Twitter data.<sup>46</sup> Twitter is an appropriate platform for analysis in the Philippine context, due to the public nature of its content and high rate of engagement (61 percent of internet users in the Philippines were age 16–64

in Q1 2020).<sup>47</sup> While other social media platforms represent higher engagement rates in the Philippines, with Facebook garnering 96 percent engagement (internet users aged 16–64 in Q1 2020),<sup>48</sup> Facebook's privacy restrictions limit meaningful content analysis and justify data collection from relatively accessible platforms, such as Twitter.

Additionally, the NDI and Demos reports informed the present study's approach to timing and language. The NDI research supported the analysis of Twitter data within a set timeframe, as their report examined Tweets within a six-month window of a significant political event.<sup>49</sup> The present study employed a similar approach by analyzing Tweets from February 9 to February 28, 2021, while simultaneously tracking significant social and political events in the Philippines. Additionally, the Demos research highlighted the feasibility and appropriateness of examining English-language Tweets from the Philippines to study disinformation,<sup>50</sup> indicating that English content is relevant to the present study and mitigating challenges related to analyzing Tweets in Tagalog (the Philippines' standardized national language).

Twitter data from the Philippines was collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) through The George Washington University Social Feed Manager. Data fell under two separate collections as determined by the Twitter API:

### 1. Timeline Collection

Tweets from specific users' timelines  
Replies to those users' Tweets

### 2. Filter Collection

Tweets mentioning Twitter handles  
and/or individual organizations specified  
in the Timeline Collection

By gathering 1) Tweets from specific users' timelines and 2) all Tweets discussing those same users, the research aimed to examine how certain actors contribute to, are responded to, and are described on Twitter's platform.

The individuals and organizations identified in the Timeline Collection and the Filter Collection were selected based on analytical categories encapsulating online disinformation’s political and gendered nature in the Philippines.

A political category (supporters and critics of the Duterte administration) intersected with a gender category (men and women leaders) or an organization category (individuals and groups) (see Table 1).

The framework resulted in six analytical categories, including 1) supportive men, 2) supportive women, 3) supportive organizations, 4) critical men, 5) critical women, and 6) critical organizations.

The framework enabled targeting of relevant Twitter accounts in the Philippines and subsequent quantitative and qualitative comparison of Tweets to determine possible relationships between regime affiliation and gender.

The Social Feed Manager gathered 67,161 Tweets in the Timeline Collection and 727,461 Tweets in the Filter Collection (see Appendix C for the volume of Tweets by category). Twitter data was analyzed using OpenRefine, an open-source data wrangling application, and manual coding.

Table 1: Analytical Framework for Collecting and Examining Tweets

		POLITICAL AFFILIATION	
		Supportive (of administration)	Critical (of administration)
GENDER	Men	Rodrigo Duterte Harry Roque Tito Sotto Manny Pacquiao Bato dela Rosa	Teddy Baguilat Francis Pangilinan Erin Tañada Franklin Drilon Kit Belmonte
	Women	Sara Duterte Cynthia Villar Imee Marcos Geraldine Roman Lorraine Badoy	Leni Robredo Leila de Lima Arlene Brosas Risa Hontiveros Samira Gutoc
ORGANIZATIONS		PDP-Laban Presidential Communications Operations Office RJ Nieto (Thinking Pinoy)	Gabriela Women’s Party GABRIELA Joms Salvador (GABRIELA) Commission on Human Rights Maria Ressa (Rappler)

# RESEARCH FINDINGS

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## Overview

Analysis of data from interviews and Twitter yielded several key findings:

- 1. Five overarching factors enable the use of disinformation in the Philippines.**  
These include 1) a history of colonialism and martial law, 2) high social media usage and low digital literacy, 3) compounding crises, such as COVID-19, 4) strongman governance, and 5) sexist and misogynist rhetoric from elected leaders. The first three factors contribute to all disinformation, while factors 4 and 5 contribute directly to the prevalence of gendered disinformation.
- 2. Disinformation is used in the Philippines in four primary ways:** 1) to confuse, 2) to distract, 3) to revise, and 4) to discredit. Of these categories, disinformation used to discredit relies heavily on the policing of gender to undermine political opposition.
- 3. Disinformation that polices gender results in the weaponization of gendered relationships, which reinforces gender inequalities.**
- 4. Illiberal actors benefit from disinformation that encourages gender inequality, as it supports hegemonic masculine norms that prop up strongman governance, which in turn consolidates authoritarian power and undermines democratic processes.**

## Enabling Environment

Analysis of interviews and Twitter data revealed five factors that create an enabling environment for disinformation to flourish in the Philippines (see Table 2). Two of the five factors were identified as contributing specifically to gendered disinformation. The following describes each of these factors and how they enable disinformation in the Philippines.

### History of Colonialism and Martial Law:

The prevalence of disinformation in the Philippines is not a new phenomenon, but rather reflects the Philippines' legacy of colonial rule and martial law. Colonialism embedded a vertical political structure in the Philippines that does not encourage accountability for top leadership.

Additionally, martial law under the Marcos regime established a precedent of disinformation, which exaggerated economic successes while downplaying human rights abuses. This dysfunction has a destabilizing effect and contributes to the weakening of democratic norms today.

### Social Media Usage and Digital Literacy:

High social media usage and low-quality information make Filipinos highly susceptible to disinformation. Filipinos rely on social media platforms (particularly Facebook) for internet access, information, and social connection. As media consumers, Filipinos possess very low media literacy, which is exacerbated by local media companies' dissemination of both poor-quality information and government disinformation as a means for avoiding censure by the Duterte administration. Social media companies contribute to the problem of disinformation by not being transparent in their algorithms, creating "echo chambers," allowing for certain actors to dominate the platform, which has legitimized attacks on democratic institutions. Non-transparent social media algorithms incentivize disinformation, resulting in a highly professionalized and scaled-up trolling sector. All forms of media partake in spreading disinformation, but social media company algorithms allow for disinformation to become amplified in ways not possible by other media sources. This media environment confuses and polarizes media consumers by creating echo chambers of opinion, high volume of content noise, and conflicting narratives.

**Compounding Crises:** Compounding crises, including poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing drug war, results in a normalization of government abuse and violence that enables disinformation. Filipinos are increasingly desperate for solutions in the wake of so many crises. This desperation for formal assistance makes Filipinos more receptive to government interference and less inclined to criticize the Duterte administration. Additionally, quarantine measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have limited Filipinos' access to information, debate,

discussion, and alternative media, thereby increasing social media platforms' echo chamber effect. President Duterte and other government officials capitalize on these compounding crises by normalizing violence through their rhetoric while simultaneously undermining the press. These actions create a social and political environment that discourages dissent and critical thought while further enabling disinformation.

**Strongman Governance:** The Philippines is a hybrid democratic-authoritarian regime. It has democratic processes which restrain the executive office; however, President Duterte and his administration exhibit strongman authoritarian behaviors, such as restricting the press and committing human rights abuses. Misogynist, sexist, and anti-feminist social beliefs are replicated in the Filipino governance structure, resulting in a "strongman" approach. A strongman narrative runs through Filipino politics, suggesting that a disciplinary "father figure" is needed to fix government mismanagement. Interview analysis revealed that the strongman figure evokes paternalism and asks Filipinos to accept behavior exhibited by President Duterte, often referred to as "Papa Digo," even when he fumbles or fails.

Simultaneously, President Duterte is a primary enabler of misogyny and disinformation by targeting women who oppose him. Strongman governance justifies the use of force by highlighting security concerns, sometimes through disinformation. By sending messages that democratic checks and balances do not work, leaders such as President Duterte justify "strongman" authoritarian behaviors in the name of solving problems.

**Elected Leaders' Sexist and Misogynist Rhetoric:** Elected leaders, particularly President Duterte and his supporters, use sexist and misogynist language. Sexist and misogynist rhetoric and disinformation legitimizes misogynist behavior by creating a permission structure that rewards violent discussion of gender, women, and feminism. Crucially, interview analysis revealed that women are not the only targets of gendered disinformation. Men who do not fit hegemonic masculine ideals are targeted or feminized. Additionally, men who are critical of the regime are frequently feminized or called gay or pedophiles. Elected leaders such as Duterte using this language has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, creating an enabling environment for violence and undermining women and girls' safety.

Table 2: Factors Enabling Disinformation in the Philippines

FACTOR		IMPACT/OUTCOME
History of colonialism and martial law	➔	Well-established precedent of and tolerance for disinformation and historical revisionism
Social media usage and digital literacy	➔	Widespread consumption and sharing of low quality information
Compounding crises	➔	Normalization of government intervention and government violence
Strongman governance	➔	Real and effective power portrayed through hegemonic masculine ideal
Sexist and misogynist rhetoric from leaders	➔	Normalization of threatening and violent language that targets genders differently

■ Factors enabling **all** disinformation

■ Factors enabling **gendered** disinformation

### Uses of Disinformation

In addition to revealing an enabling environment, analysis of data from interviews and Twitter indicated that disinformation is used in the Philippines in four primary ways:

1) as a tool to confuse, 2) as a tool to distract, 3) as a tool to revise, and 4) as a tool to discredit (see Table 3). The following describes each of these uses and their impact on democratic processes in the Philippines.

**Confuse:** Disinformation as a tool for confusion overwhelms social media consumers with varied and conflicting narratives. This tactic creates so much noise that consumers are incapable of following a coherent narrative or relying on credible information. Misleading narratives have surfaced in the Philippines due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as when the Duterte administration said the government had “beaten” the virus because there were only 38 new virus cases in a day, instead of the projected 40. Analysis of Twitter data also suggested the use of confusing narratives regarding the COVID-19 vaccine; the Duterte administration celebrated the arrival of the Sinovac vaccine from China, while liberal media outlets questioned the vaccine’s efficacy and Duterte’s dubious relationship with the Chinese government.

**Distract:** Disinformation is a tool for distraction by directing attention away from controversy or abuse. While analysis of Twitter data did not conclusively indicate which narratives were designed to distract, experts repeatedly stated in interviews that President Duterte and other illiberal actors have used disinformation to push sensational narratives or headlines that distract Filipinos from human rights abuses. Experts noted that disinformation used to distract has been particularly prevalent during Duterte’s drug war, which has resulted in the death and detainment of human rights activists, attorneys, and journalists.

**Revise:** Disinformation is used to revise history and reframe current events. The Duterte administration has pushed revisionist narratives that justify human rights abuses, including the notion that Filipinos are undisciplined and lazy drug users. The regime has also relied on red-tagging to villainize opposition voices, including activists, students, women’s rights groups, and NGOs, by falsely classifying their work and/or views as sympathetic to communist values. Paradoxically, analysis of Twitter data indicated that the EDSA People’s Power Revolution was denounced as a “joke” and “the worst thing to happen to the Philippines,” suggesting favorable perceptions

Table 3: Uses of Disinformation

Disinformation used as a tool to:	
<b>CONFUSE</b>	<i>Creates noise through volume, variety, and/or contradiction of narratives</i>
<b>DISTRACT</b>	<i>Pulls public attention away from controversy or abuses</i>
<b>REVISE</b>	<i>Rewrites events through co-optation or reframing to make narratives appear more or less favorable</i>
<b>DISCREDIT</b>	<i>Undermines credibility of individuals and/or organizations</i>

of pre-revolution dictatorial rule and negative reactions to democratic governance in the Philippines.

**Discredit:** Disinformation is a powerful tool to discredit political opposition, particularly in environments like the Philippines where media consumers are susceptible to false information due to high social media usage and low digital literacy. Analysis of Twitter data indicated that disinformation used to discredit relies heavily on the policing of gender to undermine political opposition. This form of gendered disinformation legitimizes misogynist behavior by creating a permission structure that rewards negative discussion of women and femininity. This is reinforced in the Philippines context, as women are perceived as easy targets of disinformation. For example, the Duterte administration targets Gabriela, a feminist organization and political party, through red-tagging and dissemination of false information, by linking it to the New People's Army, an armed communist group.

Critically, women are not the only targets of gendered disinformation in the Philippines. Several interview respondents noted that men who do not fit hegemonic masculine ideals or who are critical of the Duterte administration are frequently feminized, called gay, or accused of pedophilia. Ironically, many members of the Filipino LGBTQ+ community perceive President Duterte as an ally and align with him for political protection through homonationalism.

The following examples from Tweets demonstrate how gender was policed across a sample of the analytical categories (critical women, supportive women, critical men, supportive men). Notably, these examples indicate that women and/or femininities are targeted directly, while men and masculinities are targeted indirectly, resulting in narratives that reinforce gender inequalities.

## DISINFORMATION USED TO DISCREDIT

*The following examples reference Tweets found in Appendix D.*

### ***Discrediting Critical Women***

Disinformation discrediting critical women was influenced by President Duterte. In responding to criticism from Vice President Leni Robredo, Duterte stated that she did not understand the president's role, she did not understand the law, and that she was unfit to run for president. The latter statement is particularly significant, given the upcoming Philippine presidential election in 2022. Twitter users in turn discussed Robredo using implicitly gendered language, including that Robredo should "remain quiet," that she is good at being a "victim," and that she needs to be "taken down to the level where she belongs." Additionally, conversations indicated a negotiation regarding the relationship between Robredo's gender and the President's comments, demonstrating a degree of awareness among Twitter users regarding the instrumentalization of gender in political discourse. In this case, the intersection of Robredo's gender and her opposition to Duterte resulted in narratives that directly attacked her femininity.

### **Discrediting Supportive Women**

President Duterte also influenced conversations about supportive women. His daughter, Sara Duterte, is currently the mayor of Davao City in the Philippines and is a potential candidate in the 2022 presidential election. President Duterte has said that women should not be president and stated that Sara Duterte will not pursue the presidency because she has young children, and it is a “dirty” job. Additionally, Duterte emphasized his guidance to Sara by saying that he “really put his foot down.” While this language is patronizing, it has kept Sara Duterte’s name in the headlines and fueled speculation about her presidential bid. Moreover, Sara Duterte’s merits as a policy-maker and leader are continually discussed in relation to her father. In this way, she is indirectly criticized and praised by Twitter users who assume she displays strongman governance, indicating a perceived alignment with hegemonic masculinity at the expense of feminine qualities.

### **Discrediting Critical Men**

Disinformation targeting critical men also reflected indirect discrediting. Senator Francis Pangilinan was frequently discredited through his wife, Sharon Cuneta, who is a famous actress and celebrity in the Philippines. Photos of Cuneta in a bathing suit accompanied conversations about Pangilinan, and his political track record was lambasted by Twitter users who suggested his political power was derived from Cuneta’s fame and wealth. This narrative feminized Pangilinan by highlighting his dependency on his wife, a relationship which traditionally rewards women’s reliance on men, thereby reinforcing idealized notions of masculine superiority while emasculating Pangilinan.

### **Discrediting Supportive Men**

The indirect discrediting of men through women is also seen in disinformation targeting supportive men. Jen Barangan, a popular social media influencer in the Philippines, said in a Tweet that she was “fangirling” over presidential spokesperson Harry Roque. Twitter users responded with disgust and disbelief at Barangan’s admiration, which undermined Roque’s masculinity by suggesting he was unworthy of women’s respect.

In considering how these gendered relationships are constructed, received, and shared, it is worth noting that 76% of Twitter’s advertising audience in the Philippines is female,<sup>51</sup> meaning conversations are driven by and directed toward women. As the above examples demonstrate, disinformation used to discredit leverages the policing of gender to undermine political opposition, resulting in a weaponization of gendered relationships that reinforces gender stereotypes and inequalities. President Duterte and other illiberal

actors benefit from gender inequalities that value hegemonic masculine norms over feminine qualities, as it supports their style of strongman governance, which in turn consolidates their authoritarian power. More critically, these findings have implications beyond the Philippines, given the prevalence of disinformation and gender inequality in states where democratically elected leaders rely on authoritarian governance, including Myanmar, India, and Brazil.<sup>52</sup>

### Review of Research Findings

In summary, the Philippines' history of colonialism and martial law, high social media usage and low media literacy, and compounding crises create an enabling environment for disinformation to thrive. Specifically, gendered disinformation is enabled by strongman governance and sexist and misogynistic rhetoric from leaders. Disinformation is used as a tool to confuse, distract, revise, and discredit. Of these,

disinformation used to discredit relies heavily on the policing of gender to undermine political opposition. Disinformation that polices gender results in the weaponization of gendered relationships, which reinforces gender inequality. Illiberal actors benefit from disinformation that encourages gender inequality, as it supports hegemonic masculine norms which in turn consolidates authoritarian power and undermines democratic processes.

Table 4: Impact of Gendered Disinformation on Democracy



# ALTERNATIVE POLICIES

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U.S. policymakers should enact legislation to address gendered disinformation that adequately promotes democracy and gender equality globally. Activists have previously attempted to address the issue of disinformation using three main strategies. First, advocates have urged social media companies to change internal policies that amplify and spread gendered disinformation. Second, activists have advocated for enhanced moderation of social media platforms to eliminate or limit the reach of harmful content and disinformation. Finally, in addressing the weaponization of gendered disinformation by illiberal actors, activists have advocated for stronger regulatory frameworks within authoritarian contexts. Analysis of interviews and Twitter data indicated that these three advocacy strategies *inadequately* address gendered disinformation in authoritarian contexts for the following reasons:

## **Policy Recommendations Reinforcing Tech Company Self-Regulation**

For years, activists have directed policy recommendations to major social media platforms calling for reforms to internal policies or better enforcement of existing policies that address harmful content and prevent coordinated online attacks that harm democratic processes.<sup>53</sup> However, social media companies contribute to the problem of disinformation by legitimizing attacks on democratic institutions and undermining the social conditions necessary for democracies to operate.<sup>54</sup> Many activists now recognize that appealing to social media companies will not mitigate risks to social media users and societies. Therefore, self-regulation by social media companies will be insufficient to adequately address the widespread problems of harmful content, threats of violence, extremism, disinformation, and attacks against democratic processes.<sup>55</sup>

## **Content-Based Policy Recommendations**

Analysis also indicated that advocating for content-based regulation is inadequate to counter gendered disinformation. First, content-based regulation can lead to limitations to online free speech, despite its intention to only limit harmful content, disinformation, and misinformation. Therefore, this regulation may disproportionately harm the activists these policies are meant to protect. Second, focusing on content-based regulation risks siloing gendered disinformation as a “women’s issue” and prevents a multifaceted approach. Advocates concerned about proliferation of harmful content, disinformation, and misinformation on social media platforms have urged social media companies and government officials to enact policies that for example eliminate or limit the reach of abusive content and false information by removing or downranking such content. Specifically, this would include downranking abusive content from users with large platforms and government officials suspected of promoting disinformation or trolling. To achieve this, some advocates have called for new algorithms that would mitigate users’ interactions with abusive content.<sup>56</sup> However, it is more effective to advocate for policies that address the enabling factors that contribute to gendered disinformation rather than content-based recommendations.

## **Policy Recommendations Directed at Policymakers in the Philippines**

Political scientists have long classified the Philippine government as a hybrid regime with both authoritarian and democratic characteristics. However, interview respondents emphasized that President Duterte has intensified authoritarian practices in the Philippines by undermining the rule of law and independent democratic institutions.<sup>57</sup> Given this increasingly authoritarian context and politically motivated application of the rule of law, directing policy recommendations to Filipino lawmakers would likely prove ineffective, as laws addressing disinformation would risk being weaponized against President Duterte’s dissenters. For these reasons, effective policy recommendations should be directed toward U.S. policymakers who are best positioned to regulate U.S.-based social media companies to combat gendered disinformation.

# RECOMMENDED POLICIES

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U.S. lawmakers should regulate social media companies to prevent authoritarian regimes from leveraging these platforms to wield gendered disinformation to consolidate their power. The U.S. is best positioned to enact legislation to combat gendered disinformation, as most social media companies are headquartered in the United States.<sup>58</sup> Compared to European lawmakers, U.S. lawmakers are best positioned to address disinformation and authoritarianism in the Philippines, given the historical and current relationship between the two countries.<sup>59</sup> Finally, any reforms to social media platforms by U.S. lawmakers will have ripple effects globally and change the online environment for users everywhere.

The following policy recommendations are specifically directed toward the Democratic Women's Caucus, as they demonstrated concern for this issue in their August 2020 letter calling for Facebook to stop the amplification of gendered disinformation to ensure that women political leaders can engage fairly in democratic online discourse.<sup>60</sup> The policy recommendations are organized according to the impacts of disinformation (see Table 4) and provide solutions addressing the major issues identified in the research analysis. Additionally, the policy recommendations are organized based on the likelihood that U.S. policymakers would implement the proposal. (See Table 5 for a full summary of the policy recommendations).

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## POLICIES TO ADDRESS THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

**1. Require transparency of social media algorithms that promote, curate, target, or profit from user-generated content.**<sup>61</sup> Algorithm transparency would allow the public and policymakers to better assess the risks posed by social media platforms and help guide policies to limit harm caused by abusive content. Technology companies should be more transparent about how current algorithmic systems and design decisions create an enabling environment for online abuse and harassment.<sup>62</sup> Algorithms are developed to maximize user engagement regardless of what content they are consuming. Social media platforms make it too easy for dangerous misogynists, racists, terrorists, etc., to connect online. The public needs access to information about social media algorithms to better understand how content is prioritized, moderated, recommended, amplified, and advertised,<sup>63</sup> and to ensure that social media platforms act as channels of credible information so users can effectively engage in democracy. A disinformation expert interviewed by our research team noted that social media companies contribute to disinformation in the Philippines by not being transparent with their algorithms.

U.S. lawmakers should mandate algorithm transparency by passing the Platform Accountability and Consumer Transparency (PACT) Act, which was introduced in July 2020 by Senator Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) and John Thune (R-South Dakota).<sup>64</sup> Senator John Thune is the Senate Subcommittee's chairman on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet. The PACT Act was introduced after a subcommittee hearing held to investigate legislation to ensure consumers are protected online and understand content moderation practices.<sup>65</sup> In March 2021, the PACT Act was reintroduced ahead of a hearing with CEOs from Facebook, Google, and Twitter on disinformation and misinformation on their platforms.<sup>66</sup> The PACT Act would reform Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act and increase accountability and consumer transparency for technology companies, including social media platforms.<sup>67</sup> Section 230 was originally intended to encourage online platforms to adopt tools for moderating harmful content and provide legal protections for these moderation tools. However, these protections have been abused by large platforms, as they provide sweeping immunity for large tech companies that insufficiently address harmful content on their platforms.<sup>68</sup>

The PACT Act would increase transparency of the content moderation process by requiring that technology companies, including social media platforms, submit quarterly reports to the Federal Trade Commission on what content has been removed or deemphasized. Additionally, the PACT Act should be amended to include a provision that requires social media companies to make their algorithms available to the public. Senator John Thune stated in a press release that he is troubled by opaque algorithms and held a congressional hearing on this topic.<sup>69</sup> This is a bipartisan effort to address issues of transparency for social media platforms. The legislation has been referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee for review.<sup>70</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** Advocates can urge the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee to amend the PACT Act to include these amendments. Senator Brian Schatz sits on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee and can amend this bill.<sup>71</sup>

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations should educate the public on the importance of algorithm transparency by promoting consumer protection and raising awareness of the human cost of opaque algorithms and practices used by large technology companies.

**Media:** Media organizations should publish stories on social media algorithms and how they worsen online abuse, harassment, misinformation and disinformation, and use this coverage to create a direct link between harms against individuals and vulnerable communities and algorithmic decision-making that prioritizes engagement over user protection.

- 2. Require technology companies to employ content moderators fluent in all operating languages.** Social media companies have struggled to manage the volume of harmful content, disinformation, and misinformation on their platforms due in part to the limited capacity of their content moderators.

Social media platforms have unsuccessfully managed the increasing number of new languages used on their platform. For example, Facebook supports 111 different languages through features such as menus and prompts, but there remain 31 widely spoken languages on Facebook that lack this official platform support. The community standards rules, which include policies to manage content violations, have been translated into 41 languages. More critically, the automated tools identifying speech violations operate in 30 languages and identify “terrorist propaganda” in only 19 languages.<sup>72</sup>

Facebook’s lack of investment in languages and content moderation has had deadly consequences, as when the platform failed to adequately remove content that contributed to the genocide against the Rohingya population in Myanmar.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, while Facebook implemented automated tools to identify suspected terrorist propaganda in response to growing public pressure, the tools have had limited success in identifying terrorist text while demonstrating relative success in identifying images promoting terror propaganda. Despite this, images can be modified to evade Facebook’s automated tools.<sup>74</sup> For these reasons, activists should address social media companies’ minimum standards of content moderation and how they create an enabling environment for user harms. Representatives Pallone, Schakowsky, and Doyle sent a letter in early 2021 to Google’s Sundar Pichai and YouTube’s CEO about concerns over the promotion of content linked to terrorist organizations. Representative Schakowsky is planning to reveal her Online Consumer Protection Act, which would allow the Federal Trade Commission and social media users to sue companies for violation of the company’s terms of service.<sup>75</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** Advocates can approach Representatives Pallone, Schakowsky, and Doyle to amend this proposed legislation to include requirements that social media companies correct the language deficit to combat extremism on their platforms. This legislation would

require social media companies to submit a quarterly report to the Federal Trade Commission containing all languages that are being moderated on their platforms and allow for the Federal Trade Commission to penalize companies that do not employ content moderators fluent in all operating languages.

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations working on countering disinformation online, countering violent extremism, and human rights promotion should partner to co-create reports and collectively advocate for content moderation in all operating languages on social media platforms, highlighting how the language deficit is worsening each of these issues. A recent example of coalition-building to address disinformation includes organizations calling for the Biden Administration to form a disinformation task force. The organizations include PEN America, Access Now, A/B Partners, Win Black, Center for American Progress, Center for Democracy & Technology, Common Cause, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Free Press, MediaWise and The Poynter Institute, Simply Secure, and Voto Latino. This coalition can continue their partnership to examine the issue of disinformation from a multifaceted approach.<sup>76</sup>

**Media:** Media platforms should publish more stories about the language deficit demonstrated by moderation of social media platforms and how this leaves extremism, human rights abuses, misinformation, and disinformation unchecked.

## POLICIES TO ADDRESS THE WEAPONIZATION OF GENDERED RELATIONSHIPS AND REINFORCEMENT OF GENDER INEQUALITY:

### 1. Increased foreign aid funding to support civil society organizations (CSOs) and journalists in authoritarian contexts, with special attention to women led CSOs and women journalists.

Several interview respondents identified that online disinformation in the Philippines has been worsened by the Duterte administration's use of authoritarian tactics, which makes high-quality information less accessible to the public. Respondents also indicated that targeting journalists and human rights defenders, especially women dissenters and journalists, is an authoritarian tactic contributing to disinformation. More resources need to be dedicated to women-led civil society organizations and women journalists to combat disinformation and online gendered harms and promote more publicly available high-quality information. USAID should provide the necessary funding to projects that support women journalists and civil society leaders in the Philippines, as they currently do not fund such initiatives.<sup>77</sup> These initiatives are important to create more funding and support for women journalists and women-led civil society organizations who are disproportionately impacted by the fight against disinformation.

Advocates should also approach the sponsors of the H.R. 8313 Bill: Philippine Human Rights Act to advocate for this policy, which has been introduced to the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The bill is sponsored by Representative Susan Wild and co-sponsored by 30 other House Democrats. The bill would limit assistance to the Filipino police or military until an investigation and prosecution of human rights violators take place, withdraw the military from domestic police activities, and enact effective protections for journalists and civil society activists.<sup>78</sup> Activists can advocate for an amendment to this introduced legislation to highlight how women journalists and activists are especially vulnerable to these harms and call for USAID to provide more

funding to support these vulnerable advocates on the frontlines of the fight against disinformation and authoritarianism.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** Representative Susan Wild, the bill sponsor, has supported the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act of 2021 and would likely be amendable to address the gendered harms taking place in the Philippines if educated by advocates.<sup>79</sup>

**Civil Society:** U.S. headquartered civil society organizations that have existing programming in the Philippines should prioritize grantmaking that supports women-led civil society organizations and women journalists to create the funding opportunities necessary to support work strengthening democratic institutions and gender equality. These funding initiatives can include support in exposing patterns of gendered disinformation, increased funding for heightened digital and physical security measures, and support for victims of ongoing gendered disinformation campaigns online.

**Media:** Media organizations in the United States should highlight in their reporting the ongoing targeting of women activists and journalists in the Philippines and emphasize how these attacks weaken gender equality and democratic institutions.

### 2. Develop a National Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse. On March 8, 2021, President Biden signed an executive order, which established the White House Gender Policy Council to ensure a comprehensive U.S. federal government approach to promoting gender equality domestically and abroad. The Gender Policy Council works across executive departments and agencies to coordinate gender equality policies and provide legislative recommendations to the President.<sup>80</sup>

Advocates should call on President Biden to convene a National Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse. The Task Force would work with women leaders across several sectors tracking disinformation to better understand

online abuse against women in public life.<sup>81</sup> This task force can liaise with the Gender Policy Council to better understand the issue of gendered disinformation globally by coordinating and promoting research, recommending legislation for the President to support, and coordinating across federal government agencies to promote awareness of gendered disinformation. During his presidential campaign, President Biden stated his intent to create this task force.<sup>82</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** U.S. lawmakers need to privately and publicly call for the Biden administration to follow-through with this campaign promise as a part of its plan to address violence against women.<sup>83</sup>

**Civil Society:** Activists need to pressure the Biden administration to follow through on this campaign promise. Activist groups like PEN America urged the Biden Administration to implement the Task Force within its first 100 days.<sup>84</sup> The first 100 days have ended, but activists need to continue to ramp up pressure for the administration to implement this Task Force.

**Media:** Journalists should convey the necessity of policy solutions addressing violence against women online and gendered disinformation to raise public awareness and emphasize the need for the Biden Administration to implement relevant measures, including the National Task Force.

**3. Amend Section 230 to address gendered disinformation, provide victim relief, enforce civil rights protections, and ensure that victims abroad can seek redress.** In 2018, the House Bill Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Senate Bill Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA-SESTA) was passed under the Trump Administration. This bill provided a precedent for addressing gendered harms online by undermining technology companies' liability protections under Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act. This legislation has been widely criticized for endangering those engaging in consensual sex work, but it provides precedent to undermine Section 230 protections to address gendered harms.<sup>85</sup>

The Safeguarding Against Fraud, Exploitation, Threats, Extremism and Consumer Harms (SAFE TECH) Act introduced by Senator Mark Warner (D-VA), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), and Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) can address harms through gendered disinformation and other forms of hate speech. The Safe Tech Act would clarify Section 230 liability protections for social media platforms to:

1. Not apply to paid content;
2. Not prevent victims from seeking legal relief;
3. Not prevent the enforcement of civil rights protections;
4. Not interfere with stalking laws;
5. Not prevent wrongful death legal action;
6. Not prevent non-U.S. citizens from suing under the Alien Tort Claims Act.<sup>86</sup>

Disinformation amplified on social media platforms contributes to the targeting and killings of journalists and dissenters against the Duterte administration in the Philippines, according to interviews with journalists, a member of the Philippine parliament, and disinformation and human rights experts. The Alien Tort Claims Act would allow citizens from authoritarian contexts, like the Philippines, to seek redress for the (in)actions by social media platforms based in the U.S. that allow for human rights violations like those occurring in the Philippines.<sup>87</sup> Suing U.S. headquartered social media companies will not be an avenue financially accessible to most women experiencing gendered disinformation, nor would most women experiencing this have organizational backing or the protection measures necessary to make this an accessible option. However, this avenue would be accessible to high-profile activists and journalists, like Maria Ressa in the Philippines, who have garnered international support and attention. High-profile legal case against large social media platforms could set a precedent and cause large platforms to reform internal company practices or encourage lawmakers to consider stronger reform measures to address gendered disinformation.

There are a few weaknesses within the SAFE TECH Act that should be addressed through amendments. The SAFE Tech Act intends to

address deceptive advertising through removing immunity for third-party content when the content is paid speech. However, the language of the bill extends beyond paid advertising to any content that requires payment,<sup>88</sup> including potentially removing liability protection for advocacy organizations selling merchandise or accepting donations.<sup>89</sup> The language of the bill should be refined to ensure that liability protections are only removed for deceptive advertisement so that social media platforms do not begin heavily moderating other forms of paid content, which would disincentivize advocacy organizations from using these platforms for fundraising efforts. Critics of the bill also highlight that the current language would have made it more difficult for movements like the #MeToo movement to become successful.<sup>90</sup>

The SAFE TECH Act would remove platform liability protections in instances where stalking, harassment, and intimidation is occurring. It also allows victims of abuse to seek court orders where they believe a provider's services can cause irreparable harm.<sup>91</sup> The language within the SAFE TECH Act is broad enough to potentially allow those accused of abuse to allege that abuse claims are causing 'irreparable' harm or are a form of harassment. This may lead to platforms to begin to heavily moderate posts with sexual abuse allegations to avoid lawsuits from powerful abusers.<sup>92</sup> The language of this bill should be refined to ensure that liability protections are only removed for deceptive paid advertising. The SAFE TECH Act should also be amended to ensure that powerful abusers cannot exploit this bill to avoid accountability.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** Several high-profile senators sponsor the SAFE TECH Act, and with the significant momentum behind regulating social media companies, there is a strong likelihood that this bill will gain traction.

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations can advocate for the proposed amendments detailed above highlighting how the successes and failures of FOSTA-SESTA can inform the

language of the SAFE TECH Act. These organizations can work closely with individuals harmed under FOSTA-SESTA, raising public awareness of the need for more refined language in the SAFE TECH Act and similar tech company reform legislation.

**Media:** Media organizations can publish more about the benefits of this legislation, interviewing Senators Warner, Hirono, and Klobuchar. This would raise public awareness of proposed legislation to amend Section 230, highlighting the necessity of amending this outdated internet legislation.

## POLICIES TO ADDRESS THE CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN POWER AND WEAKENED DEMOCRACY:

**1. Transparency on the existence of coordinated attacks on elections.** U.S. policymakers should require social media companies to be more transparent regarding coordinated attacks online, especially attacks on elections and what actions are being taken to remove fake account networks.<sup>93</sup> Facebook creates publicly available monthly Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Reports.<sup>94</sup> According to an interview with a disinformation expert, the Duterte administration and other authoritarian leaders use disinformation as an electoral tactic to consolidate authoritarian power. Authoritarian leaders use gendered disinformation as an electoral tactic to consolidate their power, and the public needs to be made aware these attacks are undermining the integrity of the electoral process. Announcements to the public of these networks' takedown by platforms like Facebook are currently incomplete and selective.<sup>95</sup>

Activists concerned about election interference from social media actors engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior could advocate for an amendment to the PACT Act. The PACT Act requires that social media companies submit quarterly reports to the Federal Trade Commission on what content has been removed or deemphasized. The PACT Act can be amended to include a requirement that tech companies must include coordinated attacks on elections and mitigation measures taken in this report.<sup>96</sup>

### IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** Both Senator Brian Schatz and Senator John Thune have expressed concern about Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election through coordinated inauthentic behavior on social media, indicating that they would likely be open to an amendment to their bill on more transparency when these attacks exist, and measures are taken to address it.<sup>97</sup>

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations should partner with social media platforms to ensure that Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior reports are comprehensive and to adequately monitor trends in coordinated attacks against elections.

**Media:** Media organizations should publish more on the role of coordinated inauthentic behavior in shaping the outcomes of elections and the undermining of democratic elections. Media organizations should ensure that they are adequately covering these coordinated online attacks in elections taking place in smaller countries and in the global south as well.

**2. Penalize social media companies that do not adequately monitor and remove accounts and pages with inauthentic behavior that spread harmful content.** The PACT Act would require that large technology companies, like Facebook and Twitter, remove illegal content posted by users within 24 hours, while smaller technology companies would have additional time.<sup>98</sup> The PACT Act should be amended to instead focus on harmful content rather than illegal content. In the United Kingdom, a "duty of care" is being imposed on large social media companies, requiring them to take a proactive approach in preventing harmful content from spreading on their platforms. Ofcom, an existing regulator in the UK, has the power to issue warnings, notices, and fines to enforce standards on harmful content.<sup>99</sup> The fines imposed on large social media companies should be large enough to sufficiently deter these companies from violating this duty of care approach. The proposed regulatory framework would require social media companies to take a proactive approach to counteracting online campaigns intended to undermine democratic institutions and spread gendered disinformation.

The PACT Act should be amended to impose a duty of care regulatory framework rather than focusing on the removal of illegal content, which could be overseen by the Federal Trade Commission. In 2017, Germany introduced a similar provision requiring the removal of illegal

content within 24-hours, but this approach was critiqued by human rights activists that this placed the burden on social media companies to determine what content was illegal without adequate oversight. The duty of care approach would require social media companies to take a more proactive approach to preventing consumer harm.<sup>100</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** The PACT Act has the possibility of gaining more widespread congressional support because it is bipartisan, and it is co-authored by the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, Technology, Innovation, and the Internet. Advocates should support this legislation as an important step in promoting transparency for social media companies.

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations should continue to address how proactive approaches are needed in addressing gendered disinformation through generating reports that highlight the harm of passive approaches by these platforms, and how current regulatory frameworks enable social media platforms to allow consumer harm to occur on their platforms.

**Media:** Media organizations should report more on the successes and failures of the duty of care policy framework in the United Kingdom following its implementation, including how well this approach addresses gendered disinformation and other online harms.

- 3. Develop a Congressional Commission on Online Abuse, Disinformation, Misinformation, Civil Rights Infringements, and National Security Concerns.** A congressional commission is: "a multi-member independent entity that (1) is established by Congress, (2) exists temporarily, (3) serves in an advisory capacity, (4) is appointed in part or whole by Members of Congress, and (5) reports to Congress."<sup>101</sup> Establishment of a congressional commission would enable a temporary examination of the issue of gendered disinformation and other forms of online abuse, provide reports, and offer policy

recommendations that analyze disinformation as a multifaceted issue.<sup>102</sup>

Following the Capitol Riots, there is significant momentum by U.S. lawmakers to address disinformation on social media platforms. There is bipartisan support to amend Section 230, developed over twenty years ago, to address disinformation and to hold large technology companies accountable for electoral harms, undermining democratic institutions, and online abuse. Many policymakers from both major parties have drafted or introduced legislation that attempts to amend Section 230.<sup>103</sup> A congressional commission could offer policymakers the opportunity to examine this issue in more depth to inform more comprehensive legislation to amend Section 230.

## IMPLEMENTATION

**Policymakers:** There is significant momentum to regulate disinformation online following the U.S. Capitol riots in January 2021, so advocates should approach representatives who have introduced or drafted legislation on social media regulation to advocate for this commission's development. These lawmakers include Senator Schatz, Senator Thune, Representative Schakowsky, Representative Pallone, Representative Doyle, Representative Rodgers, Representative Eshoo, Representative Malinowski, Representative Cicilline, Senator Warner, Senator Klobuchar, and Senator Hirono.<sup>104</sup>

**Civil Society:** Civil society organizations and advocates can approach members of the U.S. Democratic Women's Caucus to advocate for the commission's creation because the Caucus' letter calling for Facebook to better combat gendered disinformation.<sup>105</sup>

**Media:** Media organizations can report more on all pending legislation to update regulatory frameworks for social media platforms, highlighting the different policy reform approaches being taken to address misinformation, disinformation, and human rights abuses on these platforms.

Table 5: Policy Recommendations to Disrupt Gendered Disinformation

<b>POLICIES TO ADDRESS ENABLING ENVIRONMENT</b>	
<b>Algorithm Transparency</b>	U.S. lawmakers should require social media companies to be more transparent about how current algorithms fuel gendered disinformation, misinformation, online abuse, and harassment.
<b>Content Moderators in All Operating Languages</b>	U.S. lawmakers should require social media companies to raise minimum standards of moderation practices to eliminate the language deficit and prevent proliferation of harmful content.
<b>POLICIES TO ADDRESS WEAPONIZATION OF GENDERED RELATIONSHIPS AND REINFORCEMENT OF GENDER INEQUALITY</b>	
<b>Foreign Aid Funding for Women Journalists and Women-led CSOs</b>	USAID and other government agencies should provide more funding to support vulnerable advocates, like women journalists and civil society leaders.
<b>National Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse</b>	President Biden should convene a task force to foster sustained federal research and policy attention regarding online abuse against women in public life.
<b>SAFE TECH Act</b>	U.S. lawmakers should amend and pass this legislation to clarify liability protections for technology companies.
<b>POLICIES TO ADDRESS CONSOLIDATION OF AUTHORITARIAN POWER AND WEAKENED DEMOCRACY</b>	
<b>Transparency on Coordinated Attacks on Elections</b>	U.S. lawmakers should require social media companies to inform the public when authoritarian leaders use gendered disinformation to undermine electoral processes and democratic institutions.
<b>Duty of Care</b>	U.S. lawmakers should impose a duty of care on large social media companies that requires they take a proactive approach in preventing harmful content and gendered disinformation on their platforms.
<b>Congressional Commission on Online Abuse, Disinformation, Misinformation, Civil Rights Infringements, and National Security Concerns</b>	U.S. lawmakers should establish a commission to examine gendered disinformation and other forms of online abuse, submit relevant reports, and provide policy recommendations.

# APPENDIX A: Interviews

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	<b>Date:</b>	<b>Organization:</b>
1.	2/16/2021	GQR
2.	2/19/2021	ABS-CBN
3.	2/19/2021	International Republican Institute
4.	2/23/2021	The Commission on Human Rights in the Philippines
5.	3/1/2021	Human Rights Watch
6.	3/5/2021	The International Foundation for Electoral Systems
7.	3/9/2021	Ateneo de Manila University, School of Law
8.	3/11/2021	Philippine House of Representatives, Gabriela Party
9.	3/12/2021	University of the Philippines
10.	3/19/2021	The Asia Foundation
11.	3/26/2021	PEN America
12.	3/30/2021	Graphika
13.	4/9/2021	Demos

# APPENDIX B: Description of Actors

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## Supportive Men

### Rodrigo Duterte

President of the Philippines (2016–present)  
Mayor of Davao City (2013–2016)

### Harry Roque

Presidential Spokesperson (2017–2018, 2020–present)  
Philippine House of Representatives (2016–2017)

### Tito Sotto

Philippine Senate (1992–2004, 2010–present)

### Manny Pacquiao

Philippine Senate (2016–present) Philippine House of Representatives (2010–2016)

### Bato dela Rosa

Philippine Senate (2019–present)  
Chief of Philippine National Police (2016–2018)

## Supportive Women

### Sara Duterte

Mayor of Davao City (2016–present)

### Cynthia Villar

Philippine Senate (2013–present)  
Philippine House of Representatives (2001–2010)

### Imee Marcos

Philippine Senate (2019–present)  
Governor of Ilocos Norte (2010–2019)

### Geraldine Roman

Philippine House of Representatives (2016–present)

### Lorraine Badoy

Undersecretary of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) (2017–present)

## Supportive Organizations

### PDP-Laban Tagalog

(Partido Demokratiko Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan; Philippine Democratic Party–People’s Power)  
Political party of President Duterte  
Ruling party of the Philippines since 2016

### Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO)

Office charged with disseminating information from Philippine government to private media outlets; supervises state media outlets

### R.J. Nieto Pro-Duterte

Filipino blogger Pen name: “Thinking Pinoy”

## Critical Men

### Teddy Baguilat

Philippine House of Representatives (2010–2019)  
Governor of Ifugao (2007–2010)  
Activist for indigenous peoples’ rights

### Francis Pangilinan

Philippine Senate (2001–2013, 2016–present)

### Erin Tañada

Philippine House of Representatives (2004–2013)  
Advocate for labor rights and human rights

### Franklin Drilon

Philippine Senate (1995–2007, 2010–present)

### Kit Belmonte

Philippine House of Representatives

## Critical Women

### Leni Robredo

Vice President of the Philippines (2016–present)  
Philippine House of Representatives (2013–2016)

### Leila de Lima

Philippine Senate (2016–present)

### Arlene Brosas

Philippine House of Representatives

### Risa Hontiveros

Philippine Senate (2016–2020)  
Philippine House of Representatives (2004–2010)

### Samira Gutoc

Philippine Senate candidate in 2019 election  
Regional Legislative Assembly of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (2016–2018)

## Critical Organizations

### GABRIELA

(General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action)  
Women’s rights organization

### Gabriela Women’s Party

Philippine political party-list launched by GABRIELA in 2003

### Joms Salvador

Secretary General of GABRIELA Philippines

### Commission on Human Rights (CHR)

Independent commission created under 1987 Philippine Constitution to investigate human rights abuses in the Philippines

### Maria Ressa

Journalist CEO and co-founder of Rappler, a leading news outlet reporting on disinformation in the Philippines

## APPENDIX C: Volume of Tweets by Analytical Category

<b>Timeline Collection</b>					
Analytical Category	Tweet Type				
	Original	Retweet	Reply	Quote	Tweet Total
Supportive Men	3,570	720	409	178	4,877
Supportive Women	5,689	2,643	670	483	9,485
Supportive Organizations	6,350	2,132	1,140	71	9,693
Critical Men	6,062	1,836	3,798	837	12,533
Critical Women	4,051	4,788	4,709	553	14,101
Critical Organizations	6,656	6,507	2,743	566	16,472

<b>Filter Collection</b>					
Analytical Category	Tweet Type				
	Original	Retweet	Reply	Quote	Tweet Total
Supportive Men	62,928	212,796	61,931	58,519	396,174
Supportive Women	1,409	9,981	1,020	4,451	16,861
Supportive Organizations	322	685	971	187	2,165
Critical Men	541	6,612	796	4,869	12,818
Critical Women	4,202	38,625	10,947	8,479	62,253
Critical Organizations	41,318	136,711	38,567	20,594	237,190

# APPENDIX D: Sample Tweets

## Tweets Discrediting Critical Women: Leni Robredo

**Tweet**

**ilda** @ilda\_talk · Feb 15  
Leni doesn't even know her job as VP! Someone has to tell her she's just a spare tire and should remain quiet.

**Joseph Morong** @Joseph\_Morong · Feb 15  
Pres. Duterte to Vice-Pres. Leni Robredo: You are really not qualified to run for president, you do not know the job @gmanews

11 replies, 10 retweets, 80 likes

**Tweet**

**Jamie Alexandre Alonzo** @JamieAlonzo · Feb 16  
When President Rodrigo Duterte said Leni Robredo is ignorant on the law, he is not attacking Leni as a woman, he is attacking Leni Robredo's limited intellectual capacity and her warped interpretation of the law.

6 replies, 21 retweets, 158 likes

**Tweet**

**ilda** @ilda\_talk · Feb 17  
Calling Duterte an extortionist is not what one would consider a suggestion. Leni is very good at playing the victim card. She needs to be taken down to the level where she belongs. She thinks too highly of herself.

**CNN Philippines** @cnnphilippines · Feb 16  
VP Robredo says she is disappointed that the response to her suggestions are insults, but adds that she cannot control that [Show this thread](#)

8 replies, 32 retweets, 165 likes

**Tweet**

**Zion Ryan Cruz** @zryanverse · Feb 15  
Duterte, President of the Philippines is obviously threatened by Leni Robredo, lawyer, single mom, most powerful woman & Vice President of the Philippines

Duterte is known to spread propaganda, lies & is pro China

Why should anyone w/half a brain believe a word he says?

**Joseph Morong** @Joseph\_Morong · Feb 15  
Pres. Duterte to Vice-President Leni Robredo: Kinakabahan ako if by chance maging Presidente ka. You should study more, you need a refresher course on the law (We are getting VP Robredo's side on these latest statements by the President) @gmanews

1 reply, 4 retweets, 10 likes

## Tweets Discrediting Supportive Women: Sara Duterte

**Tweet**

**The Philippine Star** @PhilippineStar · Feb 24  
"Inday Sara is not running. I have really put my foot down," President Duterte said on the sidelines of his situational briefing on Typhoon Auring in Surigao del Sur last Tuesday.



Inday Sara not running for president – Duterte  
For the nth time, President Duterte has discouraged his daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio, from running for president ... [philstar.com](#)

25 replies, 6 retweets, 9 likes

**Tweet**

**AkoKiniHigala** @AkoHigala · Feb 24  
Replying to @agot\_isidro  
The wickedness of Duterte spares neither the rich nor the poor. Sara has proven to be her father's daughter. Liar is the father so is the daughter. Remember the sheriff who Sara hit? Remember Mariel de Leon who she mocked. Put yourselves in their shoes.

**Tweet**

**Doctor Luck** @TheDoctorLuck · Jan 30  
Dear Sara Duterte,  
Please bear with us for asking you to run for president. We enjoy your dad's style of governance and truly want more. We don't ask you to run because you're his daughter, but we're asking because you're the closest match to his mettle as a leader.

[#RunSaraRun](#)

41 replies, 319 retweets, 1K likes

# APPENDIX D: Sample Tweets

## Tweets Discrediting Critical Men: Francis Pangilinan

**Tweet**

**GMA News** @gmanews · Feb 14

Sharon Cuneta receives vegetable bouquet from husband Sen. Kiko Pangilinan on Valentine's Day



Sharon Cuneta receives vegetable bouquet from husband Sen. Kiko ... Sen. Kiko Pangilinan has joined the trend of giving unusual bouquets this Valentine's Day by giving his wife Sharon Cuneta a ...  
gmanetwork.com

10 8 79

**Ruth** @ruthanginanyo

Replying to @kikopangilinan

Napakaplastik na statement goes to you Kiko! Without your wife, u will never have a seat in politics!

4:17 PM · Feb 16, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

**Tweet**

**Binibining Pilipinas** @BinibiningPili2

Replying to @kikopangilinan

puro pintas-walang tulong ibigay kung walang pakinabang

You are a politician indeed. Blame game is your motto. Haven't you heard Pfizer and Moderna are both companies out to make money like all other businesses? So why not put in a little of your wife's money to make it a reality

4:16 PM · Feb 23, 2021 · Twitter Web App

## Tweets Discrediting Supportive Men: Harry Roque

**Tweet**

@fthobn · Feb 26

"I was fangirling over Harry Roque" YUCK SIS. DO BETTER.

**s** @samgubaton · Feb 25

✨ it's the additional noise for me ✨ 😊

Show this thread



1:12 1.1M views

**Thread**

**Jett Pe** @jettpe

Replying to @jettpe

Also... Anyone who gets excited about meeting Harry Roque is just 🤢 Like seriously?? Why the f\*ck. The man is a disgrace.

9:07 AM · Feb 26, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

**Thread**

**OXOX** @teeoxslay\_ox

Replying to @teeoxslay\_ox

first of all, imagine fangirling over Harry Roque lol the bar is LOW

10:59 AM · Feb 26, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

# NOTES

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