

Mainstreaming Gender Into the Work of Cyber and Hybrid Advisers in Civilian CSDP Missions

THE ROLE OF CYBER AND HYBRID ADVISERS

Cyber and hybrid advisers in civilian CSDP missions provide expert guidance on cybersecurity and hybrid threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). These advisers are a key part of the EU's efforts to build resilience and enhance response mechanisms against hybrid and cyber threats.

Key responsibilities:



Identify and advise host state partners on the capacity-building and training opportunities related to hybrid threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference.



Support mission counterparts by assessing needs and recommending relevant training opportunities on hybrid threats.



Design, deliver and support the implementation of external training activities on hybrid threats.



Provide analysis and recommendations to local counterparts within the adviser's area of responsibility.

Mission Analytical Capabilities (MAC) Analysts contribute by identifying, monitoring and reporting on emerging and ongoing hybrid and other threats within the mission area of operations. Their work supports the mission, the host nation, and EU interests.

All mission staff has the responsibility to integrate gender equality and human rights considerations into the planning and execution of their tasks.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER ANALYSIS IN ASSESSING HYBRID THREATS IN HOST COUNTRIES

1

Women do participate in armed groups, but their participation often goes unnoticed

While most armed actors—such as soldiers, militants, and terrorists—are men, and most peace negotiators and security officials are also male, women and girls are not absent from these dynamics. In fact, research covering 372 non-state armed groups active between 1946 and 2015 found that 63% included women in some capacity.

Women and girls participate in armed groups in many ways: as combatants, spies, smugglers, porters, translators, sex workers, wives, cooks, nurses, recruiters, and communicators. Despite their involvement, their roles often remain invisible in mainstream analysis. This lack of visibility can lead to an incomplete understanding of extremist strategies and recruitment methods.

For example, in the Sahel, women have been known to carry small weapons under their clothing—often evading detection due to the absence of female border guards. In other cases, women acting as market vendors gather intelligence and pass it along through their husbands. Without proper gender analysis, such threats may go unnoticed.

Social media platforms are used to recruit women and young girls to armed groups

2

Extremist groups increasingly use social media platforms to target and recruit women and girls. A 2022 report by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), prepared for the European Commission, outlines how different platforms are used and what kinds of narratives are most effective in drawing young women and girls into violent extremism. Recruiters often exploit existing vulnerabilities, including limited digital literacy and a lack of awareness about online safety. They also appeal to traditional gender roles—using messages about identity, belonging, and “natural” female responsibilities to manipulate and groom potential recruits.

3 Online access increases access to information and creates social challenges like disinformation and radicalisation

In regions like the Sahel, growing digital access brings both opportunities and risks. According to Search for Common Ground, as more people come online, the internet becomes a powerful space for connection, learning, and community-building. It also creates new challenges. Online platforms can amplify social tensions by allowing historical divisions to play out in digital spaces—sometimes spilling back into real-world violence. Sahelian researchers and practitioners note that in already fragile societies, the interaction between offline grievances and online networks can intensify disinformation, political manipulation, radicalisation, and social polarisation.

Raising awareness of gendered disinformation

4

Misogyny, sexism, and gender stereotypes exist in all times. What has changed in the digital era is the ease of coordinating, financing, and propagating disinformation campaigns. However, there is also increased awareness about the topic and its real-life consequences, as women—especially those in positions of power and visibility—are unduly targeted by online disinformation. The goal of disinformation campaigns, especially in targeting women politicians, journalists, or public figures, is to question their credibility, polarise their audience, and push them away from positions of power.

5 There is a digital gender divide, but when women access online spaces, they face a higher chance of gender-based harassment

A digital gender divide persists: in 2023, 70% of men used the internet compared to 65% of women—leaving 244 million more men than women online globally. In regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, women are significantly less likely to own mobile phones or access mobile internet. Half of Malian women aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual violence, these dynamics replicate and exacerbate themselves in online spaces.

Yet when women do access digital spaces, they face a higher risk of gender-based harassment. Online gender-based violence (OGBV) is widespread, with global prevalence ranging from 16% to 58%. While men also experience online abuse, it is less likely to be gendered. Female political leaders report that targeted disinformation and harassment discourage women’s participation in public and political life.

The continuum between online and offline violence

6

Online and offline gender-based violence are closely connected, often reinforcing each other. Actions that begin in digital spaces can lead to real-world harm, and vice versa. The IDS Global Survey highlights a persistent “climate of unsafety” and provides strong evidence that online and offline violence are part of the same continuum.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CAPABILITIES DEVELOPMENT

1. MAC Analysts and Cyber/Hybrid Advisers should assess how women and men participate in armed groups—how frequently, in what roles, and how they are recruited—as these dynamics can influence conflict patterns in the host country.
2. It is important for MAC Analysts and Cyber/Hybrid Advisers to identify the prevalence of disinformation campaigns, especially those targeting women in politics, journalism, or public life, and consider their impact on peace and security.
3. Recognise online violence as part of the conflict landscape. Online violence against women is part of a broader spectrum of gender-based violence. In conflict settings, it can escalate and contribute to radicalisation and polarisation.
4. MAC Analysts and Cyber/Hybrid Advisers should work with Gender and Human Rights Advisers to evaluate national measures addressing online violence—such as laws, specialised agencies, and support services like helplines.
5. Collaboration with Gender and Human Rights Advisers is essential to ensure this information informs mission advice, training, and engagement with national counterparts.

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