

Strategic Communications and Gender Dimensions in the Information Environment

What is It and Why Does it Matter?

Broadly speaking, strategic communications through a gender-responsive lens seeks to draw attention to both the image projected by the mission and how target audiences perceive it. Given the weaponisation of harmful gender narratives by strategic competitors, gender-blind strategic communications may result in unintended negative consequences for armed forces and military operations. Integrating gender perspectives can help dismantle harmful gender stereotypes, foster the implementation of wider commitments related to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and represent a tactical advantage to win the information war.

Gender Disinformation

The 2024 NATO Policy on WPS mandated the use of Alliance strategic communications to support the integration of the policy into actions to detect, prevent, and respond to the weaponisation of gendered narratives and the use of related disinformation. NATO's strategic competitors use coordinated communication strategies to polarize Allies' societies and portray themselves as defenders of alternative values.

An adversary's gender-based communication strategy may pursue three objectives: (i) undermining the West's cultural influence by depicting so-called 'gender ideology' as a threat; (ii) eroding public support for NATO and the EU by claiming that NATO-aligned forces commit sexual and gender-based violence; and (iii) making its own foreign policy appear legitimate to both national and international audiences. Here, gender-related narratives act as a vehicle for hybrid influence.

Space Security and Information Infrastructures

While the battle for influence takes place in the cognitive domain, information still requires infrastructure to reach the audience's mind. In a nutshell, space enable connectivity and information flows, which then reach the cognitive environment. This is where cognition will give meaning to the available information, thereby influencing decisions and actions, generating operational effects shaping the strategic environment. Dependence on physical infrastructure exposes information flows to increased vulnerabilities. Hence, addressing strategic communications through a spatial security lens forces us to address both tangible and intangible threats.

Cognition, Behavior and Operational Effect

Information warfare translates into a competition on how information is perceived, interpreted and, ultimately, acted upon. Gender is part of the cognitive environment in which information evolves. Audiences do not process information neutrally: identities, stereotypes, emotions, and affect shape how it will be interpreted and acted upon. Indeed, the most effective hostile narratives do not necessarily create new divisions within societies; rather, they exploit and deepen entrenched grievances or dormant cleavages, thereby reinforcing an 'us v. them' rhetoric.

Even if the final objective of gender disinformation may have little to do with gender itself, its impact depends on how audiences receive and interpret it. Year after year, perceptions of NATO differ between women and men, with greater numbers of the former being either unaware of NATO's role or against its existence. This persistent gap may reveal some blind spots and the Alliance's ability to reach out to certain audiences. Integrating gender perspectives in the information environment may therefore represent a cognitive military advantage by strengthening understanding of gender-related mechanisms as well as their cognitive and behavioural effects on different audiences. This approach can support more effective communication and better-informed decision-making.

A gender-responsive approach to strategic communication is integral to understanding the information environment, recognising threats and anticipating hostile influence and potential escalation through early warning mechanisms. It is essential for mission effectiveness to grasp how identity-based vulnerabilities can be exploited by strategic competitors to affect the operational environment (i.e. not necessarily in terms of direct military effect but regarding the potentially harmful conditions that narratives fashion). Such an approach in the information environment can enhance military effectiveness at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels while helping identify vulnerabilities and strengthen resilience against a wide range of threats.