

## Support For Women Journalists in Countering Misinformation & Disinformation in The Indo-Pacific Region

### Background

While the 'Digital Age' has enabled access to diverse sources of knowledge at a mouse click, it has also created unprecedented challenges and structural changes in the news industry. Without any gatekeeping entity, journalists and media educators everywhere are grappling with a deluge of speculative and sensational content in news making, further amplified by echo chambers and trust networks. In this situation, verification/fact-checking platforms are needed to navigate the distorted and fear-mongering information circulating on traditional media, especially on social media platforms.

Given this background, misinformation/disinformation seriously threatens democracies worldwide. Therefore, it is vital to address this issue holistically, involving all key stakeholders, including journalists. Thus, this project focuses on addressing regional security issues in the Indo-Pacific countries by envisaging a solid network of informed women media professionals and enabling them to counter the challenges of information asymmetry. This will also look at measures to fight against other associated threats, such as online trolling, workplace harassment and similar atrocities committed, especially against female journalists that pose a significant threat to their careers and wellbeing.

### Problematique

The reliability of information has become a perennial issue with severe real-world repercussions. With the rise of social media in the past decade, the reach and impact of information dissemination have proliferated. Digital technology has increased the amplification and distortion of information so that a single piece of information holds tremendous potential to cause real-world impacts, within minutes, for millions of users.

Besides this, digital media allows for the publication and dissemination of decentralised information in the public arena, with little to no verification and cross-referencing. Hence, malicious actors with vested interests can freely introduce distorted content into the public discourse. At the same time, digital technology enables people to independently find information that aligns with their views and interests, thus reducing their reliance on established media houses. This, in turn, may lead them to seek out and accept information from alternative sources that are critical of the status quo, making them potential targets for disinformation.

Given this context, establishing the reliability of information is a daunting but critical task at present, demanding immediate attention, regulation, and supervision by invested stakeholders overseeing how information is presented and shared online and offline through concerning channels.

### Objectives

The project's ultimate goal is to create a group of informed women journalists to counter spreading misinformation and disinformation that not only poses a threat to their careers but could potentially jeopardise peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. To this end, we propose to bring together 40-50 senior, mid-career female journalists from different parts of India as well as from neighbouring Indo-Pacific nations of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia for a two-day training workshop in Kolkata, India.

Two key expectations from the proposed intervention would be as follows:

**Objective A:** The participants are expected to develop concrete strategies to counter disinformation and misinformation in the Indo-Pacific region within six to eight months of the workshop, as evidenced by collaborative stories/articles published; and

**Objective B:** The participants are also expected to collaborate across borders on reporting issues relevant to their communities and



the US government. The journalists are to develop digital stories countering disinformation and misinformation that will be shared on Consulate's social media platforms.

As an extension of this project, four more media literacy workshops will be organised in different cities of eastern and northeastern India and Dhaka in Bangladesh to make the training workshops more decentralised and clustered.

## Methodology

The project entails:

- **Consultation with the US Consulate General, Public Affairs Section in Kolkata**

CUTS will undertake initial discussions with concerned US Consulate officials to share the ideas and project activity plan outline. This will also include discussions on the Kolkata workshop agenda outline, lists of participants and mentors, roles and responsibilities of those involved and so on. In addition, CUTS will also discuss the Communication Strategy along with the project's Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework.

- **Mapping Of Workshop Participants and Mentors/Trainers**

CUTS will undertake a mapping exercise to shortlist participants and mentors/trainers for the Kolkata workshop. The criteria for mapping trainers will be prominent. Senior journalists, fact-checkers, online editors, photojournalists, social media practitioners, and commentators from India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the US will help participants develop their skills in responsible reporting and enhance their professional network abroad through digital platforms and physical connections. 40-50 participants will be selected along with eminent mentors/trainers. The selected cohort of participants would be from different regions of India, as well as from neighbouring Indo-Pacific nations of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Indonesia.

- **Finalisation Of Workshop Components**

The Kolkata workshop will be spread across two days. While the agenda will be finalised in consultation with the PAS and Kolkata team, tentatively, the workshop will cover the following broad issues:

1. Information literacy
2. Fact-checking tools and techniques
3. Countering online trolling and workplace harassment
4. Debunking visual disinformation and misinformation and the role of responsible journalism
5. Countering challenges to network building and cross-border information sharing among journalists

## Envisaged Outputs

- Organising a series of Webinars with Women Journalists and Other Relevant Trainers before the main workshop in Kolkata
- A physical Media Literacy Workshop in Kolkata
- Digital stories countering disinformation and misinformation by participants
- Developing a Training Manual on fact-checking, combating online trolling and workplace harassment
- Project Summary Report

## Expected Outcomes

A strong, collaborative network of women journalists in the Indo-Pacific region who are equipped to counter all forms of misinformation and disinformation and reinforce positive narratives through responsible cross-border reporting can help maintain peace and stability in this region.

## Project Duration

The project duration is from September 2020-August 2023