



WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: The Role of Social Media and Mass Media in Visibility and Collective Action

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformative role of social media in women's political participation. It highlights how digital platforms enable feminist mobilization, amplify women's voices, and challenge patriarchal structures. Despite their potential, structural inequalities and symbolic violence persist in online spaces. The study offers a critical perspective on gendered digital participation and emphasizes the need for inclusive public policies and feminist media practices.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the development of digital technologies—and particularly social media—has profoundly altered the way individuals engage with politics, giving rise to new forms of expression, mobilization, and citizenship (Banaji et al., 2021). This phenomenon becomes even more relevant when analyzed through a gender lens, as digital platforms have opened unprecedented opportunities for women and other historically marginalized groups to access the public sphere, exercise agency, and articulate collective demands. Far from being mere channels of communication, social networks have taken on a structuring role within the contemporary political ecosystem, reshaping modes of participation and challenging traditional frameworks of representation and power (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2016; Holme et al., 2023).

The inclusion of women in political deliberation and action is not a new phenomenon, but it has long faced historical obstacles that have limited their visibility and leadership. In this context, digital social media emerges as a key tool for women's political empowerment, enabling more horizontal, accessible forms of participation adapted to the dynamics of everyday life (Xenos et al., 2014). These platforms foster autonomous expression, the creation of support networks, and the articulation of collective causes—even within restrictive or authoritarian environments. Thus, the digital space becomes an alternative arena where women can contest the meaning of politics, challenge entrenched patriarchal structures, and generate new forms of social leadership (Anduiza et al., 2014).

Moreover, the emergence of digital political citizenship has amplified gender-focused activism practices that go beyond institutional participation, incorporating emotional, symbolic, and aesthetic languages native to virtual environments. Through satire, hyperbole, hashtags, and visual storytelling, women have crafted discursive repertoires capable of confronting power and mobilizing entire communities (Matsilele & Mututwa, 2021; Mpofu, 2021). This political creativity not only amplifies women's voices but also transforms the logic of protest and political engagement in the 21st century (Waeterloos et al., 2021).

However, the democratizing potential of social media coexists with numerous tensions and contradictions. The digital gender gap remains a structural barrier that restricts equitable access to technology, especially in rural, impoverished, or patriarchally governed contexts (Datta, 2019). This inequality hinders many women from fully appropriating digital environments as spaces of citizenship, limiting their autonomy, expressive capacity, and development of critical skills (Inglehart et al., 2002). In addition, political participation on social media is constantly threatened by symbolic, discursive, and sexualized forms of violence that operate with particular severity in digital spaces, perpetuating exclusion and silencing women's voices (Recuero, 2013; Žižek, 2014; Hidalgo, 2020).

From a critical perspective, this section examines how digital social media is reshaping the relationship between gender and political participation, acknowledging both its emancipatory potential and structural limitations. The analysis addresses several key thematic axes: online and offline mobilization; differentiated forms of digital political participation; discursive resistance strategies such as satire and hyperbole; the persistence of the digital gender gap; the reproduction of media inequalities; and the impact of language as a device of power. Together, these elements provide a comprehensive understanding of how social networks are being appropriated, contested, and re-signified by women in diverse contexts—not merely as technological tools, but as symbolic territories from which feminist political citizenship is reconfigured (Fairclough, 1989, 2016; Resende & Ramalho, 2006; Dayrit et al., 2022).

This reflection seeks not only to highlight women's struggles and strategies in the digital sphere, but also to challenge narratives that idealize social networks as neutral and inclusive spaces. On the contrary, equitable access to these environments demands gender-sensitive public policies, critical digital literacy, and a collective commitment to dismantling the symbolic and material structures that sustain exclusion. Ultimately, thinking about the relationship between social media, gender, and political participation requires recognizing that the democratic transformation of the public sphere increasingly hinges on the struggle over the digital space.

2. Social Media, Gender, and Political Participation

This section highlights the transformative role that digital social media plays in contemporary political participation, emphasizing its particular impact on the inclusion of women and historically marginalized

groups. These platforms have contributed to democratizing access to the public sphere, reducing structural barriers to participation, and facilitating more horizontal and accessible forms of collective mobilization. In this context, digital mobilization emerges as a key tool for women's political empowerment, enabling autonomous expression, the articulation of collective causes, and the building of support networks—even within restrictive or authoritarian settings. Additionally, digital media are noted for amplifying and making women's voices more visible in protest and collective action processes, offering safe and effective spaces for gender-focused activism.

2.1. Social Media and Mobilization

Digital social media has significantly transformed political participation, especially regarding the involvement of women and other historically marginalized groups. These platforms have lowered entry costs, allowing more people to access the public sphere, voice their opinions, and mobilize collectively. Several studies have shown that social networks help reduce political participation inequalities by removing many of the structural barriers that once limited access to deliberative and political action spaces (Anduiza et al., 2014; Xenos et al., 2014).

From this perspective, digital mobilization represents a crucial pathway for women's political empowerment. By providing more democratic access to political information and support networks, social platforms enhance civic agency—even in exclusionary or authoritarian contexts. This is particularly relevant for young women or those from underrepresented communities, who find in these media channels for autonomous political expression and collective organizing (Xenos et al., 2014).

Moreover, digital media not only amplify women's voices but also ensure their visibility in processes of protest and mass mobilization. In this sense, the role of media in general—and of social networks in particular—has been identified as key in narrowing gender gaps in protest participation, as they provide safe, accessible, and effective spaces for activism (Valenzuela et al., 2016; Mvukiyehe, 2025).

Social media has contributed to reshaping women's political participation by empowering them with new tools for visibility, organization, and mobilization. These platforms not only foster greater equity in the political sphere but also strengthen activism and collective action from a gender-sensitive perspective.

2.2. Online and Offline Political Participation

The distinction between online and offline political participation has garnered considerable attention in recent political behavior studies. According to Vissers and Stolle (2014), both forms of engagement are relevant, as online participation represents a distinct mode of political action. This modality typically presents fewer logistical, structural, or social barriers compared to traditional offline participation, thereby facilitating access for individuals otherwise excluded from conventional channels.

From this vantage point, online political participation should not be viewed merely as a supplement but as an autonomous dimension enabling new forms of agency and visibility—especially for historically marginalized groups like young women. Empirical evidence supports the idea that digital social networks and virtual environments allow for more accessible, direct, and continuous political engagement, reducing the traditional costs of involvement in political causes (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Mayoyo, 2023).

Furthermore, the informative use of media—particularly on digital platforms such as social media—has been positively correlated with higher levels of both online and offline political participation. Studies such as Shah et al. (2007) have shown that political information consumption through social networks and newspapers can act as a catalyst for civic and political engagement, encouraging individuals to stay informed, deliberate, and act according to their convictions.

The informative use of digital media and the expansion of opportunities for online participation are reshaping how political citizenship is exercised, offering new paths to empowerment that particularly benefit women and youth engaged in political activism.

2.3. Social Media as a Tool for Political Participation

Social networks have become a key instrument for contemporary political participation, particularly among women and traditionally marginalized groups. Their role has been emphasized in research

highlighting how platforms like Facebook and Twitter enable new forms of political interaction, both individually and collectively. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2012) emphasize that social media use can significantly influence political participation by expanding access to information, lowering entry barriers, and enabling direct interaction between citizens and political actors. Thus, social networks are transforming the public sphere by providing a more horizontal, inclusive, and dynamic environment.

Empirical examples of this phenomenon include nonviolent movements such as Occupy Wall Street, as well as more intense protest episodes like the London riots or demonstrations organized in the San Francisco subway (Fox, 2011). These cases illustrate the power of digital platforms to articulate civic demands, generate collective visibility, and serve as arenas for sociopolitical dissent—especially in contexts where women face restrictions in traditional public spaces.

To better understand these dynamics, Waeterloos et al. (2021) propose the concept of *Social Media Political Participation* (SMPP), which distinguishes four forms of political participation on social media. First, *latent engagement*, referring to passive consumption of political or social information. Second, *counter-engagement*, defined as uncivil behavior for sociopolitical ends, such as digital sabotage or trolling. Third, *follower engagement*, in which users interact with political content produced by others, through sharing, reacting, or commenting. Finally, *expressive engagement* involves active production of original political content, including posts, digital campaigns, images, or videos.

This typology broadens our understanding of how women exercise political agency in digital environments, making visible both explicit activism and everyday practices of resistance and participation. Overall, these approaches reveal that social networks are not just technical tools but symbolic spaces through which women build narratives, claim rights, and transform traditional logics of representation and power.

2.4. Satire and Digital Hyperbole as Strategies of Feminist Resistance

In authoritarian or restrictive contexts—where traditional political activism may entail significant risks—women have turned to social media as an alternative space for expressing dissent. One of the most commonly used strategies is digital satire, understood as a tool of symbolic resistance. Studies such as those by Matsilele and Mututwa (2021) and Mpofu (2021) highlight how women activists use sarcasm, humor, parody, and ironic hashtags as forms of indirect political critique. These practices enable them to challenge regimes without directly exposing themselves to physical violence or state repression, which often characterizes traditional public spaces. Thus, satire not only communicates dissent but also fosters community and visibility from a position of mitigated risk.

Alongside satire, another key discursive resource in digital activism is hyperbole—deliberate exaggeration to reinforce political messaging. According to Sunstein (2017) and McChesney (1999), hyperbole serves a dual function: on the one hand, it amplifies the reach and visibility of specific narratives; on the other, it can intensify polarization between opposing ideological groups. Within this framework, women participating in digital protest use hashtags such as #ZanuPFMustGo or #JusticeForMobby, which condense calls for justice and political opposition into emotionally charged slogans. These expressions function not only as discursive anchors in the digital sphere but also as symbols of resistance to authoritarian regimes, while simultaneously provoking strong reactions that deepen polarization in online public discourse.

Both strategies—satire and hyperbole—demonstrate that women's political participation on social media transcends conventional forms of expression, incorporating cultural, affective, and rhetorical codes specific to the digital environment. These politicized modes of communication enable women to amplify their demands, mobilize support, and contest the meaning of politics from the margins.

3. Digital Divide and Gender Inequality

This section examines how the digital gender divide limits women's political participation in digital environments, despite the inclusive potential of social media and other communication technologies. Based on various studies, it becomes evident that women face structural, sociocultural, and technological barriers that condition their access to, use of, and appropriation of information technologies—especially in rural settings or countries governed by strong patriarchal norms. This inequality affects not only connectivity but also hinders the development of digital skills, informational autonomy, and political expression on digital platforms. Additionally, factors such as gendered socialization, lack of resources, and the symbolic control of virtual public space deepen entry barriers

to digital political participation. Therefore, the digital divide should not be understood merely as a lack of infrastructure but as a manifestation of broader inequalities that must be addressed through an intersectional lens and the pursuit of digital justice.

3.1. Digital Divide and Gender Inequality

Despite the democratizing potential of social media for political participation, various studies agree that women continue to face persistent structural barriers that limit their access, agency, and visibility in these spaces. One of the main limitations is the digital gender divide, understood as the systematic difference between men and women in the access to, use of, and appropriation of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Studies such as those by Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) show that while women actively participate in electoral processes through voting, their involvement in other forms of political participation—such as activism, debate, or organization—remains significantly lower than that of men. This inequality is not only a result of individual factors but also of structural and cultural conditions that shape participation opportunities.

In contexts like India, the digital gender divide has been shown to be deeper than the global average (Press Trust of India, 2017), particularly in rural areas, where governmental or community norms may directly prohibit women from using social media, even requiring male approval to purchase a device (Datta, 2019). This sociotechnical control reflects how patriarchal norms continue to limit women's autonomy in the use of digital technologies, reinforcing their exclusion from virtual public spaces.

Moreover, research by Inglehart et al. (2002) emphasizes that inequality in the use of digital media is closely linked to structural inequality, where women—especially in low-income countries—are less able to appropriate these technologies as tools for political expression. This restriction not only limits access to information but also impedes the development of the digital skills necessary for meaningful participation on social networks.

Additionally, men tend to use social media more frequently for political purposes (Robinson & Gottlieb, 2021), further reinforcing gender inequality in online participation (Brandtzaeg, 2017; Vochocová et al., 2016). This disparity is not coincidental: authors such as Schlozman, Burns, and Verba (1999) point out that men have greater access to key resources—such as social networks, political interest, or cultural capital—that are vital for active political participation.

Gender socialization also plays a central role. Studies by Lovenduski (2005) and Brady et al. (1997) argue that social processes shaping gender expectations, values, and roles from an early age contribute to women developing less interest or confidence in political involvement, even in its digital forms.

In summary, the digital gender divide is not merely a matter of technological access but reflects broader patriarchal structures that restrict women's political participation on social media. Bridging these gaps requires more than providing connectivity; it calls for transforming the sociocultural conditions that prevent women from fully exercising their digital citizenship.

3.2. Reinforcement of Inequalities in Digital Media

Although social media has been celebrated as a democratizing tool that broadens political participation, numerous studies warn that these spaces can also reinforce, rather than overcome, preexisting inequalities. From a "reinforcement" perspective, it is argued that digital platforms do not eliminate the structural barriers that have historically limited the participation of certain groups but tend to benefit those who are already politically active or possess greater prior resources.

Authors such as Gustafson (2014) and Schlozman et al. (2010) argue that social networks replicate and even intensify the participation gaps observed in offline contexts. Politically engaged users or those with greater access to social, educational, or economic capital are the ones who can most effectively leverage digital tools. Conversely, historically marginalized groups—including many women, young people, or rural communities—face greater obstacles to using social networks as equitable spaces for participation.

This logic of privilege reproduction is also evident in empirical studies analyzing the effects of traditional media. For instance, Nisbet (2008), studying the influence of concurrent media use on participation gaps in Mali, found that listening to radio news reinforced rather than narrowed political

participation gaps between men and women. This conclusion can be extended to digital environments, where access to political information does not necessarily equate to equitable access or inclusion.

Therefore, access to digital platforms alone does not guarantee a fair or equal environment. When structural inequalities related to gender, class, or education go unaddressed, social media ends up mirroring systemic exclusion, privileging those who already have the tools to participate. This challenges the notion that the digital environment is inherently inclusive and underscores the need for policies and strategies that actively combat the reproduction of inequalities in digital media, rather than assuming their neutrality.

3.3. Gender Gaps and Political Participation

Gender gaps in political participation remain a persistent issue, particularly in developing countries and rural or post-conflict contexts. Specialized literature consistently shows that women participate less than men in nearly all forms of political action, with the exception of voting (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Prillaman, 2023). This political inequality is not only a matter of democratic justice but also undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of political processes by excluding the voices and demands of a significant portion of the citizenry.

Several studies have identified unequal access to political information as a key factor perpetuating these gaps. In contexts such as Liberia, for example, men tend to have greater control over information channels like radios and mobile phones, while women face material, cultural, or social restrictions that limit their autonomy to inform themselves and participate (Robinson & Gottlieb, 2021). This situation prevents many women from forming and expressing their political preferences freely and knowledgeably.

Additionally, the credibility and politicization of the media directly influence women's willingness to participate. In contexts where media are controlled by elites or political parties—as is often the case in nondemocratic regimes or countries with limited press freedom—mistrust toward available information can further discourage women's participation. In this sense, access to reliable and women-focused information sources becomes essential.

Research such as that by Heller et al. (2017) has shown that information interventions can positively impact women's political participation, though many of these actions were not designed with a gender perspective and have yielded limited or even counterproductive results. In response, some studies have embraced differentiated approaches, such as using trustworthy radio stations targeting women (e.g., UNMIL Radio), to empower women through access to autonomous and verified political information.

Moreover, the classic work of Brady et al. (1995) already emphasized that engagement in civic and political activities not only strengthens democracy but also helps reduce structural gaps, including those based on gender. However, for these activities to have a truly transformative impact, they must be supported by public policies, accessible media, and digital social networks that acknowledge the cultural, informational, and technological barriers faced by women.

The fight against gender gaps in political participation cannot be separated from the struggle for equitable access to both traditional and digital media. Only through gender-sensitive interventions, inclusive platform design, and the strengthening of reliable alternative media can we move toward a more representative, inclusive, and equitable political citizenship.

4. Access and Representation in Media

The following section explores how access to social media and digital platforms in rural contexts presents both opportunities and challenges for women's political participation. In territories where traditional media are scarce or exclusionary, platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp become essential channels for information and sociopolitical expression, especially when they enable the production of content in local languages and from culturally relevant perspectives. However, despite this inclusive potential, academic literature has often overlooked gender inequalities by treating digital media access as a neutral variable, failing to address the intersectional complexities faced by rural, Indigenous, or impoverished women. As such, the analysis underscores the need to build digital environments that are not only technically accessible but also culturally and linguistically appropriate, promoting women's political agency from their own territories and sociocultural conditions.

4.1. Access to Media and Platforms in Rural Contexts

In many rural areas, where access to traditional media such as television or print press is limited, social media has emerged as a key tool for the circulation of sociopolitical information. In this regard, Ramakrishnan (2018) highlights that platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are frequently used by rural communities to stay informed about public affairs, as they allow for quick, decentralized content sharing tailored to local needs.

A particularly relevant aspect in these environments is the role of social networks in distributing content in local languages, which rarely appear in mainstream media. National television and radio tend to centralize language and cultural references, thereby excluding large sectors of the population whose mother tongue is not represented. In contrast, social media enables women and Indigenous communities, for example, to produce and share messages in their own languages, promoting greater communicative and political inclusion (Ramakrishnan, 2018; Ahmed, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite this democratizing potential, most studies on digital communication and political participation have yet to develop conceptual frameworks that place gender as a central analytical axis. As Vochocová et al. (2016) point out, many studies continue to use gender merely as a control variable, thereby rendering invisible the different dynamics women face in digital environments, especially when intersecting with factors such as rurality, ethnicity, or class.

Hence, an intersectional perspective is urgently needed—one that recognizes not only access gaps but also the need to create digital environments that are culturally and linguistically accessible. In the case of women's political participation on social media, this means not only promoting technical access but also ensuring that content circulates in formats and languages that empower women from within their own realities.

4.2. Informational Media and Their Influence on Political Participation

Numerous studies have shown that the use of media significantly influences citizens' levels of political participation (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Shah et al., 2007). For women, particularly in contexts where they face structural barriers to accessing the public sphere, informational media can play a crucial role in shaping political awareness, articulating demands, and participating in democratic processes. However, not all media have the same impact or offer the same opportunities for empowerment.

Recent research has indicated that television, when used for information purposes, has a limited influence as a predictor of political participation. For example, Bakker and de Vreese (2011) consider its effect to be weak, while other studies have found it to be even insignificant in encouraging civic engagement (Walther & Whitty, 2021). This can partly be explained by the unidirectionality of television, which does not allow for interaction or community building—both of which are fundamental to contemporary political participation.

In contrast, digital social media has become a more effective environment for stimulating political participation both online and offline. Informational use of these platforms—that is, seeking political content, following public debates, and exposure to news—is positively associated with greater political involvement. According to Vochocová et al. (2016), there is a direct relationship between political information consumption on social media and active digital participation, while Boulianne (2015) notes that such use also promotes political engagement beyond the digital environment. These platforms, being interactive and horizontal, allow women to express opinions, build support networks, and exercise more visible political agency.

Despite this progress, the impact of other traditional media, such as radio, on political participation remains poorly understood. Research such as that by Hofstetter and Gianos (1997) shows that the role of radio has been less explored, even though it remains a key source of political information in certain contexts—especially rural or low-connectivity settings. This knowledge gap is particularly relevant for designing strategies aimed at reducing gender inequalities in political participation, considering that many women rely on media like radio to stay informed about public affairs in the absence of internet or digital devices.

4.3. Media and Sociopolitical Environments

Women's political participation in the digital age is shaped by multiple structural and cultural factors, including the design of the media ecosystem itself. Decades of research have confirmed that persistent gender inequality exists in political participation: men tend to engage more actively in political activities than women, both offline and online (Ahmed, 2020). This gap has been explained from various perspectives, including unequal access to political resources, socially assigned gender roles, and time constraints due to domestic responsibilities.

However, the contemporary media environment introduces new complexities to this landscape. In a context of "high-choice" information, where users can select from a wide variety of platforms, sources, and formats, two opposing effects have emerged that the literature has only recently begun to examine: mobilization and reinforcement. Nisbet (2008) warns that both effects can operate simultaneously: on the one hand, digital media can mobilize new sectors toward political participation; on the other hand, they can reinforce preexisting inequalities by benefiting those who are already politically active or possess more digital capital. Nevertheless, these effects have seldom been addressed together, revealing a gap in the literature concerning the contradictory consequences of current media consumption.

Moreover, news consumption behavior has changed radically. Today, users are not limited to a single platform or medium but engage in multimodal news consumption, accessing political information through social media, television, news websites, podcasts, and even instant messaging (Chadha, 2018). This informational fragmentation creates new opportunities for participation but also raises challenges concerning the quality, credibility, and accessibility of political information, especially for women who face structural barriers to technology access, digital training, or available time to stay informed.

Therefore, analyzing women's political participation on social media requires consideration not only of how these platforms are used but also of the broader media context, where the abundance of choices does not automatically ensure equitable access or political impact.

4.4. Media: Power, Control, and Equity

The role of media in shaping political participation is ambivalent: on the one hand, media can help reduce prejudice and foster greater social cohesion; on the other, they can reinforce divisions, exclude dissenting voices, and reproduce power structures. This ambiguity is particularly relevant when analyzing women's unequal access to political information in contexts marked by gender, class, or ethnic hierarchies.

On one hand, media has been shown to promote attitudinal change and reduce intergroup conflict when inclusive communication strategies are employed. Paluck (2009), for instance, demonstrated that exposure to media content promoting positive social norms can reduce prejudice and foster understanding among opposing groups. This perspective suggests that media can be harnessed as tools for social and political transformation when oriented toward equity and the recognition of cultural and gender diversity.

In practice, however, traditional media are often controlled by political or economic elites who limit their democratizing potential. As Bouvier and Machin (2023) argue, media under the influence of powerful actors tend to offer biased, partial information, shaping public opinion according to particular interests. This concentration of media power restricts access to truthful, diverse, and equitable information and disproportionately affects marginalized groups, particularly women, who have historically had less access to channels of political messaging production and dissemination.

Moreover, this domination is not always exercised explicitly. According to Conroy-Krutz (2018), many elites resort to "strategic silence," using secrecy laws or intimidation tactics to prevent the dissemination of relevant information. This practice limits political knowledge among citizens and disproportionately impacts those already facing structural barriers to information access, such as rural, young, or digitally disconnected women.

In the context of women's political participation on social media, these limitations are particularly problematic. Although digital platforms offer apparent horizontality, the presence of hegemonic media discourses and the lack of equitable access to reliable information continue to reproduce gender gaps. In this scenario, women's political and communicative autonomy largely depends on their ability to access alternative media, credible sources, and spaces of expression not controlled by traditional elites.

4.5. Media Contrasts: The Western Gaze and Saudi Representation of Muslim Women

The media representation of Muslim women varies profoundly depending on the cultural and political context in which the discourse is constructed. Two clearly opposing approaches can be identified: on the one hand, the Western gaze, which tends to stigmatize and homogenize; and on the other, the emerging narrative from Saudi media, which offers a more nuanced depiction of female agency framed within Islamic values.

Western media, especially in Europe and North America, have historically portrayed Muslim women through an orientalist lens (Said, 1995). This approach depicts Islamic societies as inherently backward, homogeneous, and oppressive, contrasted with an enlightened and emancipated West. In the case of women, this vision constructs images of passivity, subordination, and immutable victimhood within rigid patriarchal structures (Yegenoglu, 1998).

This discourse is reinforced through what various authors have termed cultural salvationism: a narrative that posits female freedom as achievable only through the abandonment of Islamic religion and culture. In French media, for example, praise is given to "liberated and rebellious Muslim women," that is, those who have severed ties with their cultural and religious roots (Navarro, 2010). In doing so, a model of political agency legitimized by assimilation into Western values is imposed, while any form of resistance or empowerment from within Islam is delegitimized.

Furthermore, this approach tends to ignore structural complexities—such as geopolitics, colonialism, or economic inequality—and reduces the issue of gender oppression in the Arab world to an alleged incompatibility between Islam and women's rights (Navarro, 2010). The result is a homogeneous representation that erases Muslim women's voices and blocks the circulation of alternative discourses, even in digital spaces like social media.

In contrast to the Western gaze, Saudi media has undergone a significant discursive transformation since the mid-2000s. Despite operating in a traditionally patriarchal context, certain sectors of the local media have begun to construct an image of Saudi women as political and social agents. This new narrative does not reject cultural and Islamic frameworks but introduces a more modern and empowered vision (Sakr, 2008; Kurdi, 2014).

Saudi journalists and editors have addressed sensitive topics such as domestic violence, women's education, and the driving ban, contributing to a redefinition of women's roles in the public sphere. This symbolic evolution allows for a representation that balances modernity and tradition, recognizing women as active subjects without requiring them to renounce their religious or cultural references (Karolak & Guta, 2020).

Sabbagh (2007) identifies a significant shift in Saudi media narratives: from women being subordinate to male figures to women as decision-makers and political participants. However, this female agency is not free of tensions. According to Mishra (2007), Saudi media often assign women a symbolic role as guardians of cultural and religious identity in the face of Westernization. Thus, while their leadership is acknowledged, they are also expected to embody traditional Islamic and nationalist values.

The comparison between these two approaches reveals a central paradox: while Western media demand that Muslim women abandon their cultural identity to be considered free, Saudi media promote their participation on the condition that they preserve that same identity. In both cases, women are symbolically instrumentalized—either as emblems of oppression or as cultural guardians.

In digital spaces, these discursive tensions become even more pronounced. The Western gaze tends to erase Muslim women's leadership when exercised from within Islamic traditions, while the Saudi narrative, although recognizing their agency, limits their scope of action to what is culturally acceptable. This dual pressure represents a challenge for Muslim women seeking political participation on social media: they must navigate between external stigmatization and internal restrictions.

5. Language, Power, and Digital Violence

This section focuses on how language, as both a symbolic and social structure, profoundly conditions women's political participation in digital environments—not only as a tool of expression but also as an instrument of power, control, and violence. Drawing on the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989; 2016), it is argued that discourses on social networks function as spaces of

hegemonic dispute where gender hierarchies are either naturalized or resisted. Forms of symbolic violence—misogyny, exclusion, stigmatization—are particularly pronounced online, amplified by anonymity, the replicability of messages, and media spectacle (Žižek, 2014; Recuero, 2013; Hidalgo, 2020). Though discursive, this violence has material effects on women's agency, representation, and political citizenship. Moreover, the tensions between normative advances and patriarchal culture, as illustrated in contexts like Indonesia, reveal that women's political exclusion is both structural and symbolic. Therefore, analyzing digital language requires recognizing it as a field of domination and resistance, where women not only face discursive barriers but also mobilize counter-hegemonic strategies to claim their place in the public sphere.

5.1. Language, Power, and Hegemony

Analyzing women's political participation on social networks cannot be limited to interaction metrics or visibility. A critical perspective is necessary—one that acknowledges how language, as a social practice, is embedded in structures of power and domination. From the standpoint of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), primarily developed by Norman Fairclough, language not only reflects social reality but also actively shapes it. According to Fairclough (1989), there is a dialectical relationship between language and society in which linguistic phenomena are simultaneously social phenomena.

The concept of hegemony is central to this perspective. Fairclough (2016) draws from Gramscian thought to argue that a social class, in alliance with other forces, can exert cultural and political leadership over society as a whole. This hegemony is maintained and reproduced through everyday discursive practices that naturalize certain meanings and hierarchies—often unquestioned. Thus, discourse operates as an ideological mechanism that contributes to either maintaining or transforming power relations.

Resende and Ramalho (2006) expand on this view by emphasizing that hegemony reveals the role of ideology in processes of social subjection. In this theoretical tradition, ideologies are not merely abstract beliefs but material meanings that shape our interpretations of the world, social relationships, and identities (Fairclough, 2016). These discursive constructions, once sedimented in digital media, can either reinforce gender inequalities or enable new forms of resistance and political agency.

In this sense, the notion of ideology in CDA highlights the structuring function of discourses in reproducing social conditions. In the specific case of women's participation on social networks, these ideological constructions manifest in discourses that reinforce gender stereotypes, silence dissenting voices, or invalidate female political agency by labeling it as "emotional" or "irrational."

However, discourse is also a site of struggle. Fairclough (2016) argues that counter-hegemonic projects can be articulated through the resignification of discursive practices, thus promoting social change. Resende and Ramalho (2006) affirm that despite physical, economic, or political constraints, social structures possess "causal powers" that allow for the modification of established practices—provided there is critical awareness. Within this framework, women's digital activism can be understood as a discursive intervention that challenges hegemonic frameworks and expands the boundaries of what is politically sayable.

Therefore, analyzing language as an instrument of power allows us to understand how representations of femininity are structured and contested in the digital realm. This approach is essential to revealing the ideological mechanisms operating on social networks and identifying discursive strategies of resistance that contribute to women's political empowerment.

5.2. Symbolic Violence, Exclusion, and Online Misogyny

Women's political participation on social media is shaped not only by gaps in access and visibility but also by multiple forms of symbolic violence that operate structurally and discursively in digital environments. This violence is not always explicit or recognizable. Žižek (2014) notes that symbolic violence manifests subtly and is normalized—unlike physical or military violence, which is more evident. In digital spaces, this form of violence is intensified due to platform-specific features such as anonymity, message replicability, and content persistence (Boyd, 2010), which facilitate the spread of misogynistic, sexist, and humiliating discourse against women.

Recuero (2013) emphasizes that the technological conditions of social networks allow aggressors to hide behind anonymous or fake profiles, reducing the likelihood of accountability and increasing impunity. This creates a hostile environment that discourages many women from participating

politically, especially in controversial or denunciatory contexts. Viegas and Recuero (2014) highlight that subtle forms of violence—such as sexist humor, invisibilization, stigmatization, or victim-blaming—are socially perceived as normal or even natural, making them harder to identify and confront. These expressions of symbolic violence form an ideological web that reinforces male dominance in participatory spaces.

From a discursive power perspective, Bourdieu (1989) argues that dominant institutions—such as the family, school, church, and state—reproduce symbolic systems that present certain values, hierarchies, and gender roles as natural. This reproduction occurs through inculcation processes that operate as unquestionable truths, consolidating patriarchal structures that condition women's participation. Strey (2012) warns that deeply rooted cultural norms continue to privilege masculinity as the universal standard, complicating efforts to address violence against women as a priority social issue. Thus, exclusion and humiliation are not always seen as violence but as expected consequences of women's behavior or appearance.

Despite the symbolic mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, women are not fully determined by the structures that oppress them. Souza (2021) insists that individuals retain a degree of agency, allowing for the emergence of counter-hegemonic practices and political visibility. This idea is echoed in the work of Kurtz (2015) and Dias Silveira (2022), who denounce imposed gender roles—such as the exclusive responsibility of caregiving or obedience—as effective forms of symbolic violence, particularly when victims are blamed for their own vulnerability or abuse.

In short, symbolic violence acts as a deep, persistent, and often invisible obstacle to women's political participation in digital environments. Understanding and transforming this reality requires analyzing the discourses, representations, and practices that sustain these forms of exclusion, as well as highlighting the resistances women articulate through language, denunciation, and collective action on social networks.

5.3. Violence in Digital Spaces and the Effects of Anonymity

Women's participation in digital spaces is frequently impacted by symbolic violence, whose effects are amplified by the logics of the digital ecosystem itself. As Recuero (2013) notes, the perceived anonymity on social networks and other platforms encourages aggressive, disruptive, and misogynistic behavior by allowing users to avoid responsibility and social sanctions. This anonymity, combined with the technical properties of digital media—such as replicability, permanence, and massive reach—produces a form of symbolic violence that is more harmful, lasting, and expansive than in physical environments.

Far from being an ethereal space disconnected from social life, the digital has tangible effects on people's experiences and emotions. Lévy (1996) argues that the distinction between the virtual and the real is false, as what happens online has direct and profound consequences offline. This principle is especially relevant in analyzing how symbolic online violence—such as hate campaigns, cyberbullying, or political defamation of women activists—impacts their emotional well-being, public reputation, and willingness to continue political engagement.

Moreover, as Apperley and Jayemane (2021) and Mathe (2023) contend, the structural problems of the physical world—inequality, sexism, exclusion—are replicated and intensified in cyberspace. Far from being neutral, the internet mirrors social tensions, where dominant discourses also reproduce. Recuero (2009) warns that the pursuit of social capital in digital settings—that is, the desire for recognition, visibility, or influence—can lead to toxic practices like harassment, bullying, or discrediting others, often for political or ideological reasons.

In this same line, Hidalgo (2020) introduces the concept of "spectacularization of violence" to describe how digital media turns symbolic aggression into a spectacle for mass consumption. According to her, true "virtual massacres" occur behind the screen, where social punishment is meted out without institutional mediation, and the viralization of violent content becomes a form of entertainment. This logic particularly affects women who speak out on political issues, as they become easy targets for digital lynchings, smear campaigns, or discursive violence legitimized by media spectacle.

Together, these elements show that women's political participation on social networks cannot be fully understood without considering the combined effects of anonymity, virality, and the spectacularization of violence. These factors not only limit the exercise of digital citizenship but also

reproduce and reinforce structural gender exclusion dynamics that cut across both digital and physical realms.

5.4. Political Representation and Patriarchal Culture

Women's political representation has been promoted as a cornerstone of achieving substantive—not merely formal—democracy. However, in many national contexts, such as Indonesia, marked tensions persist between the legal recognition of women's political rights and the sociopolitical practices that continue to exclude them from power. According to Priandi and Roisah (2019), although Indonesian law guarantees equal political rights for men and women, in practice, women remain marginalized in political processes and structures. This paradox reveals a gap between the normative discourse of equality and the social realities that hinder women's effective citizenship.

One of the deepest roots of this exclusion is the persistence of a patriarchal culture that defines and limits gender roles. Research by Kollo (2017) and Saad and Sannusi (2023) shows that Indonesian political culture reproduces the idea that politics is essentially a male domain, associated with dirty, conflictive, and morally ambiguous practices. From this perspective, many women—and broader social sectors—view political participation as a risk to their traditional roles as caregivers, confronting them with dilemmas between family responsibilities and public vocation.

This representation of politics as a domain alien to femininity reinforces symbolic and practical barriers for women, even when formal legal conditions permit participation. The cultural burden on women as guarantors of domestic stability, combined with the perception of politics as a space of aggression and conflict, limits their participation and visibility. Consequently, although women have the right to run for office and vote, they face structural disadvantages in accessing competitive candidacies, receiving party resources, and having their leadership respected once elected.

These restrictions have implications not only for political equity but also for the quality of democracy. The exclusion of women's voices from public debate weakens plural representation and reduces the likelihood of gender-sensitive policymaking. In this sense, recognizing the influence of patriarchal culture on political representation patterns is essential to understanding why, in certain contexts, social media can offer both a symbolic and operational alternative to traditional institutions: where women are excluded from the formal sphere, they can exercise leadership, build community, and exert political influence through digital means.

6. Conclusions

Social media has proven to be a transformative medium for women's political participation, offering more horizontal, safe, and accessible spaces than traditional channels. These platforms have democratized access to the public sphere by facilitating autonomous expression, the articulation of collective causes, and the construction of support networks—especially in restrictive or authoritarian contexts. In this regard, women's political empowerment in digital environments not only represents an expansion of citizenship but also an active subversion of the structural barriers that have historically limited women's voices and agency.

However, this democratizing potential is not free from tensions. A deep gender digital divide persists, conditioning women's access to, use of, and appropriation of technology. This inequality is particularly evident in rural, patriarchal, or poorly connected regions, where sociocultural restrictions limit women's autonomy in exercising their digital citizenship. While social media offers new tools for participation, it can also reproduce structural inequalities if not accompanied by inclusive policies and intersectional approaches.

Additionally, symbolic violence on social networks has become a major obstacle to women's political participation. Anonymity, message replicability, and the spectacularization of violence in digital environments have multiplied the forms of discursive aggression—from direct harassment to the systematic stigmatization of women's voices. These practices affect not only the emotional and reputational well-being of activist women but also discourage their sustained engagement in digital public life. In this context, language emerges as a site of political struggle: social media discourses reproduce gender hegemonies but also enable resignification and resistance through creative strategies such as satire, hyperbole, or expressive activism.

Furthermore, research shows that both traditional and digital media have failed to ensure fair and equitable representation of women. While Western media tends to stigmatize Muslim women through

Orientalist frameworks, local media—such as in Saudi Arabia—promotes empowerment narratives conditioned by religious or cultural references. In both cases, women are symbolically instrumentalized, which limits their full agency in political and communicative processes.

Given this panorama, it is recommended to implement gender-sensitive digital literacy policies that develop women's critical capacities to navigate, participate, and lead in digital environments. It is essential to promote culturally relevant digital platforms that account for linguistic and territorial diversity and to establish regulatory frameworks that penalize online symbolic violence. In addition, it is necessary to support the creation of alternative media produced by and for women and to encourage feminist research that exposes both the barriers and discursive resistance strategies on social media.

Finally, moving toward more inclusive political citizenship requires strengthening public policies that integrate digital access with substantive political participation, recognizing social networks as new spaces for symbolic struggle and power-building from the margins. Only in this way will it be possible to ensure that digital transformation does not reproduce old exclusions but instead opens paths toward a more pluralistic, equitable, and feminist democracy.

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