

Gender Representation in Digital Media and Its Impact on Political and Social Participation

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Mursi Abdul Karim Abdul Razeq

Modern University College, Faculty of Law, Ramallah, Palestine

morsi.saleh@muc.edu.ps

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Abstract

Digital media have grown to be significant to political and social participation, remodeling how gender identities are represented, negotiated, and made seen in the public sphere. This paper examines the connection between digital gender illustration and participatory citizenship, that specialize in how visible, textual, and discursive portrayals form political engagement throughout various social contexts. Using a mixed-strategies design, the look at combines qualitative comparative content evaluation of publicly accessible audiovisual materials with quantitative assessment, employing a three-step sampling method throughout the Philippines, Pakistan, and Brazil. Findings indicate that digital media regularly reproduce gendered hierarchies: guys are associated with authority and know-how, while ladies are extra often framed via traditional roles and continue to be underrepresented as leaders and authoritative voices. These patterns are intensified for people experiencing intersecting marginalization based on race, elegance, or other identities, whilst algorithmic curation might also extend stereotypes. Cultural norms and on line harassment similarly encourage self-censorship and reduce participation in social actions and public debate. National media differences reflect various policy regimes, infrastructures, cultures, and market systems. The paper argues that equitable illustration is essential to participatory citizenship and democratic inclusion. It recommends more potent accountability, progressed facts series, and everyday monitoring to discover inequalities and manual regulations advancing gender equality.

Keywords: Gender representation, Digital Media, Political Participation

1. Introduction

The radical transformations that diverse societies and various social institutions across the globe have undergone since the late twentieth century can be meticulously traced back to their increasing convergence with a fundamentally new and dynamic global environment—the digital environment. At the very onset of the twenty-first century, social relationships in general have increasingly taken on a hybrid character, articulated and manifested through a complex interplay of physical presence, spatial co-presence, and various forms of digital mediation. What was once considered private or deeply personal—the sharing of dreams, carefully held opinions, and intricate family affairs—is becoming, more than ever, the object of widespread public interest, even growing concern. The rapid and widespread spread of mobile

communication technology, along with the cumulative appearance and rise of numerous social networking applications, have effectively catapulted social interaction into a completely different orbit. Almost all statistics and research on societal trends bear witness to a significant and worrying decline in public interest regarding political issues. These initial and preliminary observations collectively underline the pressing urgency of thoroughly investigating the intricate manner in which the political life of the public sphere is refracted, mediated, and transformed through the public-life perspective within today's ever-evolving digital environment. (Gurumurthy, 2013)

2. Theoretical Framework

Digital media are central to contemporary political and social participation. They mediate platforms through which individuals and groups shape and share information, advocate causes, generate dialogue, mobilize resources, and organize collective action. Political phenomena such as elections, protests, and social movements exhibit the potential for mass communication, audience interaction, and rapid dissemination characteristic of digital media (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024).

Gender representation shapes how women and men, and those not conforming to both, engage in digital channels of political and social participation. Gender representation comprises the portrayals, pathways, and opportunities presented to a demographic category by public media and messages. Gendered characterizations in digital portrayals constitute significant structural barriers and implications for political action. Furthermore, economic, legal, technological, and socio-cultural factors form system variables that impact representation (Celina Sicat Dayrit et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

The chosen design is mixed-methods, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The qualitative component employs a comparative content analysis of publicly accessible audiovisual materials addressing gender issues across diverse digital media and platforms. The specific media types—informative videos, short films, and livestreams—are deliberately chosen for their broad appeal and potential to captivate youth audiences. Furthermore, poetry is excluded from consideration, as it represents a distinct genre less likely to resonate with the target demographic. A three-step sampling strategy is applied to identify the respective materials for each of the three countries under study—Philippines, Pakistan, and Brazil. The first step consists of selecting one country and a corresponding gender issue deemed relevant to the local context. Subsequently, the second step involves gathering a comprehensive pool of audiovisual materials from various media and platforms relating to the targeted issue. Finally, the third step entails narrowing down the collection to a maximum of six items per country, for a total of eighteen materials. (Celina Sicat Dayrit et al., 2022)

4. Gender Representation in Digital Media: Trends and Patterns

Visuals, narratives, and discourses in digital media form a primary constellation of gender representation. Gendered portrayal evokes perceptions of gender stereotypes, which in turn influence wider societal norms regarding appropriate gender roles. Further, participation tends to occur across three domains: civic, cultural, and social. Trends in gender representation across

the visual, narrative, and discursive dimensions of digital media were examined through secondary data analysis.

Digital representation refers to the ways in which gender is reflected, portrayed, and manifested, and is classified across three principal dimensions—visual, textual, and discourse. Each type of representation can be interpreted through multiple orientations, including the particular roles assumed within narratives, the level of agency exercised within visual depictions, or the status conferred within frameworks of discourse. Gendered representation encompasses a variety of characteristics beyond simply male versus female and can range from level of agency to character roles to narrative structure.

Representation has adapted to encompass a range of angles, styles, and productions across genres and technology, and public attitudes and preferences also shape content. Representations nevertheless persist, shaping authority, power structures, and gender roles in society and media (Gurumurthy, 2013).

4.1. Visual and Narrative Portrayals

The dominant roles, agency, and stereotypes ascribed to women and men in visual and narrative stories across major social media platforms show marked disparity. Male roles typically involve authority or expertise, while female roles often reinforce traditional stereotypes. These portrayals resonate with stereotypes of women as objects in sexualised contexts and men as perpetrators in violent scenes. Female roles also reflect stereotypes of women as homemakers or sexualised objects, portrayed within a domestic milieu, alongside the construction of women as sexual commodities. Gender representation is widely perceived as important since media portrayal is believed to influence societal norms, expectations, and behaviour (Singh et al., 2019). Several researchers have therefore argued media representation of women and men directly affects the agency, aspirations, and participation of women and men (Gurumurthy, 2013).

The representation of gender across major Internet platforms has received limited academic attention relative to its societal significance. Gender is constructed in various intersecting dimensions, yet the literature on media representation often remains fixated on the binary representation of women and men, neglecting the diverse vehicles of gender construction and the complex symbolism they embody. Despite women's contributions to democracy, and the substantial space and time devoted to women-related content, female leadership and voice are seldom visible in Canada's print media. Media coverage is an important source of information and counter-narratives for women's civic issues. Such differential and often inverse representation implies the marginalisation of women's voice rather than inclusion in media discussions and encourages further examination of the media's role. (Williams, 2022)

4.2. Intersections with Race, Class, and Sexual Orientation

Empirical evidence indicates that gender representation in digital media tends to intersect with other demographic characteristics, notably race, class, and sexual orientation. Notably, African Americans face underrepresentation along multiple dimensions and are often depicted in stereotypical, stigmatizing, and hypersexualized ways. A recent study identified pervasive and disproportionate absence, invisibility, and exploitation of queer men and women in visual media. Content analysis of older American cartoons revealed frequent representation of

working-class characters predominantly in violent or anti-social scenarios compared to higher-class or middle-class counterparts plus an overall lower average of on-screen content for lower-class figures. In summary, marginalized communities encounter negative stereotypes, limited representation across platforms, and a failure to convey their diverse narratives. These patterns disadvantage and de-legitimize their public presence, potentially exacerbating overall underrepresentation (Gurumurthy, 2013).

Interrogating the intersections between gender and other demographic characteristics is imperative for fully understanding the influences of media content on social and political participation. Broadly, membership in multiple marginalized identities results in compounded discrimination and exclusion from decision-making processes. Feminist political economy contours of digital media scholarship emphasize that while women's visibility and agency may be fostered by the digital environment, these advances are neither guaranteed nor evenly distributed. Additional systems of power and oppression continue to filter women's expressions and aspirations (Biakolo, 2015). Such considerations highlight the necessity of assessing the intersectional facets of gender representation and their impact on participation postures. Recent empirical observations confirm the increasingly intersectional nature of both fictive and non-fictive portrayals; they track the emergence of anti-racist and queer counter-narratives and underscore the importance of viewing media through a multi-axis lens.

4.3. Algorithmic Curation and Platform Policies

Gender representation in digital media is not only shaped by content creation but also by algorithmic curation and associated platform policies. Curation affects the extent to which individuals encounter and engage with diverse content (Grafanaki, 2019). Prior studies have highlighted how algorithmically curated content can amplify pre-existing biases and stereotypes across a range of platforms. Platforms have implemented measures aimed at increasing representation and reducing discrimination. However, addressing disparities arising from content moderation and gating has remained limited. These curatorial practices—long regarded as platform-neutral content moderation—stratify exposure to media, enabling some individuals or issues to dominate user feeds while limiting visibility for others. (Gurumurthy, 2013)

Algorithmically mediated content curation, by determining the order and visibility of information streams or replies, fundamentally alters the nature of technological mediation in public discourse. Content moderation, while always politically and socially contextualized, employs legislative criteria such as hate speech or law-inducing terror to filter out unwanted messages. These criteria—alongside policies surrounding account blocking, pop-ups, and post-removal—restrict freedom of expression. However, automated moderation also constrains what is expressed in the first instance. Mediated gender imagery may therefore be over- or under-represented, or else projected through stereotypical framing, and biases compiled across the full communicative history of platforms comprising diverse and complex user flows. Content curation—a categorically different dimension of platform governance—directly influences exposure to particular media content, thus prefiguring the gender representation debate itself. (Singh et al., 2019)

5. Social Participation and Cultural Norms

Social participation is shaped by cultural norms that individuals internalize through everyday experiences, and which frame expectations shaping views and actions (Banaji & Moreno Almeida, 2020). These civic expectations vary across contexts and give rise to different forms of behaviour, framing the targets of civic engagement and anticipated responses. Multiple mutually constitutive public spheres, hierarchically perceived as more or less legitimate, influence the conditions under which communities mobilize for change. Participating in specific spheres defined by power hierarchies can add value to particular communities or serve as a precondition to act on behalf of other communities.

Cultural practices transmit social distinctions rooted in economic and cultural capital, and the associated social class position also structures a gendered division of cultural participation. Socioeconomic circumstances interact with political orientations and systems of representation to shape youth views on the social order, and form youth groups that operate within or outside formal political structures. Women's complexes of access and capability for social participation are articulated through a continuum of empowerment; complex notions of empowerment are materialized in particular participatory mechanisms; and women's access, capability and empowerment circumscribe the nature of their participation in different media. Participation during, before and after emergent revolutionary processes is influenced by cultural norms—gender-based constraints in access, capabilities and empowerment guide the type of participatory engagement sought through media across different societal contexts (Gurumurthy, 2013).

5.1. Civic Expectations and Gendered Public Spheres

Political engagement is shaped by women's cultural expectations regarding civic matters. The notion of women as "less involved" has fostered more restrictive guidelines about political and public engagement, rendering voicing opinions too public a role for them. At the same time, ubiquitous leadership images and a digital media narrative celebrating and normalising leadership and activism encourage an expansive view of engagement (Gurumurthy, 2013). Women's status in the public sphere—overall and as political leaders—anchors these expectations. Low female leadership visibility, particularly in digitised countries and representation type, cultivates public/private and silence/loud dual narratives. Marginalisation and under-representation of female leaders and grassroots movements in mainstream digital discourse induce the sense that full-scale contributions to digital space are still excessive, excessive enough to demand justification.

Across diverse environments, women's politically active public engagement is impeded by ubiquitous beliefs regarding women in public. The view of public space as threatening and illegitimate to women remains pervasive at an institutional level. Such beliefs are less intense towards the provision of content and voice. Engaging from a woman identity position, therefore, is considered threatening, whilst dialogue, citizen journalism and voicing of opinion, critique, and conversion on issues remain acceptable. Harassment, abuse and threats—especially toward women and activists—profoundly shape perceptions regarding public engagement, while conditions, institutions and institutional spaces further constrain participation. On a

transactional level, civic participation extends beyond hard campaign and expertise, activism and selection is also participatory choice.

5.2. Digital Literacy, Empowerment, and Marginalized Groups

Access to digital tools and skills enables marginalized groups—including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBT individuals, and those with lower socioeconomic status—to gain social empowerment (Gurumurthy, 2013). Media exposure empowers individuals through knowledge-sharing and support networks, bolstering confidence to voice opinions. Digital participation fosters effective citizenship among girls, women, and marginalized groups—flexible self-expression hybridizes social, economic, and political dimensions, empowering participation across spheres. Digital literacy development encourages engagement with diverse content, including cultural heritage. Cultural heritage approach enables young people to create and share about subjects pertinent to their lives.

5.3. Harassment, Safety, and Participation Barriers

Harassment directed at women in offline and online spaces can lead to self-censorship and, ultimately, reduced participation in the public sphere, especially in social movements. Harassment can take the form of threats of violence, sexual harassment and abuse, doxxing, and public shaming. Victims who decide to report abusive content on social media, blogs, and forums may be frustrated by delayed or non-existent action from the platforms concerned (Noelle Simons, 2015). Men are more often the targets of online abuse, whereas women suffer from a disproportionate volume of harassment. Women receive 14.4% of harassment tweets, but 22.3% of those aimed at them are abusive. The volume of abusive messages depends on the number of followers and is higher for politicians and for women politicians in particular (Faith & Fraser, 2019).

6. Comparative and Global Perspectives

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries implemented restrictions on free movements, with the pandemic considered as an opportunity to change gender relations and norms. Such discussions were still common in April 2023, e.g. in India (Gurumurthy, 2013). In South Asian countries, the likelihood of gendered cultural scripts derived from global cultural scripts was estimated to be higher than in other parts of the world.

Mobile phones enhance exposure to media contents that transcend national borders, extending the dissemination of globalized cultural scripts concerning women's roles and gender equality. Cultural scripts derived from mass media serve as models for interpreting social environments and constructing normative preferences. The gap between scripted and actual roles potentially shapes attitudes toward women's participation in various domains (Varriale et al., 2021).

6.1. Cross-Country Variations in Media Environments

Media systems exhibit considerable national variation, shaped by factors such as policy regimes, cultural norms, infrastructural conditions, and market structures. Widely adopted frameworks and proposals recognize four fundamental media policy regimes—liberal, social-democratic, democratic-corporatist, and authoritarian—linked to distinct cultural and political traditions. Countries within the Arab Region exhibit a spectrum of media policy regimes,

typologies encompassing a dichotomy between participatory and commercial-oriented models. These models, in turn, reflect divergent governance frameworks with implications for variable normative and infrastructural media objectives. Cultural norms and values consequently inform citizen engagement in digital forms of politics and commercial media consumption practices.

Various measurements reflect differing audience engagement patterns and degrees of media freedom, differentiated within the region by audience reach, gendered dissemination, media regime, democratic transition efforts, and the strength of existing civil-society organizations. New digital platforms have propelled previously muted discourses, with both progressive and regressive participatory cultures emerging from distinctive socio-political conditions. Gender inequality in political and media arenas likewise represents a widespread challenge Arab countries, yet the composition of media outputs diverges according to state-orientation, territorial status, and competition levels.

Comparative studies further indicate that media opportunities and system characteristics shape distinct participatory strategies and political engagement modalities (Banaji & Moreno Almeida, 2020). Configurations of media participation a range of civic and cultural activities stipulate diverse monitoring, procedural, and content-creation affordances, resulting in divergent symbolic and material interventions in governance. The political stakes associated with media systems consequently yield unequal access to citizenship dimensions, engendering different sociocultural recognition claims at participatory margins (Gurumurthy, 2013).

Country analysis likewise reveals that population segments and international frameworks mediate exposure to content associated with systematically disenfranchised groups, as well as the materialization of substantive or symbolic action opportunities that intrinsically constitute media participation (Ross et al., 2016). Particular citizenry segments thus emerge, positioned either within a participatory orbit or in remoteness from the public sphere, with media environments exercising a significant influence on attitudinal, discursive, and non-discursive alignment with state or privatized governance forms.

6.2. Policy Interventions and Best Practices

Constrained by regressive social norms and political systems, women in India often face harassment and violence, particularly when expressing themselves in public spaces. This restriction is exacerbated by a culture of digital policing and disinformation, which further deters women from actively engaging in public discussions. Interviewees highlighted the surveillance of women's communication and engagement by both authorities and family members. The lack of safety online fuels self-censorship and restricts women's freedom of speech. Women prefer to engage with sensitive topics in private settings, such as through direct messages on platforms like Twitter. The threat of online harassment and the associated inability to find effective reporting mechanisms deter women from publicly participating in public discussions on many platforms (Gurumurthy, 2013).

The general anticipation for women to police their own safety limits their engagement in public discussions. The expectation for women to monitor their digital footprint, online engagement, and self-representation perpetuates gender-based biases in society. The inability of organizations to counter online harassment and offer adequate safety measures significantly influences women's participation state-wide, forcing them into private or smaller communities

(Celina Sicat Dayrit et al., 2022). The overall lack of safety stems from a broader culture that fails to curb online harassment when women take on leadership roles, thus compounding societal avoidance of public issue engagement and limiting the potential for political action.

7. Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings outlined in this report suggest several actionable recommendations for media organizations, educators, policymakers, and researchers. Each of these stakeholders occupies a key role in shaping and determining gender representation in digital media, which is critical to influencing social and political participation, as well as redressing issues of power, equity, and social justice. Certain practices and strategies can mitigate the undesirable influences of gender representation and foster its more positive and enabling aspects. (Yolmo & Basnett, 2024)

Given the rapid pace of technological change and the diverse availability of environments for digital engagement, policies for data collection and accountability are critical. The aforementioned statistics on representation in digital media involve data from only a few platforms, and they were gathered years ago even for those.

Additional information on how the situation has evolved since then would provide valuable insight into changing practices, impacts, and gaps. An understanding of current representation trends and shifts across a broader range of platforms, as well as consideration of global policy, sequence, and timing, would thus be immensely useful. Surveyed data, such as that from the European Union, are restricted to general participatory behaviour. Targeted investigation of participation across different societal domains, issues, and dimensions is required to highlight disparities in engagement that cut across contextual, institutional, political, and cultural variables.

Diversity in both perspectives and expertise can be fostered by extending research on gender representation to disciplines and orientations beyond the concentration on mainstream media and the critical political economy approach that dominates the existing work. These approaches overlook important dimensions of digital media and contemporary participation, such as representation in subaltern publics, and rely on a restrictive interpretation of agency. Broadening the investigation to encompass informed and credible perspectives from neighbouring fields of inquiry could therefore strengthen the understanding of gender representation and its implications through exposure to different concepts, models, keywords, and frameworks.

Examples of potentially fruitful areas of scholarly enquiry include critical, aesthetic, cultural, geographical, intercultural, open, and plural media studies, as well as environmental humanities, indigenous perspectives, interactional analysis, material semiotics, participatory design, political communication, posthumanism, prevention and resilience, socio-technical systems, social movements, socio-semiotics, social media, sustainability, translocality, and visual studies. The Gendered Participation in Political Communication survey project and the Generations project, both of which follow up on the European Union project Gender Equality and Institutional Change in the European Research Area using a multi-track approach, already exemplify such interdisciplinary engagement.

Regularly collecting, documenting, and updating information on the forms and evolution of gender representation in various digital spaces will increase awareness of the specific challenges, hurdles, and constraints faced by different member states, social sectors, and societal groups. Gaining insight into these variations would facilitate the discovery of solutions already being implemented within even more challenging environments and thus ascertain their adaptability to different contexts. Generating widely accessible and visible documentation on patterns of gender representation in diverse digital arenas, in turn, would help to inform teachers and activists about existing inequities and the possibilities of seeking change. Various forms of public-facing work from, for instance, the Generations programme or the Centre for Gender Research, or the reach of the Aelx Group or the Gender Representation Awareness campaign, make yet further contributions by highlighting a variety of critical areas.

In parallel with these lines of collaboration, engaging with foundations, public agencies, and non-governmental organizations anticipating change in gender representation across the digital and cultural landscape is vital. The Sequencing Engagement and Socio-Technical Digitalization within a Digital Planetary Constitution initiative, for instance, aligns with the objective of increasing genuine awareness and equality around representation in national digital media systems. Another currently ongoing undertaking seeks to provide a better understanding of how boundaries are set around those gender articulation practices that remain fundamentally unaltered, and of the multi-faceted shift in the perceptual and conceptual geography of gender characterised by techno-ecological expansion. Two initiatives focused on circular design presently explore the kind of temporal attunement active and feminist mind-sets generate. (Amaral et al., 2025)

8. Conclusion

Digital media significantly influences the representation of social groups and shaping societal participation. Despite gender equality advances, societal participation is gendered, with women generally less active than men. Gender representation in the media influences expectations, liable to accentuate or diminish participation gaps. Correspondingly, measuring the extent, forms and patterns of gender representation in diverse digital media is paramount for understanding the relationship between mapping gender representation and involvement.

Digital representational politics have emerged over the past quarter century across various fields and disciplines. Representation is a fundamental component of participatory citizenship, enabling the expression, negotiation and contestation of interests within society and raising the visibility of social groups. Media receive attention in this regard because of their pivotal role in shaping the underlying conditions for participatory citizenship. Digital platforms, unlike traditional media, offer unprecedented opportunities for representation and self-representation, yet pre-existing inequalities may undermine these opportunities. In measuring representation, gender intersects with other social categories, such as ethnicity and class. Cross-national differences affect both the opportunities and constraints for gender representation and participatory citizenship, with substantial variations in political predisposition, media systems, economic development and political structures.

Interrogating the interrelationship between digital gender representation and participatory citizenship in representative democracies constitutes a fundamental concern for participatory

democracy and gender equality. Investigating four representative democracies with different media systems exposes these mutually reinforcing dynamics between gender representation and participatory citizenship.

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