

**Female Politicians and Communicative Empowerment: Moving towards  
a Safe Space that Makes them Visible in Social Media**

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**ABSTRACT:** The analysis of the political use of Instagram from a gender perspective is pervaded by a gap in female digital visibility, with the prevalence of gender stereotypes and difficulties in generating participation in the networks. This study introduces a further approach, that of providing advice for women in politics, not merely candidates, to overcome this deficit. It aims to facilitate the participation of women in politics on social media by providing them with insights, information, and training resources. The selected case study is the National Forum of Women in Political Parties in Panama. The first phase of the study consists of formulating recommendations to reactivate the organisation's Instagram account and boosting its visibility. The second phase includes a content analysis of the account to evaluate the implementation of the recommendations. The findings indicate that the organisation is focusing on the use of non-sexist language. The narrative highlights female protagonists to increase visibility. This is accomplished by showcasing diverse female leaders in a safe and digital public space, drawing attention to their individual achievements in politics and other fields. These findings underscore the importance of

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integrating feminist perspectives and engaging in research to address the prevalence of sexist representations.

**KEYWORDS:** Empowerment, Instagram, Female politicians, Panama, Visibility

**RESUMO:** A análise do uso político do Instagram numa perspetiva de género é marcada por uma lacuna na visibilidade digital feminina, com a prevalência de estereótipos de género e dificuldades em gerar participação nas redes. Este estudo apresenta uma abordagem adicional, que consiste em fornecer conselhos às mulheres na política, e não apenas às candidatas, para superar esse défice. O objetivo é facilitar a participação das mulheres na política nas redes sociais, fornecendo-lhes insights, informações e recursos de formação. O estudo de caso selecionado é o Fórum Nacional de Mulheres em Partidos Políticos do Panamá. A primeira fase do estudo consiste em formular recomendações para reativar a conta da organização no Instagram e aumentar a sua visibilidade. A segunda fase inclui uma análise de conteúdo da conta para avaliar a implementação das recomendações. Os resultados indicam que a organização está a concentrar-se no uso de linguagem não sexista. A narrativa destaca protagonistas femininas para aumentar a visibilidade. Isto é conseguido através da apresentação de diversas líderes femininas num espaço público digital seguro, chamando a atenção para as suas realizações individuais na política e noutros campos. Estes resultados sublinham a importância de integrar perspetivas feministas e de se envolver em investigação para abordar a prevalência de representações sexistas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Empoderamento, Instagram, Mulheres políticas, Panamá, Visibilidade

## **Introduction**

Over the past three decades, equal opportunity policies have been consolidated on a global scale with the objective of promoting equity and eliminating gender-based discrimination. Notwithstanding the aforementioned policies, political parties continue to be male-dominated arenas. In late July 2024, Hillary Clinton warned the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris to expect a sexist backlash during the campaign. A review of the literature by international institutions such as UN Women (2024) reveals a lack of implementation of parity rules and an absence of effective measures to combat violence. In Latin America, political parties are regarded as a significant obstacle to the effective representation of all sections of society (Accossatto, 2021).

The participation of women in politics is frequently impeded by structural and cultural barriers, including the necessity for support from party leaders and internal power monopolies. Despite the implementation of affirmative action measures, such as gender quotas, the United Nations (UN) has reported that gender parity in government remains a distant goal, with projections indicating that it may take 130 years to reach equality (UNW, 2024).

In Panama, Fonamupp fulfils the role of a permanent advisory body on gender issues and parity to the Electoral Tribunal and the Ombudsman's Office in Panama. Fonamupp operates as a non-governmental organisation and adheres to an institutional model of communication. This organisation, established in 1993, is the inaugural entity of its kind in Central America, dedicated to the advancement of equal opportunities for women and men in elected and public office. In the 1990s, women in Panama, like their counterparts in other countries in the region, were adjusting to the advent of democracy in the context of prevailing local and international political and economic neoliberalism. In this context, only a few individuals emerged as prominent figures and interlocutors (Schild, 2016), particularly those with a recognised history of activism within political parties, whether in favour of or against the dictatorship (the period 1968–1989).

This article analyses of the implementation and impact of recommendations from a previous Participatory Action Research (PAR) project conducted with the National Forum of Women from Political Parties of Panama (Fonamupp). The preceding PAR helped formulate recommendations aimed at identifying the factors that facilitate or impede the social media visibility of women politicians and proposing solutions to the organisation. The study comprises a detailed content analysis, with the goal of assessing the implementation of strategies on the organisation's Instagram account and ascertaining their effectiveness in increasing the visibility and empowerment of female politicians.

The findings highlight the necessity of integrating feminist perspectives and involvement in research to challenge the prevalence of sexist portrayals. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical contributions of feminist digital strategies in enhancing the social media visibility and empowerment of women in politics. To our knowledge, few studies combine Instagram analysis with applied communication research.

## **1. Literature review**

### **1.1. Social media and the visibility of politicians**

It can be posited that social media platforms constitute environments that facilitate the visibility of new actors and the acquisition of an audience, despite the existence of a dominant media institution that generates media capital (Shawky et al., 2022; Pang et al., 2022). The visibility of female leadership online can serve as a valuable reference for new generations (Ferruz et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in addition to this potential, a considerable body of research indicates that social media continues to serve as a domain where patriarchal authority is exercised (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022). As observed in the broader media landscape, gender stereotypes continue to influence the portrayal of women, contributing to the perpetuation of patriarchal agendas and the persistence of gender inequality (De Gioannis et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2022).

It is argued by various authors that the media portrayal of women involved in politics could be considered novel. Indeed, they posit that the extent of exposure is beneficial in increasing visibility (Duffy et al., 2022). However, other scholars argue that this coverage perpetuates the patriarchal narrative of the media, which negates women as political subjects and positions them solely as women in politics (Vandenberghe, 2019). Indeed, female candidates are exposed to what is known as the second digital gender gap on social media. This is an exclusionary outcome resulting from the attribution of differentiated capabilities and roles to women and men (Norris, 1997). The second gap pertains to the dearth of female representation in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) (Acilar & Sæbø, 2023). This is a more structural issue that is rooted in the division of labour and gender roles. In a patriarchal society, the networks that are created and disseminated reflect and perpetuate a specific narrative. Women are not only represented as protagonists; they are also depicted as existing outside of history and culture (Zou & Liu, 2023).

In the context of political representation in the media, female candidates are not depicted as political subjects in their own right. Instead, they are represented as characters in a narrative that goes beyond their political achievements or experiences as candidates to explore aspects of hegemonic female roles (García-Beaudoux et al., 2020). Spectacularisation, typical of media narratives, is featured to depict female candidates, impeding women's involvement in politics and influencing the form and substance of political discourse. Furthermore, it influences the manner in which female politicians gain access to, are represented in, and are visible within society. In examining the visibility of women on social media (González & Ferré-Pavia, 2023), it is imperative to consider the extent to which the logic of traditional media coverage persists. To illustrate, male figures are invariably linked to women's political career.

The perpetuation of inequality is sustained by a number of key elements within the stereotypical narrative. These include the archetypal roles of the seductress, the mother, the pet, and the iron lady (Norris, 1997). Additionally, the feminine framing of the first woman, the newcomer, and the agent of change is also a significant factor. Furthermore, the presentation of women as warriors, mothers, and professionals also contributes to the perpetuation of inequality.

One of the most prevalent strategies for creating a sense of spectacle on social media is personalisation (Ferré-Pavia & Codina, 2022). Once more, this element can be advantageous for female politicians, who can showcase their attributes and challenge masculine stereotypes (Lhena Darwin & Haryanto, 2021). Nevertheless, the social networking narrative that is created around female candidates reproduces, to some extent, the objectification, hyper-sexualisation and symbolic violence that are typically employed by the media and advertising industries when providing female image content.

Prior research indicates that visibility entails additional constraints, including apprehension about unfavourable criticism, challenges in adopting the vernacular of social media (Barandiarán, Unceta & Peña, 2020) and the imperative to devise strategies for its effective utilization. Indeed, since the advent of the fourth feminist wave in 2016, there has been a notable increase in the number of attacks on women in virtual spaces (Oh, 2023). Those who generate and disseminate misogynistic messages and hate speech have been identified as the perpetrators of such actions (Hosseini, 2019; Trindade, 2020; Håkansson, 2024). In the case of female politicians, discursive attacks and disqualifications are a constant feature of their experience, particularly for those who choose to enter public service (OEA, 2019, p. 99).

## **1.2. Instagram political uses**

In 2024, Instagram is the fourth most used social network in the world with 2 billion active users. This social network has attracted the interest of scholars of various research areas. The primary campaign for the 2016 US presidential election, declared the first election year on Instagram, inaugurated the relationship between Instagram and politics. Recent studies have confirmed the importance of this social network during elections (Cartes-Barroso, 2018), and most published studies center on political parties' usage and the personal image of candidates. In general, political Instagram research has mostly focused on analysing the image of political leaders on Instagram (Haßler, Wurst & Pohl, 2023; Parmelee et al., 2022; Farkas & Benne, 2021).

With regard to the political participation through Instagram, recent research indicates that generating engagement with political content on the platform is more challenging than on other social

media platforms (Larsson, 2023; Boulianne & Larsson, 2021). Bast (2021) points out that the way in which individuals use Instagram and its effects may be influenced by the gender of political actors. At the same time, Brands, Kruikemeier and Trilling (2021) show that female politicians receive more likes on Instagram than male politicians when they are visible in a picture, but they also reveal that male and female politicians both refer more to feminine than to masculine issues, although the use of feminine issues resulted in fewer likes.

Previous research indicates that the political use of Instagram from a gender perspective is permeated by the female gap in digital visibility, the prevalence of gender stereotypes and the challenges of fostering participation on social media platforms.

### **1.3. Communicational empowerment with a gender perspective**

The term *empowerment* has its origins in the 1970s. Demonstrations against violence directed at women were organised by American feminist movements. The concept encompasses not only the act itself, but also its multiplier effect on women unaffected by it or uninvolved with activism (De Siano & Chiariello, 2022). In this way, empowerment is linked to critical awareness fostering the transformation of an individual or a group into a political subject. The continued adoption of empowerment as a mechanism to fight inequality represents a pivotal tool in the pursuit of gender equality.

It is crucial to acknowledge the crucial role of social movements in the fight for gender equality. They offer a critique of traditional concepts of citizenship and the forms of leadership in political parties, as well as the resulting narratives. The influence exerted by these movements on political parties has been instrumental in compelling them to comply with the quota requirements and to include a greater number of female candidates (Phelan & True, 2022; Bagues & Campa, 2021). Furthermore, they have campaigned for the enactment of legislation to combat political violence and to ensure accountability for human rights violations (IDEA, 2021). Indeed, the influence of these movements has resulted in government's approval of political agendas with a gender perspective. Notable examples include the so-called trans laws in Spain and legal guarantees for those undertaking gender reassignment in numerous Latin American countries. These factors have been instrumental in promoting the adoption of the definition of political violence and in acknowledging the impact of symbolic violence on women's lives and rights in all their diversity (OEA, 2023).

A significant proportion of female politicians are affiliated with or engaged in activities with feminist organisations. This represents a preliminary step towards enhancing their visibility on social

media and adopting a gender-sensitive approach to visibility. Indeed, communicational empowerment with a gender perspective has emerged as a methodological strategy for women to acquire the skills of resistance. This strategy also provides the tools to develop these groups' capacity to generate communicational actions with an impact on social imaginaries and to deconstruct the dominant discourse in the *mediapolis* (Tanikawa, 2024). This is the public space formed by traditional media and communication networks (Camarero & Varona, 2019).

It is imperative that communicational empowerment be addressed with a gender perspective that is integrated throughout (AlAmmary, 2022). This entails the empowerment of women as a collective political subject, enabling them to dismantle the second digital gap, cultivate forms of female leadership, and move beyond the hegemonic and stereotypical representation perpetuated by political parties on social media.

The process of empowerment is comprised of a critical collective consciousness, which deviates from the traditional patriarchal framework that political parties adhere to when implementing visibility strategies on social media. This framework is characterised by the following three elements: 1) limiting women's access to the party structure; 2) stereotypical representations based on the hegemonic gender roles of women; 3) the construction of an identity based on others as a form of domination.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The general aim of this study is to identify the actions that either facilitate or impede the visibility of female politicians on social media and to propose measures for the improvement of the selected organization.

This in turn gives rise to specific objectives:

- Verify recommendations from the previous Participatory Action Research (PAR).
- Evaluate the extent of autonomy in self-representation on Instagram.
- Detect trends and identify areas for improvement in the content posted on Fonamupps's Instagram account.

In this research, social media participation is defined as the act of consuming or sharing content and engaging in debates, reflecting a comprehensive understanding of the term. This perspective allows non-professionals to create content and meaning in cultural media (Carpentier, 2019).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research tools

This study has been divided into two phases and has employed the following techniques:

##### Phase 1

- Document review: Critical analysis of the PAR stages to identify and formulate recommendations.
- Instagram reports: Examination of Instagram annual reports.
- Semi-structured interviews: Collection of key points from interviews to systematize experiences.

##### Phase 2

The content analysis technique, as outlined by Igartua (2006), will be applied in this study. The application of categories derived from the 5W framework (who, what, when, where and why) facilitates the collation of comprehensive information and ensures clarity in research (López Rabadán & Doménech, 2019). This approach addresses the key thematic aspects related to the spectacularisation of political images on social media, with a particular focus on Instagram.

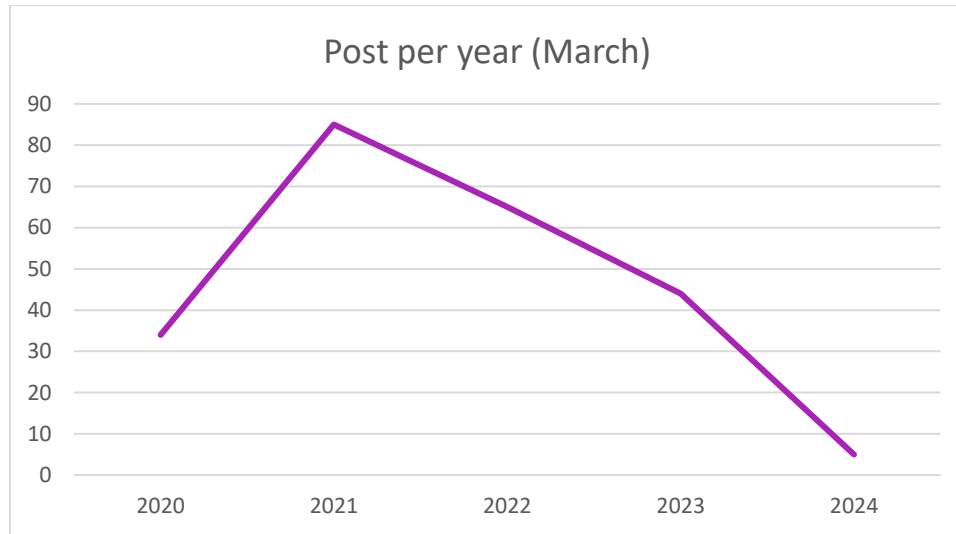
Categories	Indicators
<b>Narrative approach</b>	Safe digital space
	Promotion of feminist agenda
	Dissemination of myths and realities about women's participation in leadership
	Organized women's initiatives
	Leadership in traditionally male-dominated fields
	Female political participation
	Prominent female leaders
	Not applicable
<b>Visible female role</b>	Candidate(s)
	Member (s)
	Leader (s)
	Politician (s)
	Character (s)
	Not applicable
<b>Space</b>	Public
	Private
	Media
	Official

	Not applicable
<b>Staging</b>	Spontaneity
	Pose
	Amateurs
	Not applicable
	Other
<b>Type of post</b>	Photo
	Art
	Animated video
	Video
<b>Type of content</b>	Trivia
	Ephemeris
	Glossary
	Carousel
	Profile
	Institutional
<b>Type of elements</b>	Tag
	Index
	Both
	No
<b>Type of language</b>	Sexist language
	Non-sexist
	Both
	Not recognized

**Table 1.** Categories and indicators  
Source: The Authors for all tables and graphics (2026)

### 3.2. Sample

The sample for analysis consisted of 233 posts generated on the Fonamupp Instagram profile between March 2020 and March 2024. The rationale behind selecting this particular time interval was to enable a comparison between the same month in which the intervention phase took place in 2020.



**Figure 1.** Number of posts per year (March)

### 3.3. Limitations

The analysis omitted user interactions and reactions, as well as the changes in followers and other types of posts, such as stories or reels.

## 4. Results

The participants of the previous PAR action comprised 16 Panama activists and militants, aged between 18 and 63. The group was diverse in terms of age, educational background, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The majority of participants were engaged in social movements and chose to maintain anonymity online. The participants utilised social media for approximately two hours per day, predominantly on mobile devices. The primary source of information was Instagram. Those of an advanced age exhibited a restricted awareness of the potential of the internet yet evinced a keen desire to expand their knowledge in this regard.

### Phase 1

In light of the recommendations proffered by the participants in the aforementioned dynamic and the review of the intervention phase conducted by the Fonamupp team, the following key points were identified with a view to enhancing opportunities and mitigating weaknesses in digital communications through Instagram:

- a) *Challenges faced by female politicians:*

- Lack of visible female role models in politics.
- Difficulties in political campaigns due to gender-based stereotypes.
- Harassment and scrutiny on social media as major deterrents.
- Unequal domestic labour division affecting political aspirations.

b) *Opportunities identified:*

- Digital transformation during the pandemic as a booster for engagement.
- Plans to continue and expand the digital strategy, including educational campaigns on electoral rights and reforms using Instagram elements.
- An increase in the number of posts as an action to potentially raise the number of followers.

c) *Digital profile of stakeholders:*

Two distinct audience categories were identified as potential targets for messages on Fonamupp's social media platforms. The first category comprised women who were either members or associated with the Forum. These individuals viewed political participation as adherence to political parties and activism as belonging to hierarchical movements. The second category included women interested in politics and had a basic knowledge of social media. This group valued freedom of expression and women's rights and engaged in actions based on their interest in supporting policies rather than actively participating in the political scene.

d) *Narratives to enhance women's political participation:*

- Use of inclusive language to avoid the generic masculine and gender stereotypes.
- Shift towards a more human and active voice to foster dialogue among followers.
- Need to observe professional and prepared women for the position they aspire to.
- Urgency to establish a secure environment on social media that encourages genuine dialogue and collaboration among women aspiring to political candidacies.
- Position Fonamupp as an intermediary between the Electoral Court and political actors with the objective of meeting their needs.
- Early and inclusive calls for both members and non-members.

- Highlighting profiles of women in politics and history, with a particular focus on the distinction between elected positions and official appointments.
- Increasing the visibility of women in the media is to manage their image and reputation. This raises the question of whether the rules of spectacle and trends of media personalisation, which involve the blending of political performance with the representation of private lives, should be applied.

*e) Content types:*

In order to facilitate the dissemination of information in a more systematic and structured manner, the team proposed the creation of distinct segments, which led to the development of the following categories of content: Questions with multiple-choice answers about the history of women's participation in politics, recovery of stories from the past, definitions of commonly used concepts, visual narration of events through images, highlighting individual achievements of women in politics, and providing more information about their mission, vision, objectives, functions, and status.

*f) Autonomy and Instagram profile management:*

Fonamupp's communication strategy is designed to advance feminist political ideologies and promote gender-balanced democratic structures. It was imperative that the institutional account be transformed into a more human profile. The intervention emphasised the efficacy of specific post types and the necessity of direct invitations to pivotal political actors.

*g) During the participatory intervention*

The approval process for key messages was found to involve multiple individuals within the organisation, which resulted in delays in execution. It was recommended that the frequency of postings be increased to a minimum of once a day to maintain consistent content production. The social media assistant dedicated approximately three hours per week to the research, selection and design of graphic content for the segments. Subsequently, she scheduled weekly posts and monitored daily topics of interest to the Board of Directors, occasionally deviating from the planned narrative. The general coordinator was responsible for overseeing the plan's progress and roadmap, and for offering strategic suggestions to the organisation. The focus was placed on improving internal organisation and communication within the Forum, as well as on encouraging active involvement of the Board in decision-making regarding messages

to be published. It was recognised that the appointment of dedicated technical personnel for social media enabled more effective management and reinforced the organisation's presence on these platforms.

*h) Post research*

Fonamupp maintains a unified and consistent presence across a range of digital platforms, including Instagram. These channels are employed for the dissemination of information pertaining to noteworthy events, the celebration of the accomplishments of women in politics, the dissemination of institutional updates, and the recounting of historical narratives.

The social media manager devotes a significant amount of time and effort to researching, designing graphics, and scheduling weekly posts that align with the Board's interests. This strategy guarantees engagement, with the capacity to adapt as required while remaining faithful to the overarching narrative. The coordinator's close monitoring enables timely adjustments with a view to enhance organisational communication. The objective is to optimise internal coordination and to engage the Board in decision-making processes concerning content publication.

March consistently demonstrated heightened engagement, coinciding with International Women's Month. Campaigns that honour notable women in politics have been observed to drive significant levels of interaction and sharing. Furthermore, these periods are characterised by a surge in visibility and follower growth.

The majority of followers are located in Panama City, with an increasing interest from David, Chiriquí, and international locations such as Honduras and Costa Rica. The successful engagement with political associations has contributed to an expansion of the follower base.

Instagram has a greater appeal to a younger demographic, particularly those aged 24-35, whereas Facebook is more popular with an older group (35-44 years). Initiatives such as Brújula Mujer [Women Compass], the inaugural political training programme for young women in Panama and Central America, organised by Fonamupp and the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation, have successfully attracted a younger demographic, reflecting strategic targeting efforts.

Overall, the feedback from the Board has been favourable, indicating satisfaction with Fonamupp's online presence. There is an opportunity to enhance engagement and align strategies more closely with organisational objectives. There has been a paucity of engagement from followers and members outside of Panama Province. The implementation of the aforementioned strategy has

encountered difficulties because of the necessity to obtain approval from the relevant organisational bodies.

*Phase 2*

A review of Instagram’s own metrics, gathered from Fonamupp’s annual reports, indicates that March is the month of highest activity on their social media channels. This coincides with International Women’s Day and the anniversary of women’s right to vote in Panama. The participant’s hypothesis that an increase in posts would result in a corresponding increase in followers and interaction was confirmed during and after the intervention. In the period between 2022 and 2024, prior to the intervention, the account demonstrated a consistent increase in followers, with peaks of interaction occurring during March 2023. However, in March 2024, there was a notable decline in both posting activity and interaction, as evidenced by a reduction in comments and likes. This indicates that the account may benefit from the implementation of strategies aimed at maintaining or enhancing the level of engagement over time.

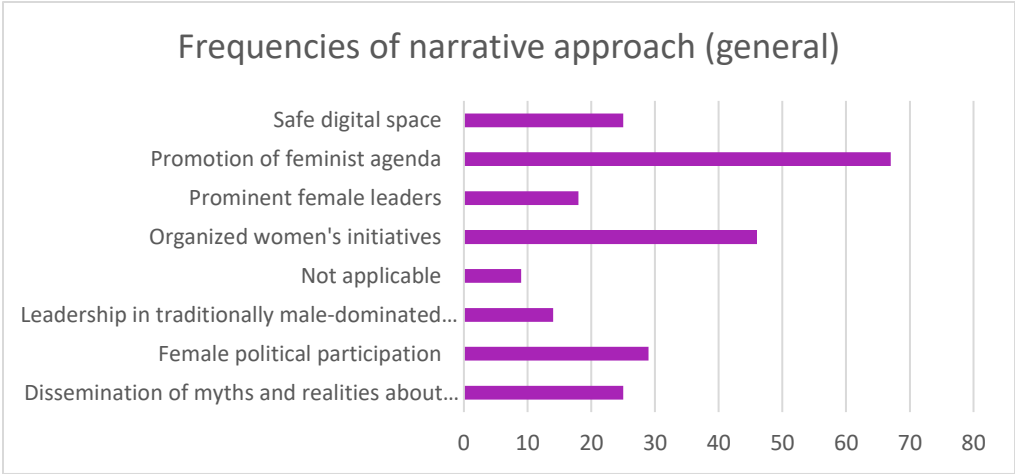
Year	Total				Research phase
	Posts	Followers	Comments	Likes	
2020	34	813	29	945	Participatory intervention
2021	85	1410	41	1436	Post research
2022	65	1701	20	893	Without intervention
2023	44	2024	1140	55	Without intervention
2024	5	2151	7	54	Without intervention

**Table 2.** Performance of the Instagram account in March 2020-2024

*a) Narrative approaches used*

The most prevalent narrative focus is the promotion of the feminist agenda, which accounts for 28.8% of the narrative and is designed to advance feminist causes and identities. This approach reflects Fonamupp’s commitment to the advancement of feminist initiatives and ensures the inclusion and prominence of feminist perspectives in its digital discourse. A further focus, that of organised women’s initiatives, represents 19.7% of the posts and is selected with the purpose of highlighting and communicating the efforts of professional women and feminist movements. This narrative presents a synthesis of organized women’s efforts and achievements within the context of feminist frameworks. The category of Female political participation, which accounts for 12.4% of the total content, emphasises the historical and contemporary contributions of women in politics. Its objective is to draw attention to the

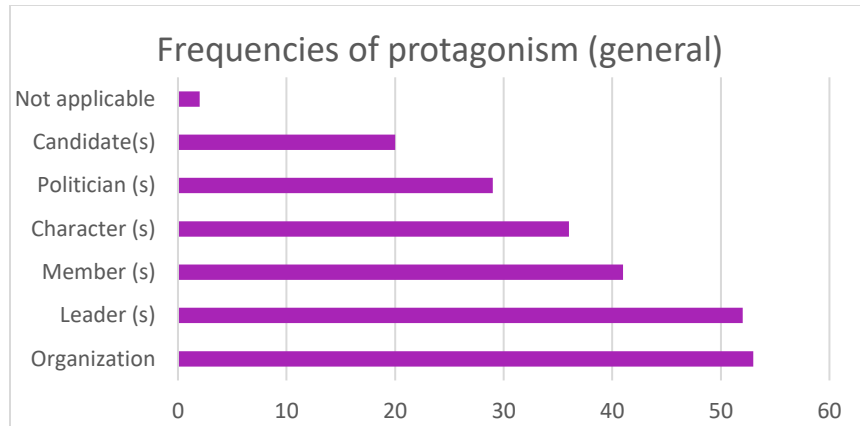
active roles and participation of women in the political sphere. They challenge prevailing misconceptions about women’s leadership roles by disseminating information about relevant events and developments, and by promoting Fonamupp as a secure digital space for members and followers to engage in constructive dialogue and debate on these issues.



**Figure 2.** Narrative approach

*b) The most visible female roles*

The Instagram profile of Fonamupp features the organisation and its leaders, both current and past board members, as the primary subjects, representing 22.7% and 22.3% of the total sample analysed, respectively. Other visible female roles include membership, which accounts for 17.6% of the total sample, followed by women acting as reference figures from both the past and the present in fields that are commonly associated with men, which account for 15.5% of the total sample. Furthermore, politicians account for 12.4% of the posts, while candidates for internal party or general elections represent 8.6%. In order to enhance their visibility, they employ the use of descriptive text and mention the protagonists in the majority of their posts, utilising the following formula: title + first name + last name + position. In this regard, the terms *doctor*, *bachelor*, and *professor* are employed, in addition to the mention of ministers, judges, ambassadors, and board members. The candidates are referenced with the position they are seeking and the political party they represent.



**Figure 3.** Protagonism

*c) Priority of types of content in their posts*

In terms of content type, the majority of posts (39.1%) were of an institutional nature, designed to showcase the mission, vision, objectives and functions of Fonamupp. Individual achievements of female politicians were highlighted in 30% of the posts, while photographic galleries of Forum or political party events were featured in 15.5%. The most prevalent type of publication is art, representing 58.8% of the total content, followed by photographs at 32.6%. The remaining 8.5% is comprised of video content.

*d) Language choices to highlight women in political roles*

In terms of Instagram feature usage, 65.2% of posts use the “@” symbol to tag political figures, political parties, state institutions, and international organisations, as well as the “#” symbol to include hashtags for names or concepts. These hashtags were originally used in Spanish to categorise content related to Fonamupp as part of a strategy to facilitate regional searches and promote discussion on specific topics. Hashtags used include #WomenInPolitics, #EmpoweredWomen, #MoreWomenInPolitics, #LiderazgoFemenino, #NoParityNoDemocracy, #NoWomenNoDemocracy and #ParityDemocracy, as well as references to #FONAMUPP and #WeAreFONAMUPP.

With regard to language use, 92.3% of analysed posts demonstrate the use of non-sexist language in captions or post descriptions. Of these, 71.67% highlight women by mentioning their full names, positions or professions in the text, as well as using appropriate formal and hierarchical terms. No difference in treatment was identified in the description of the posts based on the type of protagonist. Furthermore, expressions indicating belonging were noted, such as 'our colleague', 'our leader' and 'our distinguished member'.

Secondly, the feminisation of professions and occupations (9.87%) is evident in the use of terms such as 'president', 'former president', 'minister' and 'director' to describe women's participation and leadership in roles and spaces traditionally occupied by men (in feminine forms in Spanish).

In addition, inclusive language is evident in the use of dual forms (5.58%), such as 'together' or 'women and men', even in cases where only a man is present in the image. The employment of gender-neutral expressions (4.29%), including 'people' and 'membership', is also observed, even in instances where the reference pertains to an organisation comprised exclusively of women. In 0.86% of publications, the analysis of language use is not applicable.

Finally, phrases such as 'greater political participation by women', 'defence of their rights' and 'gender-based violence' are reiterated. The results of this study demonstrate the systematic use of non-sexist language in the analysed publications.

#### *e) Protagonists' visual depiction*

With regard to the visual aspect, 42.9% of the posts consist mainly of artwork and posed photographs. In these, it is evident that, in the limited number of posts in which male subjects are present, they predominantly occupy central positions within the composition, surrounded by female subjects who exhibit a more pronounced overall presence.

Furthermore, 13.7% of the posts consist of amateur content, comprising unplanned images of lower technical quality, mostly in posts where the protagonist is a female candidate or leader. In addition, spontaneous content, characterised by its less structured visual narrative that simulates the naturalness of the scene, is present in 9% of the posts.

#### *f) Protagonists image*

In this particular instance, 42.9% of the posts comprise posed photographs and videos. It is evident that when male protagonists are present, they frequently occupy a central position, despite the prevalence of women in the posts. The remaining 13.7% of the posts are deemed to be of an amateur nature, comprising non-professional photographs and unplanned videos of a low quality and lacking a coherent visual narrative.

#### *g) Protagonists staging their appearances*

Regarding the staging of the photographs, which other studies have identified as a crucial factor in observing the level of professionalism in the use of the platform, it is notable that the images in question have been posed.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

The general objective of this research was to ascertain the factors that impede the participation and visibility of female politicians on social media. Once the aforementioned factors have been identified, communication empowerment strategies with a gender perspective could be designed.

It can be concluded that there are a number of obstacles to the participation of women in politics. One such obstacle is the influence of the hegemonic roles that society imposes on women, including the aesthetic pressure (Al-Kandari et al., 2017). However, women also encounter gender-based violence within their political parties. These parties continue to exhibit paternalistic and sexist tendencies. The continued prevalence of masculine models of power is facilitated by their digital narratives and structural characteristics.

Female politicians are subjected to violence on social media (Blanco-Alfonso et al., 2022). This firmly situates political parties within the broader context of sexist violence. Despite the promotion of gender mainstreaming policies, sexism persists within their organisational structures. Consequently, women are inclined to remain silent or anonymous. They perceive the digital domain as a foreign entity. Furthermore, the study indicates that the dearth of female representation in politics is exacerbated by a pervasive lack of trust in political parties and the contemptuous treatment of women within these institutions. The networks serve as a reflection and an amplifier of this demeaning attitude. This results in the silencing of women and hinders formal and substantive representation.

It can be concluded that social media is a necessary tool for the visibility of female politicians. However, the women participating in the study were unequivocal in their assertion that neither social media platforms themselves nor the political parties they represent are free from gender-based violence (Sundström & Stockemer, 2022). This impedes their access to and participation in these processes. Furthermore, it misrepresents them. It is evident that women are aware that the perception of social media users with regard to their political profiles is related to gender-based violence. This has been demonstrated empirically by Håkansson (2024) in different national environments and by Krook (2020) in diverse studies. They assert that they are susceptible to being targeted. Such treatment is not a consequence of their political views, but rather a result of their private lives or appearance. Furthermore, they are not in

alignment with the conventional notion of a representative public profile that politicians are expected to embody. Consequently, they either refrain from commenting or choose to remain anonymous on social media.

Concerning the quantitative findings, it was observed that an increase in the frequency of posts was associated with a notable growth in the symbolic capital of the movement. The greater the visibility of women as political subjects, the greater the increase in the number of interactions on Instagram accounts. Indeed, they assert that they have encountered secure digital spaces for visibility when their profiles are associated with the organisations in which they are active. In these social spaces, they feel sufficiently at ease to express their opinions and interact with strangers.

In 2019, the action was oriented towards establishing the organisation as a promoter of political parity in Panama by reactivating the Instagram profile and increasing the number of publications. This demonstrated the continuous work of the Forum and significantly increased its reach on social media. In 2020, a notable increase in social media activity was observed, and in 2021, the number of publications reached its highest point in March, with key topics such as women's suffrage and electoral reforms receiving particular attention. In 2022, the Instagram profile continued to serve as a vital platform for communication, with the highest number of posts registered in March, which coincided with the conclusion of the global project.

The organisational structure and frequency of publications contributed to a heightened level of interest in Fonamupp. However, the withdrawal of dedicated personnel at the conclusion of 2022 resulted in a heightened dependence on the Board of Directors and temporary personnel. The 2023 annual report was not made available for download on the website.

The dearth of female participation in political structures cannot be attributed to a lack of ability, but to their reluctance to engage with patriarchal structures, or the sexist narratives perpetuated by political parties on social media (Krook & Restrepo, 2020). This narrative is replicated from traditional media sources narrative and focuses on appearance or personal aspects, rather than political achievements (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Indeed, women under the age of 40 seem disinclined to engage with the symbolic capital that traditional media can confer upon them.

It can be posited that civil feminist organisations have the potential to serve as vehicles for the dissolution of the second gender digital gap. Indeed, women are calling for these groups to provide them with support so that they can challenge dominant roles and gender stereotypes and develop communication empowerment strategies. The findings indicate that digital strategies and actions for the communicational

empowerment of female politicians encompass the following: (a) the visibility of references; (b) the generation of narratives that challenge stereotypical and hegemonic gender roles; (c) the visibility of the feminist agenda; and (d) the promotion of spaces for constructive dialogue.

In conclusion, these strategies permit women to demand visibility with a gender perspective that can be applied to their profiles as female politicians. These are not merely strategies of individual resistance; they are also part of a process of changing the collective narrative. It is imperative that communicational empowerment be conceptualised as a collective endeavour, and that political organisations that espouse the cause of political participation accept this premise. It is their desire to be able to present themselves in secure environments in which they can demonstrate their abilities as political leaders. Such visibility will serve to challenge the prevalence of sexist narratives and to empower other women, irrespective of their political status. Fonamupp seems an appropriate setting in which to trial feminist digital spaces for female politicians, given that media literacy is a tool for fostering self-esteem (Stamps, 2021).

It is acknowledged that the case study presented in this article can be replicated by other political institutions with a focus on women's participation and empowerment, as it is always possible to adapt the actions in question to a specific context.

It is beyond dispute that the advent of the fourth feminist wave has had a profound impact on political parties. In numerous countries, political parties have endeavoured to incorporate a gender perspective into their agendas and to advance policies promoting equality. Nevertheless, it is notable that only 25% of parliamentarians worldwide are women. This indicates a necessity to concentrate on the functioning of political parties as power structures, rather than on the policies they espouse. Considering the above, it seems pertinent to highlight a few conclusions that could potentially serve as a starting point for a process of second-order reflection within political parties. Such reflection could be replicated in other contexts, beyond Panama.

Fourth-wave feminism has demonstrated the significance of a global movement in challenging dominant narratives. Notable movements such as *Vivas nos queremos*, *Ni Una Menos* and MeToo have achieved global reach and virality (Peroni & Rodak, 2020). The role of social media as a platform for both denouncing injustices and promoting new agendas has been clearly demonstrated. These predominantly civil movements serve as a precedent about the alteration of digital narratives in the context of the fight against inequality.

In light of the observations made by the female participants in the study, it is recommended that political parties establish their own secure digital environments for female politicians. This will enable women to make their own agendas visible. Furthermore, these digital spaces allow political parties to construct representations that are free of gender stereotypes and to promote greater access and participation for women.

Even though civil organisations have created narratives of denunciation, the application of communicational empowerment to political parties would result in the generation of equitable visibility nodes with a gender perspective. This would entail a shift from male-dominated narratives to referential narratives, which are equitable and free of sexism. Such spaces are referred to as *referential* in that political parties must undertake to establish exemplary digital spaces in favour of equality, and ahead of their own interests.

The concept of *communicational empowerment* can be employed as a tool for the analysis of the behaviour of structures and unequal relationships. Furthermore, it considers the concrete effects of these actions on the daily lives of women and men. The objective is to facilitate transformation. It encourages the formation of collective entities and the facilitation of discourse for the development of collective strategies for the visibility of female leadership in roles that transcend the limitations of hegemonic structures (Wadsworth et al., 2009). The visibility of gender agendas can be enhanced through this process.

It is imperative that any communicational empowerment strategy encompass the issue of online discrimination and sexism directed at female politicians. Furthermore, it is essential to engage in a critical reflection on the gender division of labour and on the hegemonic gender roles that affect female politicians. This requires the addressing of the second digital gap.

Indeed, one of the key findings of this study is the necessity for feminist political organisations (such as Fonamupp) to not only advocate for the representation of women as candidates, but also to facilitate broader social change. Such spaces must also serve as arenas for the advancement of anti-hegemonic campaigns targeting gender roles and stereotypes. In terms of a communicational empowerment strategy, this starting point is significant as far as women are compelled to rely on extant cultural constructions in order to convey the truth (De la Mata et al., 2022). The existing cultural constructs in question present narratives in which women are not considered to be political subjects of reference. In such instances, narratives are constructed from a perspective identified by feminist theory as the impostor phenomenon. It is therefore challenging to identify narratives in which women are portrayed as fully authorised political subjects, and in which the issues under discussion extend beyond those related to

patriarchal dispositions (Bourdieu, 1998). It is important to note that, in the presented case study, one of the challenges was to develop narratives that would challenge the prevailing ones. The utilisation of digital spaces for the presentation of narratives that challenge the prevailing hegemonic gender roles and stereotypes entails the provision of a more inclusive and equitable representation of women (Dutta, 2019).

The strategy deployed on Instagram illustrated that the creation and promotion of narratives devoid of sexism facilitate the challenge and transformation of the prevailing and hegemonic narratives that reinforce patriarchal dispositions. It is therefore pertinent to enquire whether this approach has the potential to empower the women who participate and are involved. This prompts the question of whether this increased visibility is indicative of a broader shift in the political landscape. Fonamupp not only discusses these issues but also provides a secure environment in which the voices of these individuals can be heard, thereby moving away from the paternalistic approach of speaking on their behalf. This response is informed by an active listening approach to stakeholders who have expressed a desire to see women who are professional and prepared for the positions they aspire to in social media.

It is common practice in Fonamupp's communication to portray women as highly qualified professionals, a portrayal that is perceived as a naturalised expectation by the online community. This expectation can be seen to act as a form of symbolic violence in accordance with Bourdieu's theory, whereby norms and criteria are imposed that limit the opportunities for participation and recognition of women with different experiences who wish to engage in politics and do not fit this description.

The analysis of Fonamupp's Instagram content illustrates how dynamics associated with Bourdieu's (2003) concept of symbolic violence and the feminist notion of the impostor phenomenon are reproduced within digital political communication. According to Bourdieu, posing is not a 'natural' act, but rather an action that conveys self-respect and demands respect from others, projecting dignity, authority and legitimacy. It is generally accepted that the formula involves the presentation of subjects positioned in the centre of the frame, standing firmly and motionless before the camera. The author posits that even in instances where an endeavour is made to capture a spontaneous or "natural" pose, this also entails a simulated theatricality, given that naturalness is a cultural ideal that must be prepared and constructed. Moreover, in the case of group photographs, the subjects are predominantly positioned in the central area of the composition, thereby assuming a dominant placement within the image.

The narratives frequently remain embedded within dominant representational frameworks that privilege institutional authority, professional titles, and formal political roles. The emphasis on highly curated images, hierarchical language, and the need to present women as "prepared" and legitimate

subjects reflects internalised norms about what constitutes acceptable political participation. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of symbolic violence, whereby women adopt and reproduce the very standards that have historically excluded them. Concurrently, the relative paucity of narratives depicting women as fully autonomous political agents –beyond institutional validation or exceptional achievement– suggests the persistence of the impostor phenomenon, where legitimacy must be constantly demonstrated. These patterns are further reinforced by the prominence of formal roles (e.g. board members or recognised professionals) and the limited presence of alternative or everyday political subjectivities, indicating that even within feminist digital spaces, representations continue to be shaped by patriarchal dispositions.

It would be interesting to examine if this is reflected in the social media profiles of political parties. In particular, it would be valuable to identify the visual representation and narratives that emphasise gender expectations as determining criteria for visibility in these spaces of political socialisation, where they play a crucial role as content managers.

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