

Women not very involved in civic affairs on Facebook

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The survey showed that women of all ages are much less interested in politics and news information on Facebook than men. Credit: Geir Mogen/SINTEF.

A new study has been checking what 20 million users like on Facebook. Its conclusion is that men are interested in politics, women in the

environment. Young Norwegian women are among the least involved in civic affairs in the world.

The study was published in the journal *Social Science Computer Review*, and is probably the first in the world to use big data to survey and analyse gender and civic involvement on Facebook in different countries.

It concludes that Facebook does not appear to even out gender differences. Norway is one of ten countries included in the survey. Young Norwegian girls show little interest in politics on Facebook, compared with girls from the same age group in other countries. Young [women](#) from countries including Iran, Spain, England and the USA show more interest.

Men politics, women environment

The survey showed that women of all ages are much less interested in politics and news information on Facebook than men. Only about 3 in 10 women are interested in politics, as opposed to 7 in 10 men. Roughly speaking, this gap between men and women applies both globally and in Norway.

"When we look at the recent major political movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Syrian Revolution and Diren Gezi, which have also been strongly mobilised on Facebook, we see that the proportion of women here is only around 30%. Women – and particularly [young women](#) aged between 13 and 28, tend to demonstrate an interest in humanitarian aid and environmental issues", says Petter Brandtzæg at SINTEF.

Billions express their opinion

"Facebook is a new and important communal arena, and the biggest [social media](#) in the world, with over 1.5 billion users. Gender differences apparent here is an important topic. There is a low threshold here for people to express their interest in politics and civic involvement, for example by using likes", says Brandtzæg. "It was interesting for me to see whether we would find the same differences between the genders on Facebook as we do offline. The gender perspective is also interesting because women use Facebook and social media much more than men. In many ways, this is an arena for the girls", he says.

Brandtzæg started by examining the claim that many researchers have made, namely that Facebook and social media even out the differences between the genders. He then divided '[civic involvement](#)' into the fields of politics, information orientation, and more social activism orientation, such as interest in the humanitarian and environmental movements.

"The use of big data made it possible to make comparisons across several countries. The method also has significant benefits in terms of measurement and analysis. Traditionally, research has focussed on what men and women say they do, while [big data](#) analyses reveal what people actually do. An examination of behaviour and specific preferences, as this study reveals, will thus result in a more correct picture of gender differences", he says.

Old gender role patterns

The results of the survey showed that Facebook plays no part in evening out gender differences. The old gender role patterns remain, even in a liberal country like Norway.

"Perhaps we might expect young, Norwegian women aged between 13 and 28 to be among those on the most equal footing in terms of interest in politics. But in fact they turn out to exhibit the same, or even less,

interest than women in countries like Iran and Brazil", says Brandtzæg.

Of the ten countries he studied in depth, this group of Norwegian women were the least politically involved on Facebook, with the exception of women in the same age group in India, Egypt and Poland. Young women in the same group in Spain, England and the USA showed a much greater interest in politics.

Brandtzæg is not sure why young Norwegian women in this age group are less interested in [politics](#) than girls in Brazil and Iran. Or why the [gender differences](#) are smaller or the same as in countries that come way behind Norway on the UN's equality index.

Explanations

Brandtzæg believes that the results can be explained by what is known as the equality paradox. The more modern and equality-focused a country is, the more women and men seem to make more gender-traditional choices. Other studies also substantiate this explanation.

"Alternative explanations are that the use of Facebook is largely about self-presentation and identity", says Brandtzæg. "Young people are in a phase of their life when they are developing their gender identity, and this development is increasingly taking place on social media such as Facebook. The interests chosen by young people on Facebook and other media could thus be adapted according to stereotypical cultural conceptions of what gender is. When girls communicate and socialise intensively with other girls on Facebook, this can reinforce gender role patterns", he says.

More information: P. B. Brandtzaeg. Facebook is no "Great equalizer": A big data approach to gender differences in civic engagement across countries, *Social Science Computer Review* (2015).

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