

Where are the women on the Spanish-language Wikipedia site?

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Wikipedia logo.

With its more than 40 million articles in 301 different languages, Wikipedia is one of the largest human collaboration efforts in history. One of the main pillars on which this wish to bring together the sum of all knowledge is based is the achievement of a neutral space. However, several studies suggest that the site suffers from a persistent gender bias as regards both content and the composition of its community. An analysis of the gender gap in the Spanish-language version of Wikipedia by an interdisciplinary team at the UOC has revealed that only 11.6% of its registered editors are women.

According to the new study, which has been published in the journal *PLOS ONE*, the difference could be partially due to female editors being less persistent. "Women edit less and give up sooner. This is part of the reason the gap is not narrowing," note the authors. In spite of this, the results reveal a small group of veteran female editors, some of whom have edited more than men, a fact that could help design measures to highlight and increase women's participation in this space.

The paper is signed by UOC researchers Julià Minguillón of the Learning Analytics for Innovation and Knowledge Application in Higher Education group (LAIKA), of the Faculty of Computer Science, Multimedia and Telecommunications, Julio Meneses and Sergi Fàbregues of the Gender and IT group (GenTIC), of the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3) and of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences, and by Professor Eduard Aibar of the Philosophy for Contemporary Challenges group (MUSSOL) of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Núria Ferran, a researcher at the Faculty of Audiovisual Media of the University of Barcelona, also took part.

A new method for identifying gender

With over 1.58 million pages, the Spanish version of Wikipedia is the ninth largest, as well as the fourth largest by number of registered editors (around 17,000). One of the challenges facing the new study has been identifying these people's [gender](#), as many of them have chosen not to reveal it in their Wikipedia personal profiles. To ascertain this, in addition to collecting the information published by the users themselves, the researchers also created a systematic method to establish their gender based on their names and the use of grammatical gender in the descriptions appearing in their profiles. This procedure made it possible to identify the gender of 49% of editors, as compared with only 38.8% who had specified it on their personal page.

According to the results of this innovative process, the number of active female editors in the Spanish-language version of Wikipedia accounts for 7.4% of all existing profiles, a figure that rises to 11.6% if you take into account only those profiles whose genders we know for certain.

"These differences mean that the Spanish-language Wikipedia site is a male-dominated territory that may plausibly be considered a misogynistic place by female editors. Additionally, the high percentage of unknown profiles hinders efforts to reduce this perception, as women perceive anonymous editors as more critical of their contributions," the researchers highlight.

Lower retention rates among female editors

In general, the study also found differences in editing practices, as women have lower retention rates. According to the authors, this can be explained "partly by female editors being less persistent and tending to leave Wikipedia much more quickly, particularly in the first few weeks." However, an analysis of the most active people on the site revealed the

disappearance or even reversal of gender differences between men and women in some cases: "There is a small group of veteran female editors who have edited more than male editors in terms of editing practices and involvement in different parts of Wikipedia," they highlight.

The types of contributions made are another differentiating factor between men and women. According to the study, female editors edit a higher percentage of non-article pages; in other words, in places whose specific purpose is to interact with other participants, particularly discussion pages, where articles' flaws and possible improvements are discussed. These findings seem to corroborate those of previous studies suggesting that men tend to be contributors while women tend to behave more as collaborators. However, the researchers highlight that "when taking into account only the most active editors, although women have a higher average number of edits in all namespaces, the differences between women and the most active men are not statistically significant."

Greater interest in gender-related matters

The researchers also found differences between the two groups' interests based on an analysis of the categories used by Wikipedia to group articles by subject area. Although the authors describe these categories as "too general," the study suggests that women are "slightly less" interested in editing science and nature pages.

As for content pages, men always outperform women by three to one. In fact, women often do not contribute at all or contribute significantly less, although with one exception: gender gap-related pages and WikiProjects. "We found only two groups of pages in which women seem more active than men: the 'Women' and 'Feminism' WikiProjects and another group of pages relating to gender issues. It therefore appears that women are more interested in making contributions in this field," they stress.

Highlighting the work of the most active female editors

In view of this bias, the researchers suggest a variety of measures to encourage participation by women. Firstly, they propose changes to the way the website works, such as facilitating editing—particularly regarding the management of references—to "avoid incomplete or erroneous edits that are almost certain to be subsequently deleted." They also recommend improving the identification of "abusive behaviors," particularly by veteran editors who may be "less than fully impartial in relation to gender issues, a problem that is not exclusive to women and may also affect other minority groups," they note.

They additionally emphasize the importance of supporting female editors for longer after taking part in Wikipedia welcome activities such as WikiProjects or Wikimarathons, where they get together in one place to edit and improve a subject matter or group of articles. Highlighting the involvement of the group of most active female [editors](#) is another recommendation made by the researchers, who assert that "raising awareness of women's successful experiences could provide a good starting point to encourage other women to continue editing and thus promote their long-term commitment to Wikipedia." Finally, the conclusions of the paper also stress the need to research why women stop editing Wikipedia and take a closer look at the role of Wikimarathons to encourage more [women](#) to take up and maintain the editing habit over time.

More information: Julià Minguillón et al, Exploring the gender gap in the Spanish Wikipedia: Differences in engagement and editing practices, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0246702](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246702)

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