

Gender Equality Topics on the Social Media Platform *Twitter* in 2021

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Abstract. Social media has become an important part of the agenda-setting process. Digital platforms have reduced the role of traditional media in agenda-setting and have also expanded the range of agenda-setting actors. Social media provides a platform for public debate about social norms, creates a platform for further revision of norms, promoting awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of current laws and rights. Statistical data on the usage habits of social network platforms in Latvia show that the society is active in using social networks. In Latvia, social media platforms and blogs are the third most popular source of news. Social media offers a rich source of data for insight into public perceptions of certain issues, particularly sensitive or controversial. Social media debates on gender equality can promote comprehension of gender equality, as well as awareness of the consequences of gender inequality. The study evaluates the topics pertaining to gender equality discussed in the social medium *Twitter* in 2021, using the facilities offered by network analysis. By entering the key phrase ‘gender equality’ into the Twitter search engine, those posts that developed into further discussion and/or resonated in terms of reposts and likes were obtained and selected. The analysis of posts reveals that, albeit indirectly, the discussions on the social medium *Twitter* address those gender equality areas that have already come into the media’s attention – gender equality initiatives, employment and gender-based violence. The various discussion topics include a theme which depicts gender equality as a rebuke directed at men, rejecting and questioning research-based manifestations of gender inequality. The rejection of gender equality issues raises concerns about the spread of disinformation and false information in the discussion of the issue. Latvia’s *Twitter* debate on gender equality does not reach the level of influencing policy, but reflects concerns, prejudices and anxiety regarding gender equality in Latvian society.

Keywords: agenda, gender equality, social media, network analysis, *Twitter*

Introduction

Clearly, social media plays an important and constantly growing role in promoting equality issues. However, as emphasized in European Parliament's report, women's interests are often not reflected in mainstream political debates (European Parliament 2013). This means that non-formal political activities, such as the use of online social media debates, can potentially provide active proponents of gender equality with the opportunity to influence the political agenda.

The importance of social media has been promoted by their ability to convey information in real time and discuss a variety of issues, including those topics that are considered controversial. The way various issues are discussed in social networks can influence the perception and further discussion of these issues in wider society (Kim *et al.* 2012).

In Latvia, social media platforms and blogs are the third most popular source of news, used by 41% of the population on a daily basis (Nulle, Brikmane 2022). There were 1.38 million social media users in Latvia in January 2021. In 2021, the *Facebook* platform was the most frequently used one by the residents of Latvia. According to the data provided by the company *NapoleonCat*, in August 2021, the number of *Facebook* users in Latvia reached approximately 1.24 million, which is approximately 66.9% of the total population of the country. By collecting statistical data on the usage habits of social network platforms in Latvia, it can be concluded that the society is active in using social networks. An increasing number of people choose to spend their time using social networks to communicate with friends, find out news, fill their spare time by sharing the content they create (Brikmane 2021). Evaluating the situation of gender equality in Latvia, it must be concluded that the existing regulatory and policy framework does not indicate a strong will and advancement toward implementation of gender equality. The issues of gender equality in the existing political framework, for example, in the fields of education, employment, social insurance and social security are fragmented. Consequently, Latvia can be assessed as relatively weak in its political and ideological support for gender equality initiatives, moreover, the presence of traditionally conservative or religious values periodically asserts itself. As a result, there is a gap between the society's value system and the understanding of the political power in matters of gender equality (Zitmane, Broka 2023).

The aim of the current study is to conduct an analysis of *Twitter* debates to capture specific discussions on the topic of gender equality. The author has also aspired to establish how and whether the discussions about gender equality taking place in the social medium *Twitter* reflect the news about gender equality initiatives and achievements reported in the traditional media.

Existing research on the social medium *Twitter* indicates that "*Twitter* is a good source of information about public opinion because of its speed of use:

users express ideas and share information. *Twitter*, therefore, represents a rich data source which can offer keen insight about public opinion on particular issues, especially sensitive or controversial ones” (Gurman *et al.* 2018, 328). Importantly, the conversations about gender equality that are formed in social media, for example, *Twitter*, can raise awareness of gender inequality. The nature of social media provides a window of opportunity for like-minded individuals, who, by joining others can achieve more than they can as individuals. Despite the aforementioned positive aspects, it should be taken into account that social media simultaneously has a potential for attacking human rights and preventing progress (Gurman *et al.* 2018, 327).

Of course, the current average *Twitter* user may not correspond to the average citizen, however, in general, social media usage trends indicate that the reach of social media will continue to diversify. As a result, *Twitter* and other social media are likely to play a growing role in promoting awareness of gender inequality. Therefore, it is beneficial to explore the ways in which gender equality is discussed on *Twitter*, to gain an insight into how the public debate on gender equality issues develops (Gurman *et al.* 2018, 328).

Social media are relevant not only for political communication, but specifically for agenda setting: “the rapid rise of social media, including the microblogging platform *Twitter*, has provided new avenues for political agenda setting that have increasingly discernible impact” (Lewandowsky *et al.* 2020, 2). In the media environment, digital platforms have reduced the gatekeeping power of traditional media and, simultaneously, they, particularly the social media, have increased the capacity of various kinds of actors to shape the agenda (Gilardi *et al.* 2022, 39–40). The advantage of social media over traditional media is their ability to provide a platform for people to discuss a range of contemporary social issues, including terror attacks, institutional sexism, right-wing extremism, domestic violence, online misogyny, and more. Thus, in recent years, the issues of gender equality have entered the agenda of public discussion worldwide, serving as a platform for discussing further news events, such as the revelation of sexual abuse in journalism, politics, and the movie industry, high-profile stories of sexual harassment, and many more examples of male privilege, toxic masculinity, and sexual violence against women (Wallaschek *et al.* 2022, 147–148). To a great extent, the social network activism has evolved around such stories, which have formed the backdrop of online discussions about gender equality, “leading to the emergence of viral hashtags like #metoo, which was used to highlight issues of sexual abuse, assault, and harassment faced by women” (Lutzky, Lawson 2019, 1).

To sum up, “social media change political agenda setting dynamics for three reasons: first, they are a relevant channel for political communication; second, they expand the number and types of actors who can potentially shape the agenda; third, using social media, political actors can potentially reach

the broader public via traditional media” (Gilardi *et al.* 2022, 43). Furthermore, by “providing a platform for public debate about social norms present in popular and news media, social media also provides a platform to push for further legal reforms, by raising awareness about the shortcomings of current laws and legal and judicial institutions” (Gurman *et al.* 2018, 329). The discussion concerning gender is becoming more volatile and socially fraught, especially in contemporary online contexts (Lutzky, Lawson 2019, 12).

Methodology

The social medium *Twitter* has been chosen as the research object. The advantage of *Twitter* as a material for analysis is that as the platform it is best suited for public engagement in political debates where pro-gender equality campaigning is likely to converge (e. g., around hashtags), and opposing views are also likely to find expression. The audience of the social medium *Twitter* in 2021 reached 103.2 thousand users, of which 23% were female and 77% – male (Kemp 2021). *Twitter* has been chosen as a source of analysis also because, although *Twitter* can be considered a relatively elite social media network, the public debates of women’s rights taking place there might affect the political sphere, because, according to research, politicians, civil society actors, and other key stakeholders actively follow and engage in these debates (Wallaschek *et al.* 2022, 147).

In order to evaluate the topics related to gender equality discussed on the social medium *Twitter* in 2021, a social media search tool was used. By entering the key phrase ‘gender equality’ into the *Twitter* search engine, those posts that developed into further discussion and/or resonated in terms of reposts and likes were obtained and selected.

The research is carried out by the means of network analysis. Network analysis is a multi-disciplinary method that features structural intuition, systematic empirical data, graphical imagery, and the use of mathematical or computational models. network analysis enables researchers to map out the interrelationships among objects and attributes both in the media agenda and the public agenda. The advantage of the network analysis approach is that it moves beyond mere hierarchical rankings, allowing for analyses of social processes in the network (Guo 2012).

Results

Gender equality and antidiscrimination policies remain one of the most heavily contested policy areas all over European Union (Kuhar, Paternotte, 2018). If full democratization is to be realized, then equality of access, including gender equality, must be recognized across societal spheres, institutionalized, and

nurtured culturally. As emphasised by researchers, Latvia has made significant progress, but that progress is deterred rather than realized by democratization processes that have sidelined the women and have failed to recognize and remediate gender inequalities in the economy and politics. The political processes confirm, that Latvia as a democratic state has leaned toward traditional understanding of gender roles (Eglitis *et al.* 2021, 263–264). As a consequence, a situation arises that the presence Latvian women in the public sphere, including politics, is not sufficient for the development of an inclusive and gender-equal democratic state and society (Eglitis *et al.* 2021, 257).

In order to evaluate the discussions on the relevance and importance of gender equality in agenda-setting processes in the social medium *Twitter* in 2021, it is important to determine which topics related to gender equality have gained attention in the agenda of traditional media in 2021. In 2021, the following topics can be highlighted in the media:

- “The difference between men’s and women’s wages last year, compared to 2019, exceeded 22%” (Boša 2021);
- “The ranks of VUGD [State fire and Rescue Service] will be supplemented by a firefighter rescuer – a woman” (lvportals 2021a);
- “Constitutional Court: Istanbul Convention complies with the Constitution” (Soņeca 2021);
- “Latvia ranks 16th in the European Gender Equality Index” (lvportals 2021b);
- “Theatre producer: ‘I was held back by fear, shame’; several women share their experience about a violent art critic” (Lastovskis 2021);
- “Patients accuse doctor of sexual violence; the doctor continues to practice” (Feldmanis 2021).

The headlines of the news published in the media confirm that the media have highlighted events related to policy initiatives, gender equality in the field of employment, and gender-based violence.

Upon evaluation of the acquired data material, several blocks forming the thematic discussion can be distinguished. It should be emphasized that the actualities of gender equality reflected in the media headlines do not become the object of discussion and debate in the social medium *Twitter*. In *Twitter* discussions, gender equality and the issues thereof have not been amongst the top themes, which are discussed the most. It must be taken into account that the entries selected for analysis were obtained by using the search engine – entering the phrase ‘gender equality’, hence, some entries and discussions might not have made it into the analysed material.

Summarizing the discussed topics, they can be grouped into several themes: (Im)possibility of equality; “F” word; But men!; We have no problem with gender equality. Although implicitly, these discussion groups debate the areas of gender

equality that have received media attention – gender equality initiatives, employment and gender-based violence.

1. (Im)possibility of equality

As noted above, the media agenda concerning gender equality issues is not directly reflected in *Twitter* discussions. However, @inesevoika posted on *Twitter*: “The pay gap between men and women in Latvia has been growing over the last 10 years. For women, already 21% less than for men. 21.2 euros for every 100” (Voika 2021). See Figure 1. Most of the posts that are published under this post, question the statistics and also indicate that incomparable things are being talked about, also concerning the male and female tasks.

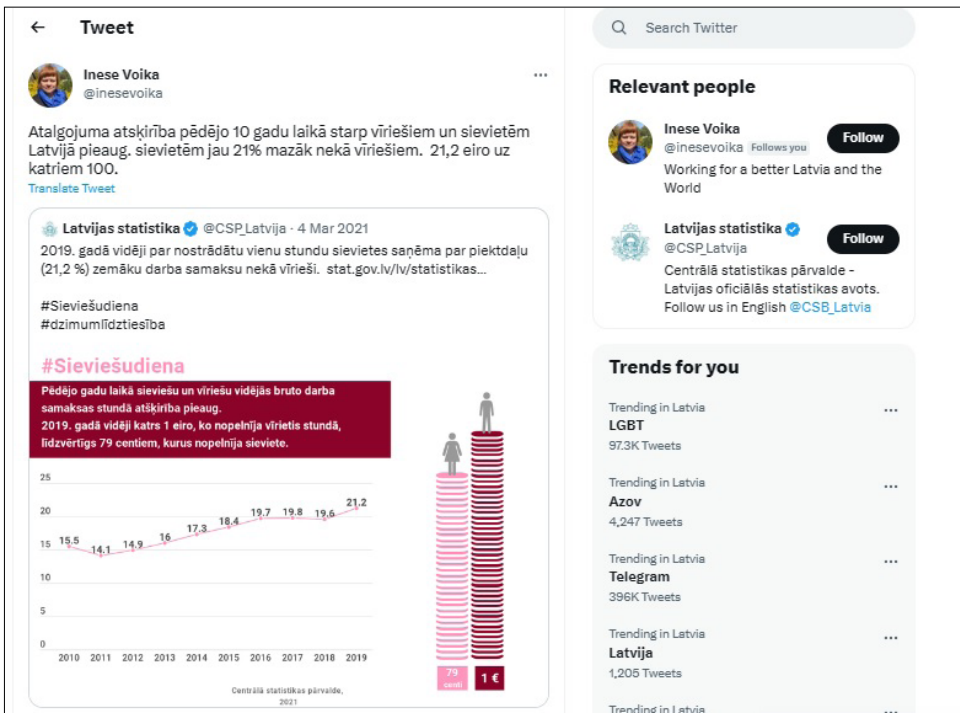


Figure 1. @inesevoika: “The pay gap between men and women”

A discussion about a man’s involvement in the performance of family responsibilities developed around the post published in the *Twitter* profile of newspaper Diena @DienaLV – “Mūrniece: During Covid-19, women around the world deserve gratitude for their tireless care for their families” (DienaLV 2021). This discussion is also a vivid example of how the exchange of opinions regarding

the division of household duties takes place on the social medium *Twitter*, as it sheds light upon the idea of women’s and men’s tasks both in the household and in employment in general. See Figure 2. This and similar discussions elucidate the view that gender equality is impossible because men and women are fundamentally different and gender-based division of labour both in the household and in the professional environment is inevitable and normal.



Figure 2. @sievieteiveicas: “One must hope that the woman will get lucky”

2. “F” word

During the analysed period, there were discussions that evolved around the topics of feminism, the nature of that movement, militancy and necessity. The post of *Twitter* user @EdijsKlaisis provoked a very heated debate: “I will add oil to the fire! In Latvia, feminism is just as crooked, askew and wrong as nationalism. Both of these things manifest, in our case, not in self-love, but in hatred and contempt for others. That’s it! I’m going to go take a dip [for a swim]!” (Klaisis 2021). See Figure 3. This discussion continued both next to the original post, mostly refuting what is asserted in that post, and branched out into further detailed debates about the feminist movement and its more radical manifestations. The main accusations made in this and similar discussions regard feminism as an idea that denigrates men, is radical and breeds discord and hatred.



Figure 3. @EdijsKlaisis: “I will add oil to the fire!”

3. But men!

The previous discussion themes already shed light on the ‘male problem’ in discussing gender equality. Latvia’s *Twitter* statistics confirm that the majority of *Twitter* users are men, consequently, men will always be involved in discussions about gender equality. Discussions confirm that, for the most part, men will rather perceive the issue of gender equality as a kind of attack upon a man’s social position in society, or even a personal attack on the specific individual. In particular, such discussions arise when talking about gender-based violence, necessarily indicating that men also suffer from violence and that it is unfair to focus the discussion only on the violence experienced by women. Notably, the topic of gender-based violence was also on the agenda of traditional media in 2021. The published materials cast light on specific cases of gender-based and sexual violence against women. On the other hand, gender-based violence against men is brought up in discussions of the topic on *Twitter*, although without highlighting specific experiences or cases.

4. We have no problem with gender equality!

Quite interestingly, positive news about Latvia’s success in ensuring gender equality, or areas and indicators of gender equality in which Latvia’s situation shows good results, are used as an argument for the futility of further discussion. It should be noted that such opinions and posts are predominantly authored by male users of the social medium. For example, *Twitter* user @dzimmij13 responded to the news posted by @DelfiLV about the number of women working in high positions in science in Latvia: “Very well, let them work! Only, why are then the leftists of various degrees shouting on the portals again, “everything is bad in Latvia in terms of gender equality, gender quotas must be urgently introduced in all sectors” – interestingly, in concreting crews as well? – we are

the backward mossbacks! It turns out, even better than in – Europe!” (Kore 2021). See Figure 4. The discussion of this topic also provides an insight into a trend observed in other discussions – the positioning of gender equality as a threat to men’s social position. Latvia’s achievements in the field of gender equality are used as an excuse and justification for the fact that no further initiatives or any initiatives at all are necessary.

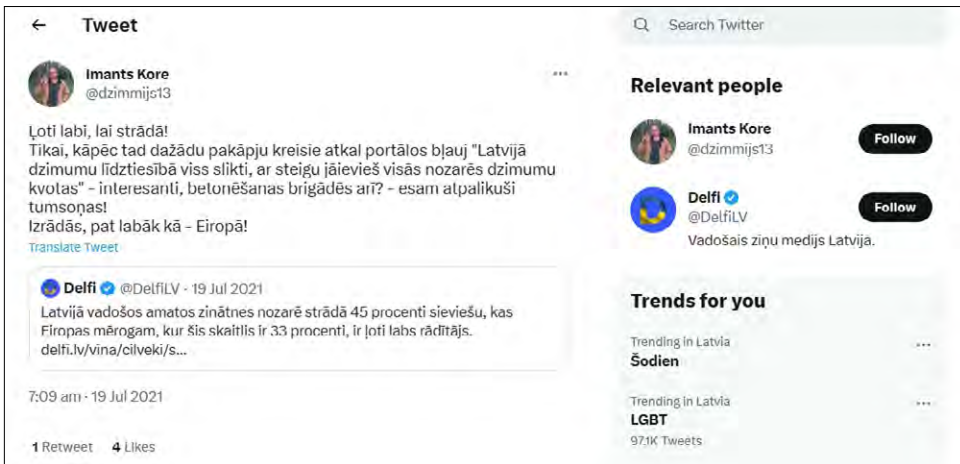


Figure 4. @dzimmij13: “Very well, let them work!”

Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this study provides an insight into the discussion of the topic of gender equality in the social medium *Twitter*. As noted previously, the selection of material, including a search for a specific phrase, limits the posts that are selected for research. The analysed material is formed around the agenda created by the *Twitter* users themselves, highlighting issues pertaining to gender equality, which reflect the interests of the users themselves. Latvia’s *Twitter* debates confirm the broader trend that the discussion on the issue of gender equality tends to become socially tense and sharp, highlighting diametrically opposed opinions.

Summarizing the various themes of discussion, surprisingly, they are united by the fact that gender equality in *Twitter* discussions and posts is understood as a reproach directed at men. The discussions in one way or another involve direct or indirect irritation expressed by male *Twitter* users. Even research-based manifestations of gender inequality are questioned, framed as anti-male. Thus, the discussion of gender equality issues grows into a mutual battle between

supporters and opponents, as a result of which none of the participants change their opinion. It should be noted that the repudiation of gender equality issues raises concerns about the spread of disinformation and false information in the discussion of this issue.

Clearly, social media can promote the inclusion of various issues in the political agenda, the diversity and availability of information, as well as provide tools and opportunities for various social groups to represent and defend their interests. As emphasised before, given *Twitter's* worldwide influence, *Twitter* can engage the public and spark debate on highly controversial topics. Furthermore, public discussions on gender equality and women's rights on *Twitter* may have the potential to influence the political sphere. However, the conducted research confirms that the Latvian *Twitter* debate on gender equality does not reach the level of influencing policy, but rather reflects concerns, prejudices and anxiety regarding gender equality prevailing in Latvian society.

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