BRIEFING NOTE

WOMEN IN POLITICS: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PERUVIAN CONGRESSWOMEN

By #ShePersisted and Fundación Multitudes

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About the authors

#ShePersisted

#ShePersisted works to address gendered disinformation in the form of the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information targeting highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other public figures. #ShePersisted conducts original research on digital harms facing women leaders and the patterns, motives and modus operandi of gendered disinformation campaigns. It supports women leaders through providing key advice on building their digital resilience, and advocates for improved digital standards; in order to accomplish this work, #ShePersisted works in coalition with policy-makers, international and domestic institutions and networks to advocate for increased transparency and accountability from digital platforms.

Fundación Multitudes

Fundación Multitudes is a non-profit organisation, founded in 2014, with the mission of reducing the gap between citizens and decision-making processes. With a team of professionals from various disciplines and with an independent partisan seal, it seeks to articulate civil society organisations to have an impact on the public agenda, increasing participation, transparency, accountability, and implemention of research-based advocacy. At the global level, Multitudes is an advocate for human rights and democracy and, since 2020 with the launch of the Women's Observatory Against Disinformation, it has focused its efforts on studying the phenomenon of gendered disinformation, foreign influence and the threat to democracies in Latin America.

Acknowledgements

Key findings

- Gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics are pervasive in Peru, and tend to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes against women in politics.

- Peruvian congresswomen report being the targets of extensive online attacks, including disinformation and abuse, which are of a very gendered and sexist nature. Many of the online comments attack their physical features, intellectual capacity and sexuality, and reinforce roles imposed by a patriarchal society.

- Women targeted by this abuse reported that the social media environment is exhausting for them, taking an extreme toll on them and their families; they also reported concerns about the potential negative impact on young women's political ambitions.

- While gendered disinformation and online abuse are recognised as pervasive and dangerous phenomena, which can discourage women's political engagement, they are often normalised by their targets and increasingly seen as an inevitable part of everyday experience for women in politics. In some cases, this normalisation might make it difficult to identify lasting solutions to these phenomena.

- While long-term solutions will only be found by ensuring further accountability from digital platforms for the harms caused by their products, some short-term interventions by governmental offices, political parties and civil society could ease some of the negative impacts and are outlined in the recommendations.

- As many of the congresswomen interviewed pointed out, such interventions are currently not available or not known and there are no clear punishments for candidates and parties that promote forms of political violence as a political marketing strategy.

Key terms

Disinformation: false information that is created deliberately and spread with the intention to mislead.

Gender-based violence (GBV): harm perpetrated due to the gender of the target. GBV encompasses many forms of violence, including that which inflicts bodily harm, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic abuse, and digital violence.

Gendered disinformation: the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information that targets highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other women in the public eye. Following story lines that draw on misogyny, and gendered stereotypes, the goal of these attacks is to frame female politicians and government officials as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, unlikable, or uncontrollable – too emotional to hold office or participate in democratic politics. Building on sexist narratives and characterised by malign intent and coordination, gendered disinformation both distorts the public understanding of women politicians' track records and discourages women from seeking political careers. The definition and understanding of gendered disinformation are evolving as evidence is gathered about both the role of technology to accentuate hate and bias, and the ways that these tools can be weaponized for malign intent.

Hate speech: discriminatory and denigrating expressions that target individuals or groups based on facets of their identities, such as sexual orientation, race, gender identity, economic class, religion, and ability. Hate speech targeting women online falls under the umbrella of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Inauthentic activity: artificial engagement on social media platforms that aims to create the illusion of natural engagement by real individuals as users, and that is often used to manipulatively amplify disinformation, target individuals and causes and sow division. Inauthentic activity may be carried out through the deployment of automated processes like bots, the orchestration of coordinated campaigns and/or paying individuals to amplify certain social media posts.

Information warfare: the advantageous and strategic misuse of information and communication technologies to deceive, cause disruption, and undermine opponents. Disinformation is a common tactic utilised in information warfare.

Intersectionality: conceptualised as the intersection of the facets of identity one holds, which may include sexual orientation, race, religion, gender identity, economic class, ability, and other characteristics, and how the inability to untangle these characteristics from one another impacts the way one experiences privilege or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1994).

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV): a spectrum of activities and behaviours that mobilise technology to perpetuate violence, abuse or harassment against (both cis and trans) women. TFGBV encompasses blackmail, sexually threatening messages, image-based abuse, doxxing and hate speech.

Trolling: this category of cyberbullying involves posting damaging or harassing comments on social media that are intended to insult or humiliate the recipient. Trolling can have detrimental effects — including anxiety and depression — on the mental health of its victims.

Background

Women's political participation in Peru is somewhat limited, with women accounting for only around one quarter of elected representatives at the national and local levels.[1] While their numbers have been growing over the years, they have done so at a slower pace than expected, given the introduction of laws to establish parity through quotas (Bill 31030, 2021[2]).

Women's access and equitable participation in decision-making processes by law is not the only problem in Peru. Abuse, and gender-based violence (GBV) that women face are making it difficult for them to be politically active and are inherently linked and should be addressed simultaneously (Aranda Friz, 2020). Political abuse, according to the 2022 Report on Regional and Municipal Elections, is pervasive and one of the main obstacles that women face in order to participate in politics (DNEF, 2022).

A 2020 survey from the National Jury of Elections (JNE, 2020), found that 52% of the women who were running for congress had experienced some type of political abuse in the form of calls and messages as well as psychological violence, threats, defamation and mockery on social media platforms. These attacks are meant to replicate and solidify some of the most damaging social norms that are still pervasive among many parliamentarians, vilifying women and diminishing their roles in public life.

What happens online is particularly important in Peru as 84% of its population use social media[3]. Facebook is the main platform and has the highest share of users (Kemp, 2022) with 67% of the population using it to read news. Similarly, according to Vizcarra (2022), the platform previously known as Twitter, now X, has allowed Peruvian citizens to take part in political discourse by influencing conversations and opinions, a dynamic that is not dissimilar to that reported in other countries worldwide.

While offering greater possibilities for political engagement, social media platforms have also become increasingly dangerous tools for undermining democratic dialogue through the spread of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and gendered disinformation (Di Meco, 2023). When weaponised against women political leaders, gendered disinformation campaigns are used, ultimately, to delegitimise them and to question their capacity to be democratic leaders. Based on and framed by misogynistic and gender biases, these campaigns portray women as inherently untrustworthy, unqualified, unintelligent and unlikeable.

For Cantuarias (2019), social media represent a key mechanism to abuse women in politics at the national level. The author shows how, in the case of Puno and Lima (two Peruvian departments - equivalent to states), abuse happens in digital media through actions of third parties that are better known as 'trolls'. This type of abuse can come from anyone: the troll could be a colleague, a cyberbully for hire, an ordinary citizen, a rival organisation or another person or group.

The Plurinational Electoral Body (OEP, 2021) also recognises the pervasiveness of this phenomenon in Peru, where 'women in politics face various forms of digital violence, such as manipulation, disinformation, information warfare or others' (p.4), most of which go unaddressed. In the parliamentary sphere, the main channel for denouncing political violence, the Parliamentary Ethics Committee, has mostly failed to investigate these events. Gendered disinformation and online

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1   According to the 2021 National Elections Jury Report, women hold 26% of positions at national representation, and 27% of positions at subnational representation.

2   **https://observaigualdad.jne.gob.pe/documentos/recursos/Materiales_educativos/cartilla -paridad-alternancia.pdf**.

3   There were 28.10 million social media users in Peru in January 2022, equivalent to 84% of the total population, however it's important to note that social media users may not represent unique individuals. **https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-peru**

abuse remain rampant in Peru, despite strong legislation to address GBV[4] and political abuse,[5] (in particular the Bill 31155 -2021, which includes language on the use of social media to manifest political abuse). As a result, in Peru — as in other countries worldwide — misogynistic (and at times racist and homophobic) language and narratives that had been latent in society find new strength, to the point of weakening hard-gained, nascent social norms of inclusion and civil discourse, and normalising abuse, as well as impunity for its perpetrators (Bitsch, 2022).

Research objectives, methodology and limitations

Despite the vast power and presence of social media in Peru, few studies have analysed the impact of the harms spread by social media platforms, or how gendered disinformation in particular, has grown on these platforms to impact gender norms in the country.

This study aims to understand how the internet and social media platforms do not only reflect, but also influence social and gender norms in relation to the political participation of women in Peru, taking into consideration their different intersectional identities. In particular, the research aims to highlight how gendered disinformation and online abuse impacts women in politics at various levels, and how they respond to the attacks that target them.

The research relied on four primary tools: an extensive literature review and document research; interviews with a diverse group of women in politics and gender experts from different regions, ethnic origins and political background; a focus group discussion; and social media analysis.

Literature review. An extensive literature review was carried out to identify patterns of women's political representation in Peru, their use of social media, the prevalence of political and digital violence, the concept of political abuse and its typification in the Peruvian legislation, and the norms and legislation that exist to defend women's rights in relation to online disinformation. There was a special focus on women's representation at national level where the use of social media is more prevalent.

Interviews. At the time of data collection for this report, Peru faced multiple crises — political as well as climate-related[6] — which made outreach to women in politics (already an arduous task, given the heavy workload and priorities of congresswomen) particularly difficult. However, 10 interviews were carried out: nine online and one in person at the request of the congresswoman. The interviews enabled congresswomen to express themselves without restrictions, given that they were provided with a safe space and a confidentiality agreement that allowed them to speak freely about their opinions and experiences, with the opportunity to remain anonymous if they wished. The congresswomen interviewed were selected as representing various regions in Peru in order to gather information that would reflect the country's cultural diversity.

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4   Peru. Congress of the Republic, (2015). Law N 30364, Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women and Family Members [online], November 23, 2015 (www.mimp.gob.pe/webs/mimp/ley30364/sobre-ley-30364.php).

5   Peru. Congress of the Republic, (2021). Law N 31155, Law for the prevention and sanction of abuse against women in the political life [online], 7th of April 2021 (https://tinyurl.com/2fywrcqy).

6   There was a political crisis in Peru which began with the dismissal of former president Pedro Castillo who staged a self coup d'etat and ordered the dissolution of Congress. This provoked an outbreak of protest, leading to a constitutional state of emergency and police repression that resulted in multiple injuries and deaths. Ms. Dina Baluarte assumed the presidency of Peru on 7 December, 2022, which led to more protests, police repression and political turmoil. Also, the environmental crisis caused by intense rain in the north of the country meant that many of the women deputies we wanted to contact were not available to participate in the study.

Focus group discussion. A focus group discussion was carried out with six participants, all of whom had expertise and/or experience in politics and women's rights at a national level. They included activists, representatives from civil society, candidates and political scientists, and were chosen for their experience, knowledge, trajectory and availability.

Social media analysis. The public Facebook pages of 51 congresswomen were analysed.[7] Additional social media analysis was carried out by Ojo Público, an independent media outlet, which used an automated follow-up of the eMonitor+ tool[8] to capture social media posts on Facebook and Twitter that contained discourses of GBV targeting Peruvian congresswomen from 1 December 2022 to 29 February 2023. This coincided with the peak of the political conflict in Peru and there was a high influx of publications, interactions, and venting by people in response to demonstrations at a national level.

Research limitations. This study represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation against women in politics in Peru. However, wide-scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels would be needed over an extended period of time to 1) gather more evidence so as to generate a more comprehensive analysis and greater understanding of this phenomenon, 2) determine the degree of influence of gendered disinformation and other harms via social media operations, and 3) identify malign actors and their interrelations through a mapping and analysis of their activities. Furthermore, this study does not include analysis of other major social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, which could offer an opportunity to further conduct visual and audio-visual analyses of content, and discourse analyses on user commentary. Future iterations of research could include participants involved in politics and women's rights at the local and regional levels. This would incorporate perspectives from understudied demographics on gendered disinformation and TFGBV, and would enable localised understanding of the challenges as well as help inform more well-rounded solutions for tackling digital abuses politically active women in Peru face.

Research findings

This section assesses how women in politics in Peru represent themselves on social media platforms, identifies specific instances of gendered disinformation and online abuse, and reveals how the interviewed women politicians perceive such attacks. It also explores the lack of accountability of social media platforms and their limited actions to mitigate gendered disinformation and online abuse, in addition to the impact of these harms on women's political participation and on the reinforcement of restrictive gender norms, as 'the way the major digital platforms are designed is largely responsible for the current hellscape experienced by women online'(Di Meco's, 2023, p. 5).

Social media usage

All 51 congresswomen use both X (Twitter) and Facebook (See Annexes 1 and 2), with younger women generally more active on social media than their older colleagues. All the women interviewed reported being active social media users, and in particular using X (Twitter) to share political opinions and Facebook to share information with as many voters as possible. Instagram tends to be used as a personal and non-political social network. This pattern is in line with the findings of previous studies on the variations in how social media platforms are utilised by women in politics (Patterson, 2016; Di Meco, 2019).

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7   **www.congreso.gob.pe/participacion/congresistasenredessociales**

8   eMonitor+ is a technological tool created by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that uses artificial intelligence to automatically identify hate speech and GBV in digital political conversations. The software uses Twitter (X) messages and sends information to a monitoring team to determine if it is based on hate speech (**www.undp.org/arab-states/emonitore**).

The behaviour of women online and the interaction between their content and the wider community is varied; while some only share information and ignore any debate sparked by the comments, others are active participants in the resulting debates. Others place some kind of restrictions on their social media (either limiting or deleting comments, limiting user responsiveness or blocking users).

Most of the congresswomen interviewed applied some type of filtering to the comments on one of their social media profiles. This gives them a sense of control over their own media and is reported as a way to protect themselves or moderate the digital violence their profiles receive. The majority of the interviewees also reported blocking comments or users that they consider abusive as a form of response.

The analysis of congresswomen's public profiles found that while most of them highlight their current position, followed by their place of origin and/or representation, profession and political party affiliation, 13% describe themselves primarily in relation to their values and identities as, for example, 'hard-working mother' or 'wife and mother' among others. This practice both reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes that are emphasised in the ideal of a 'good woman'.

Examples of Facebook descriptions of female deputies[9]

Figure 1: Facebook description: 'mother, fighter, born in Callao and former mayor of La Perla'.

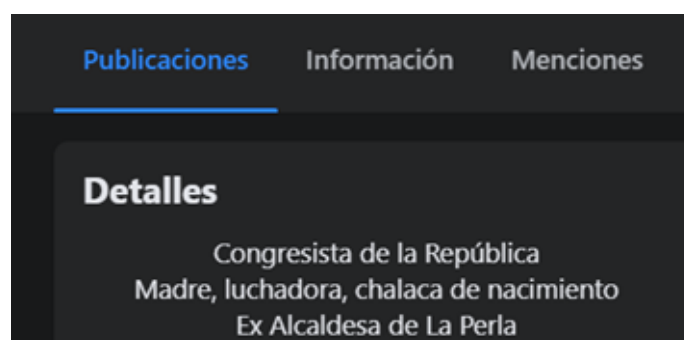Figure 2: Twitter description: 'Northern woman, Wife and Mother, Pro-life, Pro free-market, Pro-Fujimori, Entrepreneur, 1993 Constitution'.
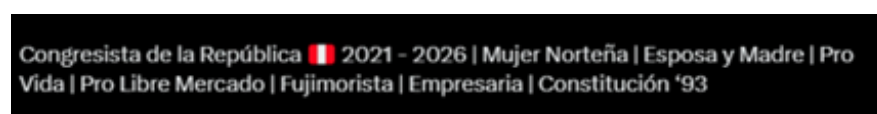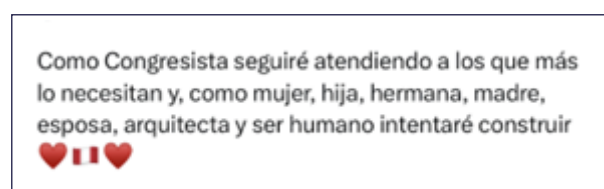

Figure 3: Facebook description: 'As a Congresswoman I will keep caring for those who need it most, as a woman, sister, mother, wife, architect I will try to build'.

9   All images have been cropped to prevent the identification of the congresswomen involved.

Incidence and patterns of gendered disinformation and online abuse

The study captured 5,362 posts from Facebook and Twitter (now X) during a two-month research period that were aimed at Peruvian congresswomen. Of those posts, 2,704 (50%) contained narratives of hate speech, and 275 (5%) openly promoted gender-based violence.

Gender-based abuse could be seen in posts that were derogatory about the physical appearance and capacity of women as a way to delegitimise their political positions. They included insults about their gender expressions, the sexualisation of their personal images, and the use of nicknames to reinforce gender stereotypes.

The comments were aimed, in particular, at the profiles of the congresswomen. As well as containing narratives of disagreement around their political actions, they sometimes contained misogynistic, racist and homophobic insults.

The public figures receiving the greatest number of gender-based attacks were President Dina Boluarte, the first woman to be President of Peru, followed by Congresswomen Sigrid Bazán. Below are two examples of social media posts attacking Boluarte (Figure 4) and Bazán (Figure 5) alongside patterns and narratives that are steeped in sexism.

Figure 4: Social media post attacking President Boluarte

Text reads 'How has Dina changed. Cooking coal (cisco de carbonería it does not have an English translation, it is a popular proverb), you have turned into a murderer in so much carnage. You changed your slippers for stilettos, and you tied up your witch hair with combs. You are still on a diet because you don't want to gain weight and you're skinny and snub-nosed like your patron Keiko [Fujimori]'.

The poster mocks President Boluarte's looks, judging her weight, wardrobe, using characteristics that correspond to an animal such as 'snout' instead of 'nose'. This kind of attack is dehumanising, objectifying and further entrenches gender stereotypes about how women must present themselves, often underpinned by expectations of femininity. By emphasising Boluarte's physical appearance, such posts reinforce ideas around how women should look in order to conform to societal standards.

These ideas often equate a woman's value with her physical appearance, rather than her intellectual or professional capabilities. Male candidates and politicians, in contrast, are more commonly criticised for their stance on issues or their political work, rather than their looks. Attacks like those shown in Figure 5 are dehumanising and may perpetuate this kind of behaviour, as they normalise the targeting of women politicians on the basis of their physical appearance, underpinned by sexist societal standards of beauty, to humiliate and defame them.

Figure 5. Social media post attacking Bazán

Text reads: 'The worst Parliamentarian of Peru: One little death more and I will have a mansion in the USA'.

In Figure 5, Congresswoman Sigrid Bazán is criticised for her alleged luxurious lifestyle as a way to delegitimise her support for the protests that occurred in December 2022 and January 2023, making her responsible for the deaths that happened during those protests. As seen in the attacks facing Boluarte, this post reinforces gender stereotypes, albeit in a way that weaponises sexuality and further entrenches expectations of women's place in society.

Attacks that target women politicians sometimes also claim that they have 'luxurious lifestyles', like in the post analysed above. These attacks are meant to play into and take advantage of divisions already existing in Peruvian society, particularly along class and racial lines. While the attacks against Boluarte emphasise her physical appearance over her accomplishments or capabilities, this attack against Bazán focuses on her lifestyle choices rather than her political work. Women in politics are more likely to face such experiences than men: a pattern that is seen in many countries worldwide (Di Meco, 2019).

The findings from the social media analysis were confirmed by our interviews, with all 10 congresswomen reporting that they had suffered various forms of online abuse while serving in their position, including gendered disinformation, often followed by sexist and/or misogynist insults. Most of the congresswomen interviewed said that social networks are hostile and exhausting spaces, but that they feel unable to walk away from these spaces, given their roles as elected officials and their desire to engage with the public.

The focus group discussion revealed that attacks were mostly linked to physical appearance, maternity, sexuality and youth, with an attempt to undermine women's credibility and call into question their ability to govern as a way to isolate them and leave them vulnerable.

It should be noted that some of the congresswomen interviewed perceived that disinformation and fake news are generated mostly by the more mainstream media (Interviewee 5, 2023; Interviewee 7, 2023; Interviewee 9, 2023), through their headlines and the way in which messages are presented. One of the congresswomen interviewed noted that a traditional media outlet was spreading disinformation about her, which she perceived as a gender-based attack.[10]

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10   To protect anonymity, this interview will not be declassified.

Some of the women interviewed also mentioned the problematic presence of inauthentic activity in the form of fake or ghost accounts. They sometimes described these as 'trolls that make aggressive and hateful comments on a massive scale'.

When asked about the topics that attract the greatest amount of hate, a number of the congresswomen interviewed cited women's rights, particularly feminism; sexual and reproductive health and rights, including comprehensive sexuality education; and sexual orientation. One of the congresswomen interviewed, for example, mentioned that she was particularly attacked, both by male and female colleagues, when advocating for women's reproductive rights, in particular the right to abortion. Her maternity was questioned and she was called an 'abortionist' in a derogatory manner.

These findings confirm patterns already seen in other countries. According to Di Meco (2023, p.9), 'online abuse and gendered disinformation primarily and most viciously targets women leaders who are demanding accountability as politicians, journalists and women's rights activists, and who are speaking in defence of women's rights and liberal, democratic values.'

The situation is worse for women belonging to traditionally marginalised communities, including Indigenous people, Afro-Peruvians and members of the LGBTQI+ community. They are often the target of toxic attacks, disinformation and hate speech that often reflect and disseminate sexism and homophobia, as well as racism. In 2020, for example, the Afro-Peruvian journalist and activist, Sofia Carrillo, became the target of an online campaign of racist abuse and hate speech at the beginning of Afro-Peruvian Culture Month. The attack was based on an interview she had given years earlier in which the interviewer verbally attacked her with sexist and racist jokes. At that time, she was presenting the campaign 'Give Racism a Red Card' in a soccer stadium, with the Human Rights Coordinator of Peru and a group of activists.[11]

One of the congresswomen interviewed, who is a member of the LGBTQI+ community, also reported being the target of hate speech targeting her sexual identity and orientation.

Accountability mechanisms and responsibilities for gendered disinformation

Several of the congresswomen interviewed expressed that it's extremely difficult to denounce perpetrators, particularly when it comes to fake accounts (Interviewee 4 and 5, 2023). As a result, they often resorted to blocking and reporting – tools which are often ineffective – and complained about the lack of accountability on the part of social media platforms.

Recent research by Pen America found that reporting mechanisms on social media platforms, including those operated by X (formerly Twitter) and Meta, are often profoundly confusing, time-consuming, frustrating and disappointing. Users rarely understand how reporting actually works, including where they are in the process, what to expect after they submit a report, and who will see their report. Furthermore, few of the reporting systems of social media companies currently take into account coordinated or repeated harassment, leaving users with no choice but to report dozens or even hundreds of abusive comments and messages individually. The authors concluded that 'if social media platforms fail to revamp reporting, as well as put more holistic protections in place, then public discourse in online spaces will remain less inclusive, less equitable, and less free' (Vilk and Lo, 2023).

These challenges persist, even though, according to Meta's Community Standards, ads or posts that incite violence are not permitted, from any type of user, whether individual, politician, organisation, or other. The new ownership of X saw a surge in hate content and harassment on the site in 2022. Researchers have found that hate content pervades much of X's discourse and has been linked

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11   manoalzada.pe/feminismos/estamos-aqui-listas-para-enfrentar-a-cualquier-mediocre-racista-que-lucre-reforzando-el-racismo.

directly to offline violence. X's 'Who to follow' recommendation engine also actively prompts users to follow prominent sources of online hate and harassment.

On major social media platforms like X and Facebook, harmful narratives are boosted and amplified through algorithms that make such content sticky and often viral, through recommender systems built to maximise attention and features that facilitate rapid and widespread distribution (Di Meco, 2023). Di Meco contends that major social media companies which have attempted to self-regulate have failed to do so effectively and have even limited the resources dedicated to maintaining or improving the safety of their platforms, necessitating external action.

Impact of gendered disinformation and tech-facilitated gender-based violence

While the majority of congresswomen interviewed reported that online abuse and gendered disinformation do not shape the way in which they behave on social media platforms, they said that disinformation affects the political careers of congresswomen through clear emotional burnout. Some interviewees maintained that these attacks pose an additional burden when you have a family, because such delegitimisation can affect the safety of children or partners (Interviewee 5, 2023).

The damage can indeed be great to a woman's image and reputation. Participants in the focus group discussion highlighted that when a hateful or deceptive comment is made or fake news is spread 'doubt has already been cast', even when accusations or disinformation are disproven.

Some of the interviewees expressed concerns for the younger generations of women who want to enter politics, because the generally violent environment of politics, combined with digital violence and disinformation can be a deterrent when it comes to pursuing a political career (Interviewee 6, 2023). One of the congresswomen interviewed in the research also mentioned that she was considering resigning from her role, in order to safeguard her family, whose life had been heavily impacted by the online abuse and attacks she was facing.

This targeting of women goes beyond those in politics: being an activist or defending women's rights can also leave someone vulnerable to online abuse. Participants in the focus group discussion also noted that breaking with the status quo places women in a naturally defensive position and exposes them to more criticism.

In addition to having devastating consequences for the women they target, online harms like gendered disinformation and GBV change social behaviours. As noted earlier in this report, social media platforms spread misogynistic language and narratives that have always been present yet latent in society, and that now find new strength, to the point of weakening social norms of inclusion and civil discourse, and normalising abuse and impunity for its perpetrators (Di Meco and MacKay, 2022).

The study raises serious concerns that gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics seem to be entirely normalised in Peru, and are seen by many as an inevitable part of a political career. These findings are in line with those of research studies by Fundacion Multitudes in Chile, where women in politics are becoming so accustomed to being the targets of online hate and gendered disinformation that, despite its devastating personal and political consequences, they are starting to see it as an inevitable consequence of political engagement (En La Fontana, 2021). Similar findings have been reported across multiple contexts, showing the increasingly global nature of this phenomenon.[12]

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12 In 2023, #ShePersisted released research identifying similar patterns of gendered disinformation and its impacts in Tunisia, India and Italy as part of the #MonetizingMisogyny research series (**she-persisted.org/our-work/research-and-thought-leadership**).

> 'I believe that [disinformation] is part of the "dirty war of politics"' (Interviewee 10, 2023).

> 'We know that [disinformation] is part of politics, which should not dissuade anyone [...] I have not met women in politics who drop out for these reasons, just as I have known women who live with violence in their homes, dissipating all aspirations to improve or emerge as a person' (Interviewee 7, 2023).

The failure to address gendered disinformation seems, therefore, to be reinforcing gender norms on a wide scale, with serious implications for women's participation in public life. Abusive and sexist posts, which are often allowed to remain online and that are amplified by an algorithmic design that favours sensationalism, can reinforce expectations of women's physical appearance and of how they should act when gaining wide viewership. Stereotyped characteristics of women are often viewed as incompatible with maintaining leadership positions in traditionally male-dominated fields. They can, therefore, result in retaliation when women do not comply with these expectations, further distracting from their political work and capabilities. As norms are reproduced online through malicious gendered attacks, and as social media companies do little or nothing to prevent their spread, it becomes ever more challenging to change preconceptions of women in leadership positions.

Conclusion

The study found that social media platforms play a crucial role in politics and have a major impact on the experience of women elected to Congress.

Peruvian congresswomen face various forms of digital harms, including harassment, violence, disinformation, information warfare, and defamation, which take a heavy toll on their well-being and that of their families, as well as their reputations. While women in politics express concern about this phenomenon, they have also come to normalise it and see it as an almost inevitable part of the political job, but also as a discouragement to the political engagement of young women.

Several lawmakers and experts identify digital platforms as at least partly to blame for the hellscape that women face online. Indeed, 'the design of digital platforms reflects pre-existing sexism and biased social norms against women in politics, but it also increases them. Harmful narratives are boosted and amplified through algorithms that make such content sticky and often viral, serving companies' commercial interests at the expense of women's rights and societal progress towards gender equality' (Di Meco and Mackay, 2022).

While there is recognition that these solutions are urgently needed, as individual responses such as blocking and reporting are insufficient, the normalisation of this phenomenon makes it harder for lawmakers to prioritise the identification of long-term solutions.

Normalisation of gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics also undermines social norms around the possibility for women to engage in politics without becoming the targets of hate, disinformation and harassment.

Recommendations

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy to address gendered disinformation. There are, however, legislative frameworks, policies and practices that can help to address this problem, involving action from multiple actors.

The recommendations below, grouped by actors, are based on extensive analysis of the problem both in Peru and globally (Di Meco, 2023), as well as on the experiences and proposals shared by interviewees and members of the focus groups.

Governments and governmental institutions

- Regulatory effort[13] to curb disinformation in Peru have failed for multiple reasons including their potential negative impact on freedom of expression. Instead, new globally-minded legislative frameworks and approaches to address gendered disinformation are needed. These should focus on transparency and 'duty of care' for social media companies with respect to the harm that is caused by their services, as outlined by Kristina Wilfore (Di Meco, 2023) 'tech accountability is the real long term solution needed', and it's important to 'ask governments to incentivize companies to open up the black box of how amplification and artificial distortion happens on their platforms, and demand that trustworthy, independent researchers be given greater access to the platforms' data in order to support evaluating online abuses, and recommend urgent innovations and solutions'.

- In the area of electoral tribunals, the training of lawyers, judges and public servants to act directly against gender-based political violence should be promoted, as has been demanded and highlighted in regional and global consultations on this matter.[14]

Political parties

- Parties should establish and/or strengthen internal protocols and sanctions for those party members who use forms of gender-based political violence, digital political violence or disinformation.

- They should establish awareness-raising sessions on gender-based political violence among party members and training sessions for candidates so that they do not use this type of behaviour in the context of campaigns.

- Parties should provide tailored training to women candidates and political aspirants on how to engage on social media in a way that is both effective and safe, taking into consideration safety issues and double binds, as well as the newest research in this area.

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13 Law No. 6567, which modifies the Organic Law of Elections was proposed with the purpose of prohibiting the dissemination of fake news as electoral propaganda. Perú. Congreso de la República, (2015) (**leyes.congreso.gob.pe/Documentos/2016_2021/Proyectos_ de_Ley _y_de_Resoluciones_Legislativas/PL06567-20201029.pdf)**.

14 According to the UN Women report *Violence against women in politics: Expert Group Meeting report and recommendations*, Bolivia's supreme electoral tribunal (working with other actors) has 'focused on developing indicators for political violence and harassment, a system for follow-up and protection, connecting all relevant authorities through technologies, as well as providing training and immediate support systems for survivors' (p. 26) following the criminalisation of violence and harassment targeting women in politics. The report also notes that the Commissioner of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Margarette May Macaulay, stated in 2018 that 'other countries in the region can learn from this example of having established the necessary mechanisms to prevent and respond to VAWP' (p. 9) (**unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/9/egm-report-violence-against-women-in-politics**).

- It is important for parties to strengthen and promote the creation of women's caucuses that can provide a network of support to congresswomen and women candidates, and that can make suggestions on these challenges to the party's leadership, as well as provide a space for women parliamentarians to exchange response strategies.

Civil society

- National observatories should be created or strengthened to specifically monitor gender-based political violence and gendered disinformation on the internet.

- Effective counter disinformation research, as well as the organisation of communication and targeting efforts, should aim not only to understand disinformation, but also to limit its sources, spread and impact, by pressuring platforms to implement terms of service through the strategic leverage of stakeholders, awareness campaigns, and so on.

- Research on gendered disinformation should take into account intersectional vulnerabilities and be paired with public opinion research to test and verify workable strategies. It should also consider geographic diversity, race, ethnicity, religion, etc., so that the women leaders targeted with disinformation can design and implement proactive counter narratives that identify the impact of these indicators.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Social networks of Peru's congresswomen

Name	Period	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Tik Tok
Adriana Tudela Gutiérrez	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Auristela Obando Morgan	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Betssy Chávez Chino	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Carmen Juárez Gallegos	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cheryl Trigozo Reáutegui	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cruz María Zeta Chunga	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Diana Gonzales Delgado	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digna Calle Lobatón	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Elizabeth Medina Hermosilla	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Elva Julón Irigoín	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Flor Pablo Medina	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Francis Jhasmina Paredes Castro	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gladys Echaíz de Núñez Izaga	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Heidy Juárez Calle	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Hilda Portero López	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	
Isabel Cortez Aguirre	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Janet Rivas Chacara	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No

Jeny Luz Lopez Morales	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Jhakeline Ugarte Mamani	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Karol Paredes Fonseca	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Kelly Roxana Portalatino Avalos	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Lady Camones Soriano	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lucinda Vásquez Vela	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Magaly Ruíz Rodríguez	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Margot Palacios Huaman	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
María Antonieta Agüero Gutiérrez	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
María de los Milagros Jáuregui Martínez de Aguayo	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
María del Carmen Alva Prieto	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
María del Pilar Cordero Jon Tay	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
María Elizabeth Taipe Coronado	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
María Grimaneza Acuña Peralta	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
María Jessica Córdova Lobatón	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Martha Moyano Delgado	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mery Infantes Castañeda	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No

Nelcy Heidinger Ballesteros	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Nieves Limachi Quispe	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Nilza Chacón Trujillo	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Noelia Herrera Medina	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Norma Yarrow Lumbrera	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Patricia Chirinos Venegas	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rosangella Barbarán Reyes	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rosio Torres Salinas	2021-26	Yes	Yes		
Ruth Luque Ibarra	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sigrid Bazán Narro	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Silvana Robles Araujo	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Silvia Monteza Facho	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No
Susel Ana María Paredes Piqué	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tania Ramírez García	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vivian Olivos Martínez	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yessica Amuruz Dulanto	2021-26	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yorel Alcarraz Aguero	2021-26	Yes	Yes	No	No

Source: self-generated.

Annex 2: Social network analysis of congresswomen's X (Twitter) accounts

The profiles were analysed to determine whether they contained the following categories: political role, political party, professional experience, place of origin and alignment to gender-stereotypical norms around womanhood and motherhood.

Name	Political role	Political party	Mentions aligned with gender-stereotypical norms	Mentions motherhood	Professional experience	Place of origin
Adriana Tudela Gutiérrez	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Auristela Obando Morgan	No description					
Betssy Chávez Chino	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Carmen Juárez Gallegos	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Cheryl Trigozo Reáutegui	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Cruz María Zeta Chunga	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Diana Gonzales Delgado	Not available					
Digna Calle Lobatón	Not available					
Elizabeth Medina Hermosilla	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Elva Julón Irigoín	No description					
Flor Pablo Medina	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Francis Jhasmina Paredes Castro	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Gladys Echaíz de Núñez Izaga	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Heidy Juárez Calle	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Hilda Portero López	No	No	No	No	No	No
Isabel Cortez Aguirre	Facebook group					
Janet Rivas Chacara	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No

Jeny Luz Lopez Morales	Not available					
Jhakeline Ugarte Mamani	Not available					
Karol Paredes Fonseca	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Kelly Roxana Portalatino Avalos	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Lady Camones Soriano	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Lucinda Vásquez Vela	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Magaly Ruíz Rodríguez	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Margot Palacios Huaman	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
María Antonieta Agüero Gutiérrez	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
María de los Milagros Jáuregui Martínez de Aguayo	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
María del Carmen Alva Prieto	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
María del Pilar Cordero Jon Tay	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
María Elizabeth Taipe Coronado	Yes		No	No	No	Yes
María Grimaneza Acuña Peralta	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
María Jessica Córdova Lobatón	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Martha Moyano Delgado	No	No	No	No	No	No
Mery Infantes Castañeda	No	No	No	No	No	No

Nelcy Heidinger Ballesteros	Not available					
Nieves Limachi Quispe	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Nilza Chacón Trujillo	Not available					
Noelia Herrera Medina	Not available					
Norma Yarrow Lumbrera	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Patricia Chirinos Venegas	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rosangella Barbarán Reyes	Not available					
Rosio Torres Salinas	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ruth Luque Ibarra	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Sigrid Bazán Narro	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Silvana Robles Araujo	Not available					
Silvia Monteza Facho	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Susel Ana María Paredes Piqué	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Tania Ramírez García	Not available					
Vivian Olivos Martínez	Not available					
Yessica Amuruz Dulanto	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Yorel Alcarraz Aguero	Yes	No	No	No	No	No

Source: self-generated.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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Indigenous women participate in an informative workshop and consultation with the Peruvian Ministry of Environment on proposed changes to regulations on climate change laws. The consultation, in May 2019 in Lima, brought together approximately 100 indigenous representatives of native peoples.
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