

ENPA - PUBLIC SECTOR COMMUNICATION AND BRANDING

Title: Is transparency neutral? Gendered information needs and administrative responsiveness

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Abstract

Who requests what information from government and public organizations, and does responsiveness vary depending on who asks? In other words, do different genders differ in their information needs, in how they formulate these needs, and in the likelihood of receiving a meaningful response from government? In this study, we attempt to answer this list of complex questions, all of which are based on the underlying hypothesis of gender-related administrative burden (related to e.g., Herd & Moynihan, 2025; Jilke et al., 2018) and discrimination in public information provision (e.g., Michener et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Rossel, 2018). Our study thus aims to combine these two research streams by analyzing information requests from citizens submitted via a digital platform. To this end, we also build on the extensive literature on digital interaction between citizens and the state in the context of government transparency, specifically on the analysis of citizens information demand and requests (e.g., Bagozzi et al., 2021; Trautendorfer et al., 2023; Žuffová, 2025).

Some previous research on government transparency and Freedom of Information (FOI) has already examined gender differences. While there are some empirical findings about the supply side of public information (e.g., greater responsiveness to information requests of female mayors compared to male mayors (e.g., Spáč et al., 2018)), the demand side, so the requesters themselves, remains rather underexplored. Existing studies about requester identity report mixed evidence regarding responsiveness to different professional status and/or gender of requesters; And they also rely largely on experimental designs using researcher-generated requests (e.g., Esposito et al., 2024; Michener et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Rossel, 2018). In contrast, this study is novel as we use ‘real-world’, citizen-generated FOI requests, enabling the examination of whether gendered information needs exists and, if so, how these information needs differ in topics, tone, and complexity. And, in a last step, also whether these differences translate into unequal administrative responsiveness and therefore gendered discrimination.

Empirically, the study analyzes 4,266 FOI requests submitted between 2016 and 2025 via Transparencia.be, Belgium’s digital FOI platform. Belgium provides a particularly informative setting due to its fragmented, multi-level governance structure, in which transparency rules and administrative practices vary across federal and regional entities. Using multinomial logistic regression models, the analysis assesses if and how interactions between requester gender and request characteristics such as topic, tone and request complexity influence three outcomes: no response, a response without information, and full or partial disclosure. We derive the gender of the requester from categorizing the first name (including a third “unknown” observations in case the gender cannot be clearly identified from the first name), thus we can approximate an objective gender measure without directly asking the requesters.

The study contributes to theories of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), administrative burdens, and organizational behavior by highlighting the discretionary nature of information provision: despite legal obligations, FOI responses depend on individual administrative judgments, creating opportunities for implicit gender bias to shape routine, low-visibility bureaucratic interactions. Our study is also relevant to practice and policymaking because it reveals whether information needs differ among different genders. Transparency policies designed under assumptions of neutrality may overlook gendered differences in citizens’ information needs and administrative experiences. Thus, we want to shed light on some sort of ‘gender-sensitive’ transparency policymaking and address the needs of all genders, leading to greater equity and equality in information access. So, similar to developments in gender-sensitive medicine, it might be that policies are designed around male norms disadvantaging women and other genders. This could apply to public services as well, and we would like to take a first step in this direction by highlighting different gender-related information needs and issuing specific policy recommendations based on them.

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