

Towards gender-sensitive transparency policymaking: Analyzing gender differences in information needs

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Abstract: Who requests what information from government and public organizations, and does responsiveness vary depending on the requester? Do genders differ in their information needs, in how they formulate these needs, and in the likelihood of receiving a meaningful response from government? This study tests the hypothesis of gender-related administrative burdens and discrimination in public information provision. To do so, we bridge these research streams by analyzing citizen information requests submitted via a digital platform.

Previous research on government transparency and Freedom of Information (FOI) has examined gender differences, primarily on the supply side of public information. However, the demand side remains underexplored. Studies on requester identity report mixed evidence on responsiveness to requesters' professional status or gender and rely largely on experimental designs using researcher-generated requests. In contrast, this study is novel as it uses real-world, citizen-generated FOI requests, allowing us to examine whether gendered information needs exist and, if so, how they differ in topic, tone, and complexity, and whether these differences translate into unequal administrative responsiveness and gender discrimination.

The study analyzes 4,265 FOI requests submitted between 2016 and 2025 via Transparencia.be, Belgium's digital FOI platform. Belgium's fragmented multi-level governance, with varying transparency rules across entities, provides an informative setting. Using multinomial logistic regression models, the analysis assesses 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 requester gender by categorizing first names, including an "unknown" category when gender could not be inferred.

The study contributes to theories of street-level bureaucracy, 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 by gender. 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 'gender-sensitive' transparency policymaking and address the needs of all genders, leading to greater equity and equality in information access. As in gender-sensitive medicine, policies may be designed around male norms, disadvantaging women and other genders. This may also apply to public services, and we take a first step by identifying gender-related information needs and proposing policy recommendations.