

Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres

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Abstract

Research on gendered public spheres has examined how struggles over gender equality, recognition, and equal representation unfold across changing communication environments. These struggles involve competing actors and claims, including feminist and queer mobilization as well as anti-gender contestation, but they are also shaped by how and under what conditions actors become visible, remain less visible, or strategically manage their public exposure. This thematic issue conceptualizes gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility and brings together contributions that address three closely connected dimensions: the structural conditions that shape visibility; the situated agency through which actors navigate them; and the relational production of visibility across networks, publics, and national boundaries. Together, the contributions show that visibility is neither inherently empowering nor always the desired outcome, while invisibility cannot simply be equated with exclusion or political irrelevance. The thematic issue contributes to research on feminist and anti-gender mobilization, platformized and networked publics, strategic (in)visibility, and the relationship between visibility and influence in contemporary gendered public spheres.

Keywords

counterpublics; feminism; gendered public spheres; influence; invisibility; networked publics; visibility

1. Introduction

Public spheres are structured by the inequalities that partly determine whose voices are heard, whose experiences are recognized, and which issues receive attention. Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated that these inequalities are deeply gendered, observing that women and other marginalized groups have historically faced exclusion from public participation, recognition, and political representation (Benhabib,

1995; Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 1999). At the same time, feminist movements and counterpublics have continuously challenged the dominant publics that generate and sustain such inequalities by creating alternative communicative spaces, articulating marginalized experiences and interests, and contesting established interpretations of gender and socio-political relations (Jackson et al., 2020; Jackson & Kreiss, 2023; Korolczuk, 2021).

Theoretical concepts such as affective publics (Lünenborg & Röttger-Rössler, 2023; Papacharissi, 2015) and performative publics (Foellmer et al., 2017) further challenge the idea of public discourse as fixed and rational, emphasizing the importance of emotions, affect, and personal narratives in the emergence of publics as well as their fluid and dynamic character. Contemporary gender-related struggles unfold under these ever-changing communication conditions. Increasingly fragmented, digitalized, and platformized, today's communication environments offer activists, political actors, and ordinary users a host of opportunities to participate in public communication, circumvent established gatekeepers, connect across geographical boundaries, and make marginalized experiences visible (Jackson et al., 2020; Scharff et al., 2016; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). And while feminist movements and marginalized communities have used digital spaces for mobilization, community building, and the articulation and circulation of counter-narratives (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Robards et al., 2021; Wallaschek et al., 2022), the same infrastructures have also enabled anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilization and facilitated the circulation of misogynistic and exclusionary claims, harassment, and opposition to gender equality (Bauer, 2024; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Tronina, 2024).

Building on these tensions, this thematic issue conceptualizes gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility. We claim that visibility is not inherently a desired or positive condition for individual or collective actors to exercise communicative power. Rather, its value and effects are highly contested and relational, depending on the actors involved and the conditions under which it is produced.

Scholars have emphasized that visibility is relational: it can provide recognition, create opportunities for mobilization, and expand actors' reach—even as it potentially exposes them to surveillance by private companies or the state, harassment or stigmatization by other platform users, and commodification (Brighenti, 2007; Thompson, 2005; Uldam, 2018). Invisibility, by contrast, is strongly connected to forms of exclusion, silencing, and marginalization, but it can also provide protection, enable communities to support group members outside the public, or simply form part of actors' strategic practices (Esposito & Semenzin, 2025; Lee, 2018; Stegeman et al., 2024). Hence, understanding gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility shifts attention away from simply asking “who” or “what” is visible towards examining the conditions, agency, power, and practices through which (in)visibility is produced and contested.

Building on this understanding, the eight contributions to this thematic issue examine contested regimes of (in)visibility in gendered public spheres from three interconnected perspectives. First, they address the structural conditions that shape who and what can become (in)visible, particularly within platformized, institutional, and gendered environments. Second, they highlight the situated agency of actors who navigate these conditions and develop practices to shape or limit their own public presence. Third, they emphasize that (in)visibility is relational rather than an individual attribute. Although not all three perspectives are present in every contribution, taken together they reveal the overlapping dimensions of gendered public spheres.

This thematic issue brings together articles on gendered public spheres across a range of national, cross-national, and local communication contexts, from journalism to online and offline activism, including feminist movements as well as anti-gender mobilization. The contributions also draw on a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches including interviews, multimodal discourse analysis, and hashtag co-occurrence analysis.

2. (In)Visibility: Structural Conditions and Situated Agency

The first set of contributions deals with the interplay of structure and agency in these contested regimes of (in)visibility. Digital platforms are particularly relevant here because they organize attention through algorithms and affordances that select and amplify content and users and thereby co-produce specific regimes of (in)visibility (Bucher, 2012). Yet actors are not simply exposed to these conditions; they also develop social practices and strategies to deal with different conditions of (in)visibility, depending on their resources and capacities (Cotter, 2019).

Several contributions illustrate this tension between enabling and constraining conditions. Bănoiu and Wiesböck (2026) show how platform infrastructures govern queer visibility by simultaneously facilitating expression and community formation while also producing hypervisibility, erasure, and surveillance. In a similar fashion, Holm and Hunklinger (2026) demonstrate that the platforms on which trans advocates depend for political communication can expose them to severe harassment, with consequences for continued participation. These findings underline previous research which highlights that visibility can generate recognition and political opportunity while also increasing exposure to misogynistic resistance, intimidation, and silencing (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobieraj, 2018). As Holm and Hunklinger (2026) also investigate the role of national platform regulations within experiences of online harassment, their contribution reveals practical insights into how regulations aiming to prevent online harassment and silencing fail to meet the needs of those being affected.

Other contributions to this thematic issue examine how actors negotiate conditions of (in)visibility. Cervi and Straub (2026) show how feminist activists on TikTok in two different national settings appropriate established beauty formats and platform vernaculars to make feminist critique visible within an attention economy structured by algorithmic and aesthetic conventions. Rather than operating outside platform logics, activists work through them and repurpose their gendered meanings. This resonates with research on digital feminist activism that emphasizes both the opportunities opened by platforms and the need to navigate their specific norms and risks (Caldeira, 2026; Mendes et al., 2019). Jansová, Urbáníková, and Waschková Císařová (2026) extend this perspective beyond social media by showing how political journalists in the Czech Republic develop tactical practices to secure professional visibility and safeguard their careers within masculinized institutional structures. Their agency remains limited, however, because strategies that enable individual navigation in the workplace do not necessarily alter the underlying structures.

Kim, Pyun, and Kim (2026) further complicate the picture by challenging the assumption that political agency necessarily seeks greater visibility. Examining young feminist activism in South Korea, the contribution conceptualizes invisibility not merely as exclusion or as a stage that precedes public mobilization, but as a condition with political potential in its own right.

Taken together, these contributions show that (in)visibility is neither structurally predetermined nor fully under actors' control. Rather, it is shaped through situated encounters between unequal communicative and institutional conditions and the practices through which actors respond to them. This perspective shifts attention from visibility as a fixed and necessarily desirable outcome and toward the processes through which public presence, exposure, and conscious invisibility are continually negotiated.

3. Relational and Transnational (In)Visibility

Contested regimes of (in)visibility in gendered public spheres are also produced through publicly shared content, interactions, and exchange within and beyond political, cultural, or national boundaries. This is particularly evident in contemporary gender politics where both feminist and anti-gender mobilization increasingly operate through networked communication and transnational connections. Research on (anti-)gender politics has shown how actors across national contexts draw on shared frames and discursive repertoires while adapting them to specific political settings (Kaushik, 2026; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Righetti et al., 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2022).

Tronina (2026) develops this perspective by examining how such transnational similarity is translated into shared visibility. Through hashtag practices, anti-gender organizations across five European countries jointly sustain ideological narratives, activate campaigns, and connect anti-gender claims to broader public debates. In this sense, visibility is co-produced through networked communication while national variation continues to shape how frames are articulated and mobilized. Other contributions broaden this relational perspective beyond organizational networks. Ma (2026) examines how idealized femininity is produced and negotiated within affective networked publics on the Chinese platform Weibo. As Ma convincingly demonstrates, visibility emerges through the circulation of discourses that gain meaning through relatability and identification, creating a sense of belonging while also reproducing gendered forms of discipline. By contrast, Backes, Makhshvili, and Rojas (2026) demonstrate that visibility is constituted through affective contestation. In TikTok debates around Germany's Self-Determination Act, competing trans-affirming and trans-antagonistic formations struggle over whose vulnerability becomes publicly legible, which emotions appear credible, and whose recognition is presented as necessary or threatening. Visibility therefore concerns not only the public presence of actors but also the production of meanings, emotions, and claims to legitimacy in networked communication.

Cervi and Straub (2026) point to a related process across distinct political contexts. Feminist activists in the Iranian #WomanLifeFreedom and Latin America #NiUnaMenos movements draw on shared platform vernaculars and visual repertoires despite substantial differences in political conditions and risk. Rather than implying a homogeneous transnational public sphere, Cervi and Straub argue that visibility can facilitate the circulation of recognizable practices that are then embedded in locally specific struggles and shaped by platform affordances, aesthetics, and gendered forms of politics. Across these contributions, public visibility is not only based on the actors' characteristics or the specific content of the message. Rather, the relational character of claims, identities, and emotions moves to the center stage of scholarly attention, revealing how these dynamics extend across national, socio-cultural, and political boundaries and contexts.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, the eight contributions conceptualize gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility in which public presence, interactions, and exposure are shaped by structural conditions, situated practices, and relational communication. They show that visibility is neither an unambiguous resource nor necessarily the desired outcome of political and communicative action. Forms of relative invisibility may likewise sustain political capacities, support communities, or enable practices that remain outside of public attention. The issue therefore cautions against equating visibility with influence.

The contributions also show how actors' identities, emotions, and claims become recognizable in different ways, while the studied communication processes remain embedded in specific political, socio-cultural, and platform contexts. At the same time, several contributions demonstrate how visibility is produced across networks and national and political boundaries. Bringing these perspectives together, the thematic issue highlights the value of examining influence and (in)visibility as related but distinct dimensions of contested gendered public spheres.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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