How to connect? Communication strategies of female political leaders facing public space barriers

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Abstract. The dichotomy between public and private space has been a central axis in the exclusion of women from political participation, but phenomena such as "celebrification" (Oliva *et al.*, 2015) have intensified the problem by normalizing a constant exposure that amplifies the vulnerability of these leaders. This article analyses how women in institutional positions negotiate their presence in a context of old and new obstacles that condition their impact. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1981), the research reveals the interaction strategies that women representatives develop to communicate with citizens. Based on 20 in-depth interviews, three profiles with different dynamics of adaptation to public spaces can be identified, so the results show that the presence of female politicians is not even, but instead it is mediated through their degree of institutional integration and their use of digital platforms. While some must stay on social media to ensure their visibility in the absence of media support, those who do benefit from this affinity remain on the sidelines to protect themselves from digital violence. Therefore, the findings highlight that participation in spaces of interaction is not always a matter of free choice, but rather a necessity of survival and constant management of their exposure to circumvent structural barriers. Evidence of the need to develop safer public environments that promote the full participation of women with high-visibility profiles.
Keywords. Political communication, feminism, public space, social media, institutions.

¿Cómo conectar? Estrategias comunicativas de las líderes políticas ante las barreras del espacio público

Resumen. La dicotomía entre el espacio público y privado ha sido un eje central en la exclusión de las mujeres de la participación política, pero fenómenos como la «celebrificación» (Oliva *et al.*, 2015) han intensificado esta problemática al normalizar una exposición constante que amplifica la vulnerabilidad de estas líderes. Este artículo analiza cómo las mujeres con cargos institucionales negocian su presencia en un contexto atravesado por viejos y nuevos obstáculos que condicionan su impacto. A partir de la teoría dramatúrgica de Erving Goffman (1981), la investigación revela las estrategias de interacción que desarrollan las representantes para comunicarse con la ciudadanía. A través de 20 entrevistas en profundidad, se identifican tres perfiles con distintas dinámicas de adaptación a los espacios públicos, por lo que los resultados muestran que la presencia de las mujeres políticas no es uniforme, sino que está mediada por su grado de integración institucional y su uso de las plataformas digitales. Mientras que algunas deben mantenerse en redes sociales para garantizar su visibilidad ante la falta de respaldo mediático, las que disfrutan de esta afinidad permanecen al margen para protegerse de la violencia virtual. Por tanto, las conclusiones destacan que la participación en los espacios de interacción no siempre responde a una libre elección, sino a una necesidad de supervivencia y gestión constante de su exposición para sortear las barreras estructurales. Una evidencia de la necesidad de desarrollar entornos públicos más seguros que promuevan la plena participación de mujeres con perfiles de alta visibilidad.
Palabras clave. Comunicación política, feminismo, espacio público, redes sociales, institución.

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1. Introduction

Over time, feminism has challenged the historical division of space along gender lines, a central axis in excluding women from political participation. The public sphere has been conceived as a male domain, reserved for matters of state, the productive economy and reason. In contrast, the private sphere has been associated with feminine, which has relegated this population to care, domestic and reproductive roles (Pateman, 1995). This division has not only sustained women's unequal access to decision-making, but it also conditions the behavior of those who manage to participate in it.

From the first perspective, Fraser (1990) questions the "Habermasian" view of the public sphere as a unique and neutral forum for participation as it ignores this historical marginalization of women. Instead, she argues that excluded groups create multiple subaltern spheres to debate when they are not considered in the hegemonic one. The feminist movement itself would function as a channel of political articulation outside institutional structures, but its activity is not limited to protest (Navarro & Coromina, 2020; Pettinicchio, 2012; Reverter & Medina-Vicent, 2022), but it also manifests itself in the incorporation of representatives linked to activism who promote change from within the system (Pettinicchio, 2012). In the case of reaching out to the institution, Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1981) helps to interpret how these leaders manage their presence in spaces that restrict their activities. In his paper, the author likens social interactions to a play in which people play different roles depending on the context.

To explain the metaphor, Goffman (1981) distinguishes the front region —the stage where actors project a particular image to an audience, from the back region —the backstage where they behave naturally as they do not feel observed—. Coller (2024) exemplifies these practices because parliamentarians tend to theatricalize their positions in public spaces such as plenary sessions, where they emphasize their differences with their opponents, while their interventions are not so confrontational in more private spaces such as committees. In the case of women politicians, this distinction of regions is crucial to understanding how they navigate between the scenarios necessary to maximize their communication with citizens under conditions of inequality.

Although women make up more than a third of parliaments in the Global North and 44% in Spain (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025), numerical increases in descriptive representation do not guarantee substantive equality. Sanjaume-Calvet *et al.* (2023) warn that organizational factors, such as women MPs occupying lower positions on electoral lists and reaching party leadership, less frequently affect the number of speeches they deliver on the floor. These obstacles prevent them from participating in legislative debates on an equal footing with their male counterparts, and it may also reduce the likelihood that women-related measures will be passed.

Social media was initially presented to expand the deliberative space and alleviate these restrictions. So, the public sphere also began to be approached from a digital dimension (Matsilele & Nkoala, 2023). These platforms have amplified the communicative dynamics of representatives by offering a scenario in which they can interact directly with citizens, listen to them (Kavada, 2024) and create an image of an accessible leader (Hinck & Rasmussen, 2021) without the mediation of the traditional press (Eldridge *et al.*, 2019). This phenomenon has led to the emergence of celebrity politicians (Ahmad, 2020; Establés *et al.*, 2024; Street, 2004), a trend that has been studied mainly in men such as Volodymyr Zelensky (Plazas-Olmedo & López-Rabadán, 2023) or Justin Trudeau (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019), more women such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Hinck & Rasmussen, 2021), Isabel Díaz Ayuso (Caro-Castaño *et al.*, 2024) or Ada Colau (Cervi, 2023) have joined this "celebrification" (Oliva *et al.*, 2015).

However, while these channels have allowed subaltern groups (Fraser, 1990) access to public discourse, they have not transformed existing power dynamics (Matsilele & Nkoala, 2023). The impediments to institutional space have not been removed, and new ones have emerged (Kavada, 2024). The constant visibility on social media implies specific challenges for female leaders, who tend to be targeted and subjected to digital violence more frequently (Collignon & Rüdig, 2020; Southern & Harmer, 2021), especially if they hold a high-profile position (Collignon & Rüdig, 2020; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2020; Håkansson, 2021; Rheault *et al.*, 2019). Even lesser-known women can be the target of hate speech (Meriläinen, 2024), a fact that shows that this hostility is transversal to all women in politics or with projection in the public space (Piñeiro-Otero & Martínez-Rolán, 2021). In the same vein, the media act as echo chambers that amplify the harmful narratives of the virtual sphere (Iranzo-Cabrera *et al.*, 2024), which contributes to making it a hostile space for female representatives (Harmer & Southern, 2021).

Although some studies argue that attacks against women politicians are no more frequent than those against men (Al-Rawi *et al.*, 2023; Esposito & Breeze, 2022), Carson *et al.* (2024) highlight that they are experienced online and in person. Moreover, this hostility reduces their online participation (Piñeiro-Otero *et al.*, 2024; Wagner, 2022) and affects their institutional performance. The digital environment blends with the analogue environment, reinforcing their difficulties. The attacks that leaders face undermine their ambition and the time they devote to drafting proposals and restrict their parliamentary debates to avoid unwanted situations (Håkansson, 2024). Wagner (2022) argues that the fear of such reactions might even cause representatives to refrain from defending feminist views, which would affect the implementation of measures to promote gender equality.

In this context, the historical separation between public and private spaces creates a dilemma for this group. On the one hand, they can maintain an active presence on both virtual and institutional platforms to strengthen their connection with citizens and amplify their reach (Håkansson, 2024). However, it also increases their exposure to new impediments, such as hostility. While this choice allows them to participate in both spheres, bearing the obstacles of both at the same time may lead them to abandon politics and public life (Carson *et al.*, 2024; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2020). The alternative is to limit their online activity to minimize the adverse effects of visibility. However, this withdrawal weakens their ability to influence public

debate by giving up a channel of political communication (Caro-Castaño *et al.*, 2024). Representatives are forced to exclude themselves from a space they have access to. This act reflects that social networks have not removed traditional barriers for marginalized groups but have only replicated them in a new environment.

Despite this complex situation, no studies have analyzed these leaders' interactions with the citizenry. How do they communicate in this scenario? What are the difficulties they encounter? Other research indicates that parties hardly engage in dialogue with the population (Liberia-Vayá *et al.*, 2024; Ramos-Serrano *et al.*, 2018) but said the research did not consider their links to social causes. This analysis aims to shed light on the communication of representatives with links to activism, as their contact with citizens is a priority. It allows us to understand how they are integrated into formal structures to influence the public agenda (Pettinicchio, 2012). Their presence not only expands feminism's political opportunities (Tarrow, 1998) but also challenges how social movements have been understood within institutions. As was seen when Irene Montero (Durántez-Stolle *et al.*, 2023) combined militancy with formal responsibilities, it generates friction because power relations crisscross these structures favor certain positions and exclude others (Mouffe, 1999). It can, therefore, lead to resistance on the part of the actors (Brown, 2024). Understanding how they manage their activity in these spaces is key to understanding their capacity to influence decision-making.

2. Objectives and methodology

This paper aims to explore the communicative strategies of female politicians in the context of resistance to their leadership in the public sphere. Understanding these adaptation dynamics is indispensable to ensure their effective participation (Sanjaume-Calvet *et al.*, 2023; Wagner, 2022) and actions aligned with civil demands. Both digital and institutional obstacles (Carson *et al.*, 2024) force women representatives to manage their activity with caution as they may limit their political impact (Håkansson, 2024) and their relationship with citizens. To avoid this, leaders act in different public and/or private regions (Goffman, 1981) according to how they can sustain interaction without harming them. Previous studies such as Cervi (2023) and Liberia-Vayá *et al.* (2024) focused on the open communication of digital platforms without attending to less visible physical or virtual channels. Therefore, the following objectives are proposed:

- General objective: To describe the profiles of women politicians in terms of their previous trajectories and their degree of adaptation to institutional dynamics, as these characteristics may influence how they are perceived by citizens and how they interact with them.

- Specific Objective 1: To identify the communication strategies of the representatives in a context that conditions their presence in different spaces.

- Specific Objective 2: To identify the main obstacles that institutional leaders face in their work, given that they can limit their capacity to influence the development of public policies.

To carry out this research, a qualitative approach has been chosen based on semi-structured interviews, as this method allows for a flexible conversation that facilitates the exploration of specific topics in depth while maintaining a general guide (Kvale, 2014) that facilitates subsequent analysis. This methodology is suitable for studies that seek to capture those experiences and meanings (Seidman, 2013) that participants attach to their own experiences and the contexts that shape them. Moreover, interviews provide information that is difficult to access through other techniques that do not involve dealing directly with the subjects themselves (Tansey, 2007).

Through the analysis of 20 interviews, we seek to understand how women who have moved from activism –especially feminist activism– to institutional work shape their interaction according to the space in which they operate. The choice of this criterion is based on the premise that, having been linked to the social fabric, these people have a greater predisposition to interact with citizens. We have also ensured that the interviewees came from diverse ideological, geographic and generational backgrounds to avoid possible biases: We have covered a variety of positions within the progressive spectrum in which the feminist movement is framed (Evans, 2016), as well as guaranteeing an age range that captures the diverse perspectives over the years and a representation of the different regions within the Spanish territory. Only five leaders developed their work in the Community of Madrid, which avoids the centralist view of the field studies.

The initial selection of participants was made after exhaustive consultation of the public lists of candidates for different state bodies. This enabled the identification of women who had held relevant positions in the local, regional or national Administration. As can be seen in Table 1, eight of the interviewees held positions in the latter sphere. Subsequently, participants were screened and selected based on their links to social movements and the relevance of their work within the proposed theme. After this first approach, the snowballing technique was used to broaden the sample, and interviewees were asked to recommend other potential profiles, contributing to a greater diversity of experiences. It is convenient to use this method when part of the population of interest is less well known (Tansey, 2007), so relevant institutional actors may have been missed if only the original sampling had been used. Thus, the study focuses on women advisors, experts and policymakers.

Interviews were conducted via video, telephone, or face-to-face to accommodate participants' availability and preferences. All interviews took place between February and April 2024 and lasted approximately one hour on average. Each interviewee signed a participation and confidentiality agreement that they would not be identified in the study, so the names used to refer to them are fictitious (Table 1). Other data have been omitted for this reason. The interview script included 15 questions on various aspects related to their participation in social movements, motivations for entering formal politics, how they maintained their relationship with citizens, and the obstacles they encountered in the institution and social networks.

After the interviews, each was transcribed for thematic analysis to establish patterns within this qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is particularly suited to the analysis of in-depth interviews, as it facilitates identifying recurring themes and organizing the data into meaningful categories. In this case, an inductive treatment of the data was followed to uncover the participants' experiences without tying them to previous theoretical frameworks. From this extraction, the interviews were examined using an analysis model configured after several exhaustive readings of the transcripts. This allowed us to identify these recurring patterns in the participants' accounts. The model was divided into several thematic axes, developed in the following section.

Table 1. Participants interviewed.

Pseudonym	Profile	Field	Medium	Duration (min.)
Cristina	Hybrid	Local	Online	50
Marta	Hybrid	National	Online	65
Patricia	Activist	National	Online	60
Raquel	Activist	National	Phone	70
Alicia	Institutional	Regional	Online	60
Verónica	Activist	Local	Online	70
Isabel	Activist	Local	Online	90
Ana	Hybrid	Local	Online	70
Sandra	Institutional	National	Online	50
Silvia	Hybrid	Local	Phone	55
Vanesa	Hybrid	Local	Online	60
Elena	Hybrid	National	Face-to-face	70
Noelia	Institutional	National	Online	60
Nuria	Institutional	Local	Online	60
Mónica	Institutional	National	Online	90
Irene	Hybrid	National	Online	45
Natalia	Hybrid	Local	Online	45
Belén	Hybrid	Local	Online	80
Miriam	Hybrid	Local	Phone	45
Carolina	Institutional	Local	Phone	40

Source: elaborated by the author.

The first focused on recognizing the different spaces formal actors use to interact with citizens. In addition, the use they make of social networks was analyzed in terms of whether they use them as a front region, i.e. as a platform to project an institutional image and disseminate official messages, or as a back region, where they prioritize private channels such as direct messages and minimise public exposure (Goffman, 1981). The second axis examined the reasons that led the interviewees to prefer some spaces over others, the obstacles encountered in the institutions (Table 3) and how they negotiated their presence in activist spaces. In the same way, the feelings of closeness or hostility they experience in social networks were also studied. These questions made it possible to identify the factors that condition their decisions about which spaces are perceived as safe and effective for citizen interaction.

The analysis model not only made it possible to identify common patterns but also allowed for the profiling of each interviewee according to her previous militancy in social movements, the environment in which she operates, the connection she maintains with citizens, and the role she plays in the institution (Table 2). Therefore, the results obtained from this inductive approach are presented below to shed light on the negotiation strategies used by these politicians and the obstacles they have faced. For ease of reading, participants are identified by pseudonyms associated with their profile (Table 1).

3. Results

3.1. Profile characteristics

This section begins with an analysis of the main features that allow us to understand how the political identity of the interviewee's conditions their position and behaviour in the institutions, an initial step to studying their spaces of interaction. A comparative table on how each trajectory shapes communication with citizens can be found at the end of this section (Table 3). The first profile corresponds to a person who has not adapted to the institution, the activist. This woman comes from a strong commitment to social movements. She enters formal politics at an advanced stage of her militant trajectory, and her close-knit environment is usually linked to activism, both at the family level and in social circles, such as her university mates. Her entry into the institution is usually circumstantial, and she tends to ponder her decision because she believes that she will have to give up her ways of doing things. However, she takes it with enthusiasm because she thinks that her parti-

cipation can be a way to promote social change from within the system.

However, this woman has not yet adapted to the formal dynamics and maintains a critical attitude towards public bodies' bureaucratic and hierarchical logic. Her expertise as an activist has led her to express herself freely, which clashes with the demands of the institution: "The self-censorship that you must apply [...] was something I was very bad at [...]. I did not get used to not being natural, to not being the same as I have always been" (Patricia). Consequently, this category prefers more informal and alternative spaces for interaction, such as meetings with collectives and associations, rather than the official meetings organized by the institutions, as she does not feel part of their dynamics. This lack of integration into the institutional logic and their reluctance to abandon activist practices shape their communication strategies and how they negotiate in public spaces.

In contrast to the first profile, the second describes a woman who transits between social activism and institutional politics, thus building a bridge between both spaces. This hybrid representative also comes from social movements and has usually had a long history of activism before joining a party. The close environment of this profile is also related to activism, either through family or professional circles, the latter often related to social rights. Their decision to enter formal politics rarely comes from their initiative. Instead, they respond to a sense of collective duty to collaborate with their organization: "I want to work for this project, and it needs me to become involved" (Irene). This profile often relates that their entry into this role comes after perceiving that traditional activist tools were not enough to achieve profound changes and that the institution "was just another tool to try out" (Belén).

Although she maintains close links with social movements, this politician gradually adapts to institutional dynamics, balancing her role as an activist with the demands of the public administration. Although initially maintaining an activist logic, she gradually adapts to the formal structure and learns to navigate its procedures. This hybrid group seeks to take advantage of the structure of governmental bodies to advance their causes, so they prioritize this role and try to mediate between political power and citizens. Their priority is to understand the institutional dynamics to ensure adequate representation, so their strategy is based on active listening and understanding the different roles within the organizational system: "Ours was more of a listening process, [...] of understanding who represented whom in the spaces of participation" (Ana).

Finally, the third profile corresponds to that of a system politician, given that it refers to a woman who enters the institution with a logic which aligns more with the procedures and dynamics of public administration than those of social movements. As Nuria shows, these women believe that progress is achieved through the administrative structure: "Things are changed in the General State Budget". Unlike the previous profiles, their link with parties arises early and naturally, without necessarily being involved in social movements for a long time. However, they are linked to some associations. These interviewees' associations' beginnings tend to align with their work or living conditions, but their family environment is not inherently activist.

Therefore, this profile considers that structural changes must be driven by the institution, given that regulations can only be modified through formal power, even if they need to be pushed by social mobilization. This leader sees institutionality as the way to reformulate citizens' demands to achieve tangible results, so she also avoids excessive confrontation with the social movement that could jeopardize future actions. In this way, the institution depends on activism to guide its work, as it does not have the knowledge, experience or drive to promote specific changes: "If there is no well-organized activism, the public administration does not know what to do either" (Miriam). Similarly, according to this profile, non-institutionalized politics needs this structure because of its greater practicality: "Activism is not made for doing, it is made for thinking, pointing out and demanding" (Miriam). In this sense, it is not a question of establishing a hierarchy between the two actors but of recognizing that their collaboration is essential to promote reforms in line with citizens' demands.

3.2. Strategies for interaction

The ways of connecting with citizens vary according to the perception and treatment of the leaders with the institution, social movements, the media and the digital environment, so they are not equal. The representative's communication is mediated by her behavioural profile and how comfortable she feels in each context, which conditions her choices and prevents her from choosing freely. On the one hand, the activist profile prioritizes the spaces of social movements as its main scenarios for interaction with citizens. She prefers informal meetings and encounters with associations because she perceives them as safe and legitimate spaces for direct dialogue with the grassroots. Although she has held public office, this profile continues to operate in private and alternative spaces that allow her to remain close to social movements.

However, this can be complicated for her as she feels that she contaminates an activist space or can generate conflicts by being an institutional representative. In this sense, Verónica says that feminist movements did not want to have any contact with her and that they reproached her for having run for political office, but that she was still a feminist activist: "I had always been there, and I felt rejected. In fact, I left because there was a conflict". Furthermore, although this profile tries to maintain a direct connection with citizens, Patricia highlights how, in these spaces, "people treat you differently", and there is a reinforcement dynamic that can limit critical voices: "When someone contradicts you, there are always many people who agree with you, and you end up discrediting that person". This perception reflects the difficulty of maintaining a horizontal dialogue in these spaces, where interaction dynamics can become entangled, leading to this profile being left out of the process. Therefore, this tension between the different roles can mark the communication strategies of these policies.

On the other hand, the activist maintains a tense relationship with the traditional media, which she does not perceive as allies but rather as instruments of power subject to economic and political interests: "The problem is that there are (none) that are free because they need money to support themselves" (Isabel). Although this profile recognizes that there are journalists who are trying to change how the system works, this situation makes her distrustful. She seeks other means of direct communication with citizens, such as social networks. In this sense, this profile uses them as a public platform from which she informs her community about her activities and political positions on her terms. Although she is no stranger to violence, social networks have become a key tool for her, as she perceives them as a channel where she has more direct control over her communication than in the traditional press: "It is the medium through which we inform our people of what we are doing" (Verónica).

A preference for institutional spaces characterizes the profile of the hybrid representative as the primary means of interaction with citizens. Unlike the activist, this group is more aware of the need to separate spaces to avoid interference, as they know that their presence could be seen as an intrusion in activist spheres: "I will not join your organization because I think I am taking a space that I should not" (Ana). In other words, this politician does not feel expelled. Instead, she understands that it is necessary to maintain these spheres free of interference from the public administration unless they seek its help. This profile understands that their formal role cannot be mixed with the activist, as it is a "very conflicting" duality, even on digital platforms, which become a means of communication to defend their policies and institutional positions.

In this way, these women take advantage of formal resources to promote citizen demands. However, their social networks cease to be personal tools and become official channels: "You stop using the language you would use or addressing whom you used to" (Ana). These interviewees use digital platforms as a tool to disseminate public policy messages, carry out surveys, and publish relevant information for citizens, albeit at a high cost: "People are very violent on social media, aren't they? Because at the end of the day, you type things on a keyboard, but your audience cannot see you" (Silvia). It may be that, due to their high level of institutional involvement, this profile experiences greater visibility and corresponding hostility in this space, but they do not completely renounce it. Instead, they adapt its use.

This profile remains attentive to public opinion, albeit with caution: "I try to be very attentive to those who write to me with their name and face on the networks; those who you know perfectly well are not trolls" (Cristina). This hybrid practice of dissemination and interaction reflects their role as a bridge between social movements and the administrative structure. In any case, this leader resorts to social networks to communicate because she feels that the like-minded press is not available to the public: "The media had the feeling that this political space did not belong to us" (Silvia). These strategies lead us to consider this profile a digital media agent. This group does not shy away from public opinion but feels more comfortable communicating via social networks than the traditional press.

On the other hand, system politicians carry out their work from an entirely institutional logic, so they prioritize formal spaces such as offices, meetings and negotiation tables, which, although designed to talk to citizens, are established by the institution. These representatives not only assume these spaces to be the most appropriate but also apply measures to bring the institution closer to the population through them. "I asked my political party for an office, and I welcomed citizens in", explains Nuria; this reflects how such interactions can occur within institutional limits but under a controlled and formal framework that differentiates this profile from the activist. This group does not mention that alternative spaces can be contaminated, probably because they are not so closely linked to them, and she does not perceive their tensions in the same way or identify her influence. However, she treats her relationship with social movements from a perspective of service to citizens and natural collaboration: "I do not understand politics or associative life in any other way" (Sandra).

Unlike the previous profiles, she does not usually mention open spaces such as assemblies or public forums, although she does value tools such as participatory budgets within institutional margins. In this sense, Nuria mentions how citizens also delegate many decisions to them; thus, she claims voting is a form of participation and a citizen's demand for representation. However, system politicians do not maintain such a negative discourse on journalism as the other two categories but rather value its role. They treat the media as allies and consider them essential to reach a wider public since it would be difficult to "permeate society as a whole" without them (Sandra). However, this profile is aware that the communication work of journalism has changed and that social networks are now tools with a significant impact, although the interviewees use these spaces more restrainedly. This leader recognizes the importance of having a presence on these platforms but also criticizes the hostile environment that prevails in them and shapes her communication strategies around it.

In general, this representative tends to limit her digital activity to disseminating institutional messages or informative publications: "I post news that interests me, and I type in a very brief comment along with the news piece" (Alicia). This is how this politician controls their presence on the networks because, otherwise, they may decide to withdraw from specific platforms altogether when they perceive an aggressive environment: "I have removed myself from Twitter because it is a hate factory, and I refuse to participate in (such) forum" (Nuria). However, other times, politicians do not want to leave these platforms and communicate with citizens privately to avoid debates that end in confrontation: "They ask many things (through direct messages) that they know I am not going to answer in public" (Carolina). In other words, this profile is careful not to comment on issues that could lead to open hostility or antipathy and, therefore, uses more discreet channels. In general, this leader tends to deem social networks as a space combining both communication forms to prevent conflicts.

Table 2. Participants' profiles.

Aspects	Profiles		
	Activist	**Hybrid**	**Institutional**
Institutional adaptation	Low: finds it difficult to adjust to formal dynamics.	Average: take a pragmatic approach that allows them to adapt to their new role.	High: has the tools to fit into the Administration.
Use of social networks	High: values the networks as a space to communicate his/her actions and positions.	High: uses networks as an institutional tool, although she tries to protect herself from exposure.	Low: avoids exposure on social networks.
Relationship with traditional media	Limited: the media are not allies, which reinforces its preference for networks.	Limited: media are not allies, which reinforces their preference for networks.	High: feels a greater affinity with the press, which allows them to communicate outside the networks.
Preference of spaces	Activist: feels more comfortable in environments such as meetings with like-minded groups.	Institutional: she separates herself from activist groups so as not to interfere in them.	Institutional: they are her natural space.
Communication strategy	Direct: prioritizes activist networks and meetings to avoid the rigid structures of the institution.	Institutional: she balances her presence in both networks and physical spaces to articulate her proposals.	Traditional: she relies on the media and formal spaces.
Obstacles	She highlights structural and media challenges but does not perceive social or cultural ones.	She faces all challenges, which reflects her position as a mediator.	She encounters fewer obstacles than the other profiles, in addition to the fact that she does not face intra-party or media obstacles.

Source: elaborated by the author.

3.3. Obstacles faced

Finally, the study identifies the challenges encountered by the participants in each space to establish to what extent they can get in the way of their communication and the advancement of public policies by the demands expressed by citizens. The activist profile faces structural, media, organizational and material obstacles that make it challenging to adapt to formal spaces. Firstly, this group perceives the institution as a rigid and bureaucratic body, given that the usual response she received there was "that is just the way of the world" (Verónica), which showed the existence of procedures that did not allow for even the slightest change. In addition, this representative manifested a lack of prior knowledge of administrative and legislative processes, which hindered her in exercising her functions. On the other hand, the relationship with the media is a significant challenge for this profile, highlighting the amount of misinformation they spread about their work. For leaders such as Raquel, journalism has not fulfilled its role as a communicator, given that they prioritize negative narratives and omit their teams' achievements, which weakens their capacity to project a favourable public image: "Whatever we had done, they would have criticized us".

However, the activist also faces organizational difficulties at intra- and inter-party levels. To begin with, she notes that her party does not prioritize feminist agendas, "there are always more important things" (Patricia), and that they experience difficulties in reaching agreements with other organizations within the progressive spectrum, which limits the effectiveness of their policy proposals. Finally, this agent faces a lack of material and human resources, as she does not have sufficient budget to carry out her projects: "When we arrived, it was an empty building, there was nothing, [...] there were no people"

(Patricia). This precariousness makes it even more challenging to implement public policies: "It is designed to go unnoticed and do-little things". However, in this profile, there are no social or cultural obstacles, which is consistent with the fact that they work in spaces related to their ideas and ways of doing things. This reduces resistance and reinforces their harmony with social movements.

On the other hand, the hybrid representative faces all kinds of challenges in her practice, reflecting her intermediate position between social movements and institutional politics. Structural obstacles are a common barrier with the first profile, as the formal structure prevents specific changes. Silvia stresses that it is a corseted space "where politics takes place behind society's back". However, this role's dual identity and activist background clashes with many of the demands of institutional logic, such as a lack of knowledge of administrative processes and the difficulty of adapting to their times, which often do not coincide with those of social demands. In this respect, Marta criticizes the complexity of institutional mechanisms: "Everything that depended on us was done, but bureaucratically, there was always a problem". She also complains that the lack of updating the institution's staff blocks the implementation of new policies and hinders the administration's work. In the same vein, and like the activist, the hybrid profile states that the party does not consider feminism as a priority issue or a significant obstacle.

The challenges described so far can be seen as the activist part of this group, but others are related to their role in the institution. This politician perceives that journalists may direct public opinion against her measures or even harass her as an obvious obstacle: "They created a terrible little monster out of me" (Belén). Regarding social impediments, the

interviewees emphasize that, although they often share ideals with the movements, conflicts and differences arise over which measures to prioritize or how to implement them, as well as having to negotiate with other parties. This leader also denounces facing cultural challenges arising from the perception that feminist policies are a secondary or exclusive women's issue, which hinders their relevance on the political agenda. Finally, like two of the other profiles, she points to obstacles such as the shortage of budget and staff, which limits her capacity to work by forcing her to take on additional tasks that do not correspond to her: "Between doing technical work, policy work, working in the government organization and maintaining the networks, you do not have enough (time) for anything" (Belén).

Regarding the third profile, institutional politicians encounter fewer obstacles than the previous categories, especially regarding parties' internal organization and relationship with the media. However, they face cultural challenges related to changing entrenched attitudes and thoughts about women and equality policies, such as quotas: "Everyone thought you were coming for their position" (Nuria). This profile has also encountered obstacles when trying to reverse policies inherited from previous conservative governments. However, above all, she points to the importance of accompanying laws with adequate budgets and civil servants aligned with the objectives of the collective so that the institution functions better in terms of efficiency and time management: "That is the difficulty of meeting the demands of a social movement at government pace" (Noelia).

As mentioned above, this representative does not encounter intra-party organisational or media obstacles, as she is aligned with the dynamics of her party and is also in tune with the traditional media. In this sense, the interviewees warn about how the consumption of information has changed and highlight that there are young people who no longer get their information from the news or the radio but rely on social networks. Due to the segmentation of these platforms, citizens tend to follow those with a similar point of view, limiting their diversity of information: "Depending on how you inform yourself, you could be very misinformed" (Sandra).

Table 3. Classification of obstacles reported by interviewees.

Obstacle	Interpretation	Profile		
Structural	Derived from the institution's own internal functioning and logic.	Activist	Hybrid	Institutional
Material	Lack of human and financial resources.	Activist	Hybrid	Institutional
Intra-party organizational	Internal party dynamics and priorities.	Activist	Hybrid	
Inter-party organizational	Interaction and negotiation with other political parties.	Activist	Hybrid	Institutional
Media	Lobbying and media relations.	Activist	Hybrid	
Cultural	Gender stereotypes, women are seen as intruders in spaces of power.		Hybrid	Institutional
Social	Citizen pressures to carry out policy proposals in line with movements.		Hybrid	Institutional

Source: elaborated by the author.

4. Discussion y conclusions

This study set out to identify the communication strategies used by women politicians to negotiate their presence in public and private spaces, which has revealed the existence of different profiles according to their degree of adaptation to institutional and digital dynamics. Table 4 shows the absence or minimal presence of representatives with blank space, «—» for limited presence and «X» for active participation. Based on the intended objectives, the research shows that the choice of spaces for interaction responds to a communication strategy and a need to circumvent the impediments that limit the political opportunity (Tarrow, 1998) to transfer feminist demands to institutions.

The first profile is the activist, a representative characterized by her strong links to social movements who finds little support in the hegemonic sphere, given that even her party does not prioritize feminist agendas. She, therefore, must turn to subaltern spaces (Fraser, 1990) closer to the back region (Goffman, 1981) to debate her proposals. Activist, less regulated meetings with more like-minded interlocutors nurture deliberation without institutional constraints and direct listening with the citizenry (Kavada, 2024). However, the dual identity of politics generates some tensions among activists as it is seen as a threat to horizontal dialogue. Podemos' disconnection with its grassroots (Brown, 2024) led to a distrust that has marked the relationship of many movements with the institution. The activist will, therefore, must manage her role with caution if she wishes to maintain her participation in these spaces.

However, activists do not rely on the press because of the harmful discourses it amplifies (Iranzo-Cabrera *et al.*, 2024), so social networks have become another communication channel with the outside world. In the digital environment, the activist occupies the front region (Goffman, 1981), where she builds a visible public presence from which she communicates her political actions without media intermediation (Eldridge *et al.*, 2019). In line with Kavada (2024), the results do not indicate that these platforms are not used for active listening but for one-way communication (Liberia-Vayá *et al.*, 2024; Ramos-Serrano *et al.*, 2018). However, this does not imply an unwillingness to engage with citizens, as it could be a way to protect herself against digital violence by reducing her interactions. Future research will have to analyze this possibility in depth. Thus, the activist's communicative strategy responds to her exclusion from the hegemonic institutional space (Mouffe, 1999), so she relates to the citizenry through a visible digital scenario and the subsequent physical region (Goffman, 1981) to compensate for her limited capacity for formal advocacy.

The second profile is the hybrid representative, who adopts a pragmatic approach that allows her to introduce changes with a citizen's perspective from the public administration (Pettinicchio, 2012). Unlike the previous leader, she prefers institutional channels because she does not want her participation to be perceived as an undue intrusion into an activist space. This care attempts to protect the autonomy of the social movement, a value rooted in the Spani-sh protest scene that rejects institutionalized forms (Brown, 2024). Moreover, this decision allows her to focus on formal structures to gain experience and circumvent her difficulties. Therefore, the lack of interaction with activists, together with the hostility of the traditional press, leads this politician to use the front region (Goffman, 1981) of social networks to communicate with the citizenry. Indeed, lacking access to physical alternative spaces, they are more dependent on them than their other female colleagues, which helps them understand the different positions of a representative linked to activism (Pettinicchio, 2012).

Nevertheless, her institutional role should not alienate her from movements, which is what many fear with entry into formal politics (Brown, 2024). To avoid this, this leader must maintain a strong connection through her position without overexposing herself to digital violence (Collignon & Rüdig, 2020; Håkansson, 2024; Harmer & Southern, 2021). Her communication strategy prioritizes public messages but should enhance the subsequent communication (Goffman, 1981) that these platforms offer because it does not contribute to hostility and strengthens relations with activism. Although all three profiles can experience said hostility, the biggest challenge of this hybrid role is that it is perceived as ambiguous because Spain has not always had a history of a permanent organization to protest (Brown, 2024). Strengthening these ties clears up some drawbacks that may lead her to give up politics (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2020).

Table 4. Regions in which each profile operates.

Spaces		Institutional		Digital	
Regions according to Goffman (1981)		Front	Back	Front	Back
Profiles	Activist		X	X	
	Hybrid	—		X	—
	Institutional	X		—	—

Source: own elaboration.
Legend: Blank (absence or minimal presence); — (limited presence); X (active presence).

On the other hand, the system politician does not stem from the desire to transform the demands of activism from the administration but instead orients them. Social movements must make demands for this, but the formal structure carries out the action. In fact, according to Pettinicchio (2012), feminism is one of the struggles that has developed its activism within institutions the most. This leader focuses on public spaces, such as negotiation tables or meetings, but it does not relate to the movements' alternative ones. Her communication strategy is developed in the region before the administration (Goffman, 1981), as she has favourable tools such as the support of her party and the media.

Belonging to groups with a strong political identity (Brown, 2024) and guaranteed visibility exempts the representative from a constant presence on digital platforms. When she does use them, she does so through informative publications with which she can control her exposure to hostility. However, some take refuge in later scenarios, such as private messages, to avoid confrontation (Gofman, 1981), and others choose to disconnect (Piñeiro-Otero *et al.*, 2024). These measures reaffirm that social networks do not transform power dynamics (Matsilele & Nkoala, 2023) and may even aggravate inequalities (Kavana, 2024). This combination of regions responds to a self-protection mechanism for all profiles, but institutional policies do not rely on these platforms to communicate with citizens and influence public debate. This difference illustrates Mouffe's (1999) idea of how some positions may be better received within the system than others, which conditions their communicative strategies.

Based on the evidence presented, the interviewees' experiences show that women's exclusion from public spaces is not uniform but is mediated by their ability to integrate into the formal structure and the cost of digital exposure. Moreover, while the absence of media support forces the first two groups to remain in hostile digital environments to communicate with citizens, the institutional profile shows how the alliance with the press makes it possible for them to do without social networks if needed. Thus, the

public space is fragmented, making the institution more accessible to some. In contrast, others communicate better on social networks, which weakens their capacity to influence public policy and citizen opinion.

These results, therefore, reflect how women's exclusion from the public sphere is not only a historical issue but a problem that continues to shape their participation in institutional and digital politics. Goffman's (1981) dramaturgical theory helps to interpret how women adapt their communicative strategies according to the degree of exposure and hostility they face. Thus, the study's findings provide evidence of how digital dynamics have reframed the boundaries between the two spheres just as "celebrification" did by using the private lives of representatives as a political strategy (Cervi, 2023). Future research can extend this investigation with other methodological approaches. A digital ethnography of participants' social media profiles would allow for a more in-depth analysis of their strategic use of these digital spaces. Similarly, although this study has focused on the dynamics of social networks and institutional spaces, other lines of research could study the role of the media in these women's interaction with citizens. Examining how the media influences the construction of their political image would allow for a better contextualization of the communication challenges they face.

These representatives face constant barriers in negotiating their presence in public spaces (Sanjaume-Calvet *et al.*, 2023). While social networks help them to connect directly with citizens, they also represent a hostile environment that forces them to seek protection mechanisms that do not relegate them to the private sphere (Pateman, 1995). This study shows that there is no single solution to these difficulties, as the strategies used by these leaders depend on factors as diverse as their level of adaptation to the formal structure, their previous trajectory or the support of the media. Therefore, women's exclusion from the public sphere manifests itself in different ways depending on their identity and the specific barriers they face. It is fundamental to raise awareness of this diversity to introduce cross-cutting measures to protect these politicians in the digital and institutional environment so that they do not have to renounce public life (Carson *et al.*, 2024; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2020; Håkansson, 2024). Rather than offering straightforward solutions, this research has sought to uncover the dynamics that shape their participation to show that women's access to politics does not guarantee their permanence, which is indispensable for building more representative democracies.

5. Funding and support

6. Authors' contribution

Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Data curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including *software* code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later re-use.	Author 1
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyze or synthesize study data.	Author 1
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection.	Author 1
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models.	Authors 1, 2
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution.	Author 1
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools.	Authors 1, 2, 3
Software	Programming, *software* development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components.	Author 1
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team.	Authors 2, 3
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs.	Author 1
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/data presentation.	Author 1
Writing / original draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation).	Author 1
Writing / review & editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision –including pre- or post-publication stages.	Authors 2, 3

7. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

In this article, OpenAI artificial intelligence has been used with GPT-4o to reorganize complex ideas and check the argumentative coherence of the text.

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