

Gender Difference in Attitudes towards Global Issues

Richard C. Eichenberg
Blair M. Read

Forthcoming in: Jill Steans and Daniela Tape, eds, *Handbook of Gender in World Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishers, 2015)

Introduction: Hypotheses on Gender Difference

One consistent finding in the public opinion literature is that gender is correlated with political attitudes and behavior. In this chapter, we examine cross-national gender differences in attitudes towards international affairs, focusing on attitudes towards war and the use of force, international institutions, and the relationship between gender difference and the political mobilization of women.

Scholars have hypothesized that gendered variation in attitudes toward international affairs can be attributed to differences in the ways that men and women perceive threats and risk, to essentialist, biological differences, to a preference of women for consensual international decision making, and to the level of political mobilization of women. In this chapter, we briefly review these hypotheses before assessing them with cross-national survey data. We close by assessing the quality of research on gender and public opinion and introduce an agenda for future research.

Threat, Risk and Violence. A consistent finding in the scholarly literature is that men and women differ in their attitudes towards war and the use of force. Conover and Sapiro

report an interesting finding in their study of gender differences during the Gulf crisis and war of 1990/91: women in the US were more likely to exhibit a “fear of war” and to express what the authors call “isolationist” sentiments, that is, more likely to agree that “this country would be better off if we just stayed home and did not concern ourselves with problems in other parts of the world” (1993, 1088-91). These results are consistent with a broader literature on gender, threat perceptions, and risk aversion. Specifically, there is substantial evidence that women perceive higher threat from their environment than do men in the same environments (Huddy, Feldman, and Casese 2009).). However, they are less likely to favor a forceful response to such threats. For example, women in the US were more threatened than men by terrorism after September 11, 2001, but they were less likely than men to endorse forceful retaliatory measures (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, and Lahav 2005). One explanation may be that women are more likely to experience anxiety at the prospect of forceful retaliation, and anxiety increases the perception of risk and uncertainty (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, and Lahav 2005, 594-595). We therefore would expect the threat or use of violent military force to produce the largest gender differences in public opinion. However, we might also expect to find that women are more supportive of humanitarian military interventions that are designed to mitigate the effects of violent conflict, as is the case in some studies (Eichenberg 2003; Brooks and Valentino 2011).

Community and Consensual Decision Making Do men and women also differ on attitudes concerning how their nations should address issues of threat and force? One important finding in the literature is that, although both men and women are more likely

to support the multilateral use of force, the effect appears more pronounced among women. For example, in a study of support for using force in 37 countries, Eichenberg found that mention of UN participation increased women's support by about 8 percentage points (2007). Similarly, Brooks and Valentino find that women are actually more likely than men to support the use of force when the action is approved by the UN (2011).

The Essentialist View Perhaps the largest body of literature on gender difference is based on the effect of biological difference, especially the fact that women bear children and bear the largest responsibility for their nurture and survival. Hypotheses associated with this line of reasoning—many of them highly contested—include the arguments that women are more empathetic, more caring and compassionate, and more sensitive to threats to human life. This hypothesis is now discounted by many, since hypotheses based on biological difference would predict relatively invariant gender differences across time, issues, and cultures, but existing scholarship demonstrates that gender differences vary across all of these dimensions (Reiter 2014). In the US, for example, there are large gender differences during some conflicts but not in others (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Eichenberg 2003). There is less cross-national research on support for using force, but the limited evidence suggests variation rather than uniformity. For example, gender differences on security issues concerning the Middle East peace process are small to nonexistent in Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Grant 1999).

There is no single survey in any one country that would allow us to evaluate these hypotheses in a unified analysis, and there are very few comparative surveys that allow a test of even one hypothesis in cross-national perspective. In this chapter, we take an alternative approach by comparing gender differences in a number of opinion surveys across a range of global issues. Our principal question is this: does gender difference characterize attitudes on all global issues, or is gender difference confined to a specific issue or set of issues? In addition, we are interested in discovering if gender difference on global issues is universal across countries.

War and the Use of Force

Despite considerable scholarly attention to gender difference on issues of war and military force, much of the existing evidence is confined to the US, which may lack generalizability due to its domestic politics or global role. Figure 1 provides an international comparison of the size of the gender difference on attitudes on the acceptability of war (Eichenberg 2012 provides a more detailed discussion of this question) There are several striking features of the results. First, the gender differences are large—13 percentage points on average—and display cross-national consistency. This difference exceeds the threshold of statistical significance in twenty-one of the twenty-nine countries shown in the graphic. Clearly, gender difference on the question of whether war is a necessary instrument of policy is not confined to citizens of the US superpower. It is an issue that divides the genders in most countries.

-- FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE --

Nonetheless, a notable finding in the graphic is that there is substantial cross-national variation in the magnitude of gender difference, from a low of 4 percentage points in Romania, Turkey and China to over twenty percentage points in Belgium, Sweden, and Australia. This variation casts doubt on the essentialist, biological hypothesis. Evidence in support of the essentialist hypothesis would consist of large and unvarying gender difference across different political, cultural, and strategic contexts. The fact that the size of gender difference varies across countries indicates that factors other than gender also influence the gender differences that result.

Does the gendering of attitudes toward war translate into significant gender differences on specific military actions? The answer is complicated: depending on the objective for which force is used or proposed, gender differences range from large to nonexistent. Table 1 summarizes gender differences on four questions involving the use of military force by individual nations, the European Union, or “international forces.” The first concerns approval of the presence of each nation’s troops in Afghanistan (2004) and subsequent opinions on whether troop levels should be increased, maintained, reduced, or withdrawn altogether (question b. in Table 1). In 2004, gender differences were everywhere apparent on the question of troop presence in Afghanistan. In Western Europe and Turkey the difference occurs at levels of support that are politically tenuous (majority support among men and far lesser support among women). However, through

2009 and 2011, enthusiasm for the mission in Afghanistan declined, especially among men. By 2011, gender differences remained but are less significant; in all but Turkey, support for troops in Afghanistan had collapsed. Nonetheless, gender remained a significant element of polarization as this process of opinion change unfolded.

--TABLE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE--

However, opinions of stationing troops in the Middle East yield a different story (question c. in Table 1). The question asks about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and in particular whether “The US and Europeans should send a peace-keeping force to separate the parties.” As the table shows, there is a gender difference only in the US, with women now in a strong supportive majority, compared to minority support among men. This replicates a finding discussed above: in past research, gender differences on the use of military forces in the US are smaller when the objective for using force is arguably humanitarian (Eichenberg 2003; Brooks and Valentino 2011). We now see that the pattern holds for Western Europe as well: there are large gender differences on the question of troops in Afghanistan, but virtually none on the issue of peace-keeping in the Middle East.

A similar pattern holds in opinions concerning the 2011 military attack against the Qaddafi regime in Libya (question d. in Table 1). There is a great deal of variety in the national responses, but the level of support is fairly high compared to support for troops in Afghanistan. In addition, with the exception of four countries (Germany, Italy,

Portugal, and Sweden), gender differences are smaller than those found on many other questions. Again, one suspects that NATO's humanitarian justification for the attack on Libya is responsible for this pattern.

International Institutions

We noted above that some scholars argue that women's outlook on international affairs is characterized by a preference for consensual decision-making. Women should therefore demonstrate stronger support for international institutions. From 2003 through 2006, the German Marshall Fund asked respondents in the US, Europe, and Turkey about their general level of favorability toward the United Nations. The question asked: "Would you say your overall opinion of the United Nations (UN) is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?" Although not terribly specific, the question does allow a rare comparative evaluation of the hypothesis that women will demonstrate more positive affect toward international institutions. Table 2 indicates that there is little evidence for the hypothesis.

Several features of the data stand out. First, the results at the top of table show that citizens in both Western and Eastern Europe are highly favorable toward the UN, while those in the US and Turkey are less so. The second finding is striking: it is only in the US that there are gender differences. In fact, American women reveal attitudes toward the UN that are closer to the average European than to those of men in the US. Table 2 also shows that gender polarization in the US exists at all levels of political engagement

(and by party identification not shown). Although it is clear that partisanship and political engagement are strongly correlated with support for the UN, there are also strong gender differences within these groups. In the US, then, general assessments of the UN are thoroughly polarized, and the political significance of polarization is heightened by the fact that the most politically engaged men differ most in their views.

--TABLE 2 GOES ABOUT HERE--

The Political Mobilization of Women

The surveys presented above highlight considerable variation in the magnitude of gender difference across issues and countries. What explains this variation? Some theorists argue that the differentiation of women's views increases as women gain access to higher education and to the labor force (Inglehart and Norris 2003). In turn, these economic and cognitive resources increase the political mobilization of women. Figure 2 reveals this process of gender differentiation by displaying the relationship between the level of women's political engagement and the average gender difference on several security issues, including ones discussed in previous sections of this chapter. Specifically, it shows the relationship between the percentage of women who frequently discuss politics and attempt to persuade friends and family of their political views, and the average gender difference on a number of security issues.

--FIGURE 2 GOES ABOUT HERE--

The correlation displayed in Figure 2 is a very strong one: countries with higher political engagement among women also display higher gendered differences on security issues. The relationship is highly significant (.01), and women's engagement explains 45 percent of the cross-national variation in gender difference on security issues. Clearly, women's political engagement is an important element in the politics of national security, although the graphic does reveal that other factors influence the magnitude of gender difference. For example, Sweden, Germany, and Spain have levels of gender difference that are higher than expected given their level of female engagement, while Romania, Bulgaria, France, and the Netherlands have less. Why this is the case is a matter of speculation. It is likely that some combination of socialization practices, historical experience, contemporary political discourse, and strategic culture also influence gender difference in these countries. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the level of female political engagement is a very strong correlate of the magnitude of gender difference, and this has important implications both for theory and for the politics of Western security.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

The survey data described in this chapter suggests several conclusions. First, there are indeed gender differences across many countries on many international issues. Second, the largest differences occur on questions concerning violence, war, and the use of military force. Third, gender difference appears to be smaller when humanitarian objectives are pursued through military force. Finally, except in the US, gender difference in attitudes toward international institutions are small, which suggests that there is not a broader polarization among men and women along the liberal-realist divide.

These findings suggest that other factors are influencing the relationship between gender and attitudes. Perhaps the most interesting finding is not that there are significant differences between men and women on attitudes toward the use of force and international institutions, but that there is significant variation in the magnitude of gendered differences between countries and issues. As we strive toward understanding the underlying mechanisms driving gendered differences in public opinion, researchers should use the rich data available in public opinion surveys to understand individual-level correlates of attitudes that extend beyond binary, gender-based characterizations. The work of Huddy and her colleagues is suggestive in this regard (Huddy, Feldman, Taber, and Lahav 2005).

This chapter underlines the fact that gendered variation in attitudes toward the use of force is not confined to the United States. Although public opinion data suggest that violence and war produce the largest gender differences, scholars do not yet have an understanding for the mechanisms driving these differences. As previously discussed,

many scholars propose essentialist arguments that emphasize biological differences between men and women, often evoking gender stereotypes such as women's compassion and maternal nature to explain women's hesitation to use force. Others rely on explanations that highlight gendered differences in labor markets, education markets, or marriage markets to explain why men and women support different policies. Additional scholars argue that attitudes toward war and use of violence are a function of societal power dynamics and reflect mismatches in power both domestically and in interpersonal relationships. As we move forward with a research agenda on gendered variation in attitudes, scholars should prioritize these research questions, moving beyond identifying gendered differences in public opinion to explaining them.

References

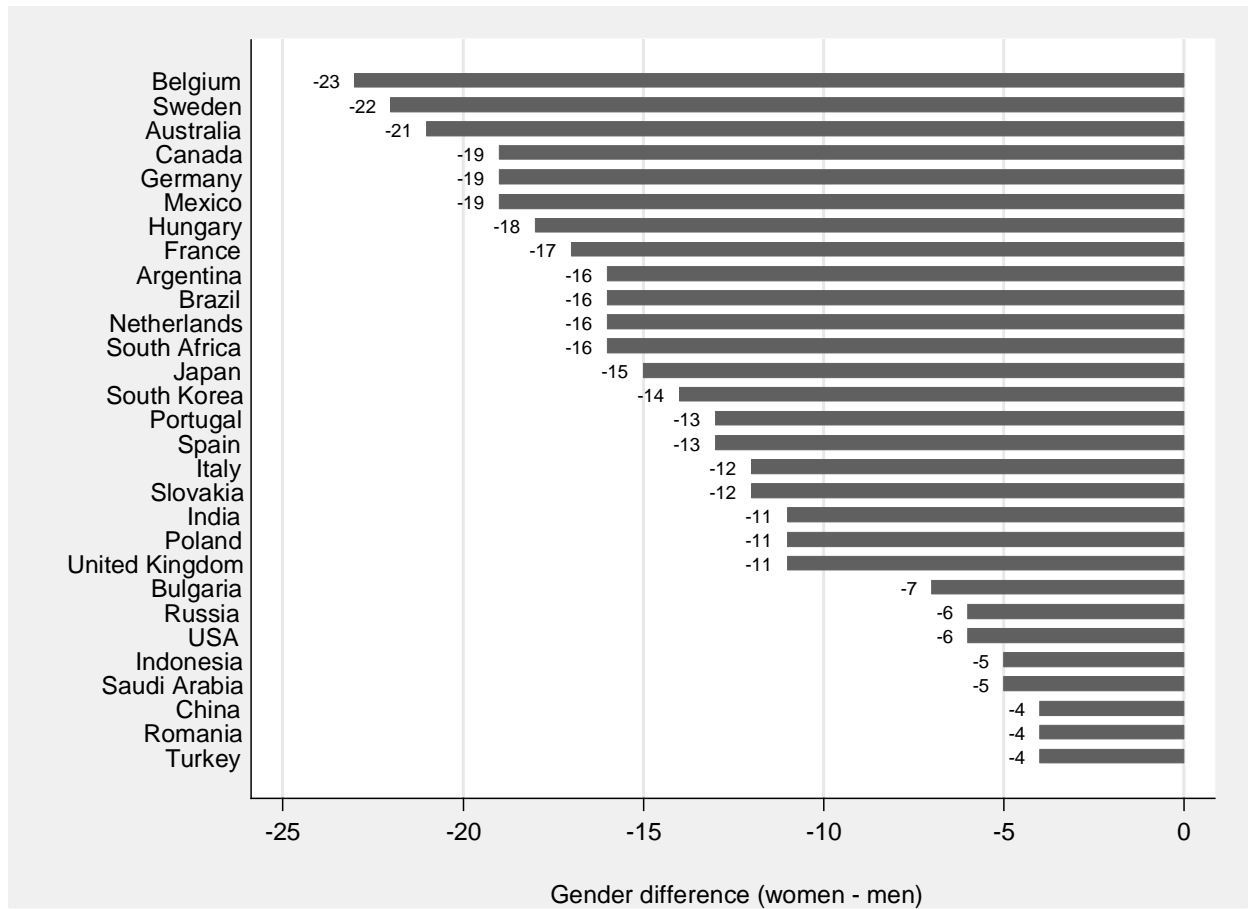
- Brooks, Deborah Jordan, and Benjamin A. Valentino. 2011, "A War of One's Own: Understanding the Gender Gap in Support for War", *Public Opinion Quarterly* **75** (2), 270-86.
- Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Virginia Sapiro. 1993, "Gender, Feminist Consciousness, and War", *American Journal of Political Science* **37** (4), 1079-99
- Eichenberg, Richard C. 2003, "Gender Differences in Public Attitudes toward the use of Force by the United States, 1990-2003", *International Security* **28** (1), 110-41.
- Eichenberg, Richard C. 2007. "Gender Differences in Support for the Use of Military Force in Cross-National Perspective: The War System, Modernization, and the Universal Logics of Military Action", available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=1329135 (accessed 3 February 2015).
- Eichenberg, Richard C. 2012. "Women, War, and World Order: Gender Difference in Security Attitudes in Europe and the United States, 2002-2011", available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=1329135 (accessed 3 February 2015).
- Huddy, Leonie, Stanley Feldman, and Erin Casese. 2009, "Terrorism, Anxiety, and War", in Stritzke, Werner G. K., (ed.), *Terrorism and torture :an interdisciplinary perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Huddy, Leonie, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber, and Gallya Lahav. 2005, "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political*

Science **49** (3), 593-608.

Reiter, Dan. 2014. "The Positivist Study of Gender and International Relations." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*: doi:10.1177/002200271456035 (accessed 3 February 2015).

Tessler, M., Nachtwey, J., and Grant, A. 1999, "Further Tests of the women and peace hypothesis: Evidence from cross-national survey research in the Middle East", *International Studies Quarterly* **43**(3), 519-531.

Figure 1 "Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following—Under some conditions war is necessary to obtain justice." (gender difference in percent agree)



Source: German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends 2013* and Halifax International

Security Forum, *Global World Affairs Survey 2013* (survey by IPSOS).

Table 1 Support for Deployment and Use of Military Forces (Selected Cases)

a.) Percent approving of presence of troops in Afghanistan, 2004

	Men	Women	Gender Difference	N
USA	81	65	-16	950
Western Europe	65	51	-14	6509
Eastern Europe	37	20	-17	916
Turkey	57	35	-22	934

b.) Percent responding "maintain or increase troops in Afghanistan", 2009 and 2011

<u>2009</u>	Men	Women	Gender Difference	N
USA	73	61	-12	919
Western Europe	50	39	-11	6844
Eastern Europe	29	23	-6	3750
Turkey	47	35	-12	858

2011	Men	Women	Gender Difference	N
USA	34	30	-3	969
Western Europe	42	35	-6	7831
Eastern Europe	32	28	-4	3857
Turkey	54	48	-5	880

c.) Percent approving peace-keeping force in Israeli/Palestinian conflict, 2003

	Men	Women	Gender Difference	N
USA	48	61	13	1001
Western Europe	70	70	0	6012

Table 1 continued. Percent support for military actions

d.) Percent approve military action in Libya, 2011

	Men	Women	Gender Difference (women – men)	N
Sweden	79	67	-13	973
Netherlands	71	64	-8	962
USA	66	62	-5	955
Portugal	65	55	-10	959
France	62	58	-4	972
United Kingdom	61	54	-7	955
Spain	59	53	-6	944
Italy	56	43	-13	957
Bulgaria	52	45	-7	948
Germany	51	28	-24	967
Romania	47	41	-6	927
Poland	45	40	-5	828
Slovakia	35	29	-7	923
Turkey	25	25	-1	873

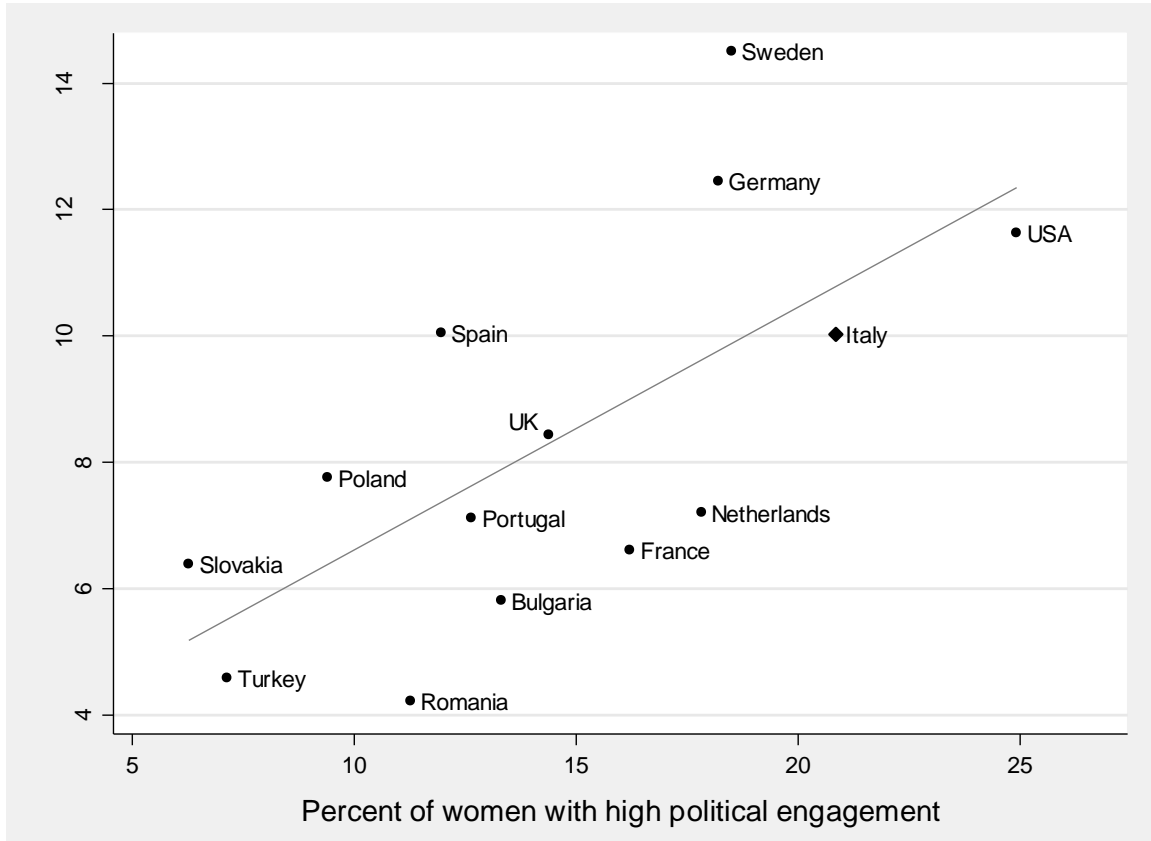
Table 2 Percent with a Favorable Opinion of United Nations, 2003-2006

	Gender			N
	Men	Women	Difference (women – men)	
USA	53	70	17	3397
Western Europe	77	77	0	23130
Eastern Europe	80	82	2	7230
Turkey	57	59	2	2469

By level of Political
Engagement, 2006

	Low		Medium		High		N
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
USA	57	74	53	71	47	73	943
Western Europe	75	77	77	78	74	78	6727
Eastern Europe	82	75	86	86	80	82	3378
Turkey	59	59	64	60	48	65	758

Figure 2 Relationship between Women’s Political Engagement and Average Gender Difference on Security Issues



Note: The measure of political engagement is defined in the text. The average gender difference displayed on the vertical axis is based on the following survey questions: international involvement, Iraq violence threat, peace through strength, spending for European superpower, UN favorability, bypassing the UN, defense spending 2004, war is necessary 2002-2011, approve troops Afghanistan 2004, maintain or increase troops Afghanistan 2009, approve Libya, and abide by EU decision to use military force. See Eichenberg (2012) for additional elaboration of this relationship.