

1 Introduction

How do women experience war? Two distinct threads of scholarship have developed exploring this question. First – women’s standing in society and the occurrence of violence are related. Early feminist IR scholars like Enloe (1990, 1993) and Tickner et al. (1992) theorized the nature of this relationship and more quantitative scholars have provided empirical evidence. Melander (2016, p. 197) suggested that “the strongest pattern in civil war is probably the gendered nature,” and Bakken and Buhaug (2021, p. 984) highlights the “near consensus finding that gender inequality is associated with increased risk of civil war.”

Secondly, the consequences of war are also gendered. Civil conflict has significant, negative effects on maternal health (e.g., Kotsadam & Østby, 2019; Kottegoda, Samuel, & Emmanuel, 2008; Tamura et al., 2012; Urdal & Che, 2013).¹ Going a step further, public health scholars have explored the role that women’s autonomy or empowerment plays in conflict outcomes related to maternal and infant health (e.g., Adjiwanou & LeGrand, 2014; Banda et al., 2017; Bloom, Wypij, & Gupta, 2001; Stephenson, Bartel, & Rubardt, 2012).

Far less attention has been paid to the interrelationship between these two processes. If gender affects both the occurrence of violence and the consequences of that violence, then it is essential for them to be considered together. Skeptics of gender equality as an important determinant of war and peace have expressed concern about endogeneity but rather than exploring the meaning of this inter-relationship, they have dismissed it. Our approach is different – as we put the connection front and center, both theoretically and methodologically. We place the focus on how gender inequality greatly increases the likelihood that states will experience armed conflict and the fact that women will suffer greater consequences in those conflicts that do occur. This is more an issue of sample selection rather than endogeneity. Women in Finland are less likely to experience harsh health conflict consequences. The comparatively small gender gap there makes it less likely that they will experience a war and make it more likely that women will receive excellent care should a conflict occur.

Gender is the most basic hierarchy in the human experience. Failure to recognize it as a power structure has implications for politics and, of course, our understanding of politics. Peterson (1992, p. 197) notes that we cannot fully

¹ The majority of these studies rely on micro-level survey data of individuals in single country case studies (e.g., Akseer et al., 2019; Chandrasekhar, Tesfayi Gebreselassie, & Jayaraman, 2010; Chi et al., 2015a; Das et al., 2020; Kotsadam & Østby, 2019; Mirzazada et al., 2020; Namasivayan et al., 2012; Nepal, Halla, & Stillman, 2023; Østby, Leiby, & Nordås, 2019; Torres & Urdinola, 2019).

understand real-world events based on solely on male-focused accounts that “render women and gender invisible.” Moreover, as Sjoberg (2010) notes, representing the state as non-gendered does not make it so. Decisions about when to use force and as well as the decisions about how to invest in public good goods (for example, how much money should we allocate toward women’s health programs) are a reflection of the gender attitudes and hierarchies in society.

In this Element, we discuss the research on the gender and war. Scholars have demonstrated that in societies where gender inequality is greater, armed conflict is more likely to occur (Caprioli, 2000, 2003). Once conflict has begun, women have a different, more indirect experience of armed conflict. After drawing this conclusion, we take the analysis an important step further. Where women’s equality is low, conflict is more likely and women experience more negative consequences. If gender inequality affects both the causes and the consequences of war, then we need to consider the inherent connection between the two processes. If causes and consequences are clearly linked to each other as well as to gender political inequality, then efforts to prevent conflict as well as the humanitarian response to the consequences of war need to take gender into account.

Feminist View of Security

As a foundation of feminist security, it important to recognize that the word *gender* does not mean the biological differences between men and women because gender is culturally defined. Gender is a social construction and that social construction is one that denotes inequalities based on perceived differences between men and women (Scott, 1986; Tickner et al., 1992). All over the world, men are privileged and in a position of dominion over women (Tickner et al., 1992). Our understandings of gender create hierarchies based on perceptions of masculine and feminine characteristics (Sjoberg, 2010).

To fully understand the gendered causes and consequences of war, a feminist security lens is essential. Both the prosecution and study of armed conflict continue to be dominated by men (Sjoberg, 2010). Without a gendered lens, we miss the critical insights found in the feminist security literature. From this perspective, war is part of continuum of the violence experienced in everyday life rather than a separate and distinct event (Sjoberg, 2013). When militarized masculinity is widespread in society, any conflict is more likely to be met with violence (Enloe, 1993).

Using gender as a lens allows us to focus on power dynamics within a society. Taking the idea of gender hierarchy into consideration when we think about the causes and consequences of armed conflict, we must consider what

Sjoberg (2013) terms “relative vulnerabilities.” In unequal societies where violence is already viewed as more acceptable, when conflict inevitably begins women are more vulnerable to its impacts because of their preexisting subordinate position in society. From this perspective, conflict encompasses violence in the household, and in society, as well as between states or rebel groups and governments. Violence has economic, social, and political consequences that are gendered because these consequences are filtered through the institutions and structures of society. A gendered approach enables scholars to focus on women’s experiences and the ways in which those experiences reflect an unequal social position.

Gendered Causes of War

Mainstream scholarship on the causes of civil conflict has often highlighted greed and grievance (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Rebels are either victims fighting against religious or ethnic oppression, or they are brigands looking to seize loot like natural resources or other sources of wealth. While the greed versus grievance dichotomy is an oversimplification (Berdal, 2005), much of the popular discourse about civil wars focuses on these two explanations.

Traditional research on the causes of war fails to acknowledge that gender influences the occurrence of violence. Recent work on gender-blind approaches in political science (Forman-Rabinovici & Mandel, 2022; Paxton, 2000) demonstrates how not taking gender into account creates gaps in our understanding of political phenomena. For our purposes we wish to highlight the fact violence is a highly gendered practice.

Men and women play different roles in conflict. Who fights in wars is gendered as is how individuals are affected by the fighting (Bjarnegård et al., 2015). According to Goldstein (2001), less than 1% of warriors throughout history have been women, but biology alone cannot explain this imbalance. Under some circumstances, women perpetrate violence and can be highly effective fighters (Darden, Henshaw, & Szekely, 2019; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011; Thomas & Bond, 2015; Wood & Thomas, 2017). The predominance of men in war is rooted in societal constructions and traditional gender norms that dictate that men defend the homeland and women maintain the home front. If anything, these gender role norms tend to be strengthened during wartime (Sjoberg, 2013).

Feminist scholars point out that gender is an essential aspect of violence in all societies because gender inequality exists in all societies (Caprioli, 2005). There are two primary explanations for why gender inequality might cause conflict. First is the essentialist argument – women are more peaceful by their natures. From this point of view, there are inherent differences in the attitudes

of biological men and women (Goldstein, 2001; Melander, 2005). Given their preference for peaceful means of conflict resolution and their role as mothers, women are believed to be more averse to violence. In societies where political equality is greater, these peaceful tendencies of women have more influence on foreign policy decision-making. This preference for nonviolence may be born of upbringing or genetics (Bjarnegård & Melander, 2011; Melander, 2016).

In order to lessen violence in a society (or the international system or a household), the essentialist prescription would be to empower women. Women are less likely to use violence in daily interactions (Dahlum & Wig, 2020). Many studies of individual attitudes demonstrate that women prefer nonviolent methods of conflict resolution. When women are elected to public office, they can turn those preferences into policies that put fewer resources toward the military or increasing attention on social ills relating to underlying grievances that could turn violent (Melander, 2005).

This essentialist logic does not go unchallenged, however. By suggesting that *all* women, by their nature, prefer nonviolent methods of conflict resolution or are less likely to use force, many see this as reinforcing gender stereotypes (Mansbridge, 2005). Women vary in their political preferences as do men, and thus attributing gender as a cause of war seems at best incomplete.

The second explanation is more of a constructivist argument – meaning socially constructed norms about gender and gender roles influence how a society responds to conflict. Ideas about what is feminine and what is masculine affect attitudes toward violence. Men are expected to be warriors while women are caregivers, and in many cases, their upbringings reflect these differences (Melander, 2005). Men and boys are taught to be tough while women and girls are taught to be nurturing. Such stereotypes also highlight women's subordinate position in the societal hierarchy (Goldstein, 2001; Tickner et al., 1992). Boys who do not act tough and warlike are accused of being weak or girly, which is perceived as less than being manly and lessens social status.

Not only do traditional gender roles cement societal hierarchy, but they also legitimize violence as a man must do whatever it takes to defend the home and the honor of the women under his care. When men and women are more equal, violent and intolerant (masculine) methods of dealing with conflict are less dominant. From a constructivist point of view, the prescription for lessening violence would be to change the minds and perceptions of both men and women and thus shift societal norms.

These two explanations do not run counter to each other, and both may help us to understand the relationship between gender inequality and conflict (Caprioli, 2000, 2005; Goldstein, 2001; Melander, 2005; Tickner, 1997; Tickner et al., 1992). Both evolution and socio-economic conditions help us

to understand why women tend to value peaceful solutions more than men (Melander, 2016). In egalitarian societies where women's preferences for interdependence and egalitarianism over pure competition are taken seriously (Welch & Hibbing, 1992), resources and health care are more likely to be available to all. Societies' constructed ideas about gender and gender roles also influence decision-making over how resources are allocated. Women's political empowerment and representation influences well-being outcomes for women and children, as well as for society as a whole (Bhalotra & Clots-Figueras, 2014). Without gender equality, national political cultures will be characterized by norms of violence. Those norms will, in turn, influence foreign policy and the way that the government responds to internal challenges. When inequality is high, the likelihood of violence will be too.

What Kind of Inequality?

Gender inequality exists everywhere, reflecting the gender hierarchies that exist in all societies (Webster, Chen, and Beardsley, 2019). Rich and poor countries, democracies as well as autocracies are all similar in this regard. What is less obvious is the fact that gender inequality can be a matter of life and death. Inequality has been linked to violence, ranging from domestic violence to war – both international wars (Caprioli, 2000, 2003; Hudson et al., 2009; Regan & Paskeviciute, 2003) and civil wars (Caprioli, 2005; Melander, 2005). Focusing on the causes of conflict, where gender inequality is high, tolerance for violence will be high, enhancing the ability of violent groups to mobilize support. How inequality has been conceptualized and measured, however, has varied.

Gender inequality can take several forms – economic, social, and political. Economic gender inequality includes unequal labor force participation and the existence of systematic pay gaps between men and women. The exclusion of women from financial decision-making in the household and unequal laws regarding property ownership and inheritance are additional examples. Social gender inequality make take the form of unequal access to education, forced marriages (often at young ages), lack of access to family planning services, and the absence of the right to divorce.

In this Element, we focus on political inequality. When women lack the right to vote or are under represented in government or lack standing in the judicial system, this is gendered political inequality. According to the World Economic Forum, political empowerment (or the degree to which women have influence in political and social spaces) is where the greatest gap exists worldwide between men and women, compared to educational attainment, economic opportunity, and health & survival (Zahidi, 2023). In their 2023 Global Gender

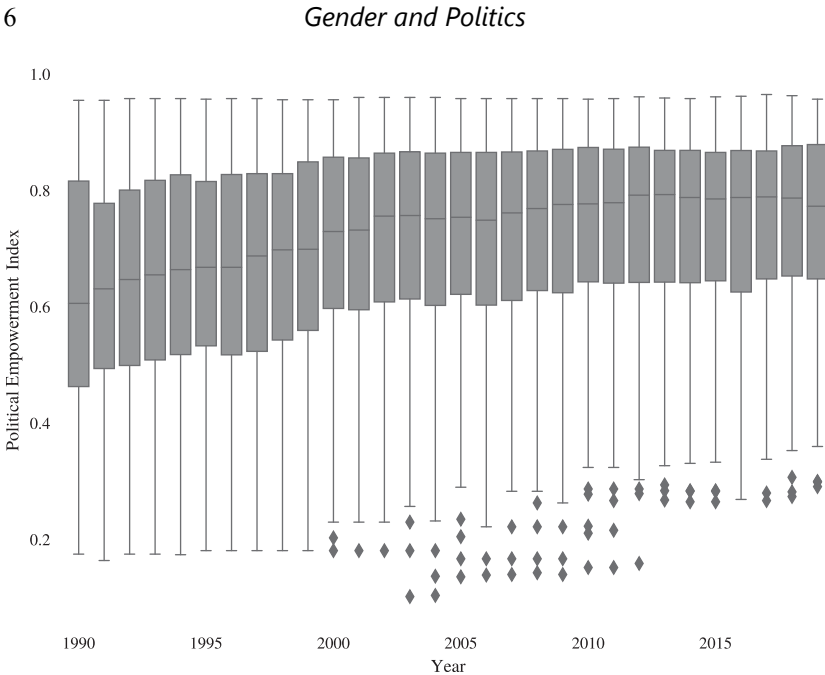


Figure 1 Political Empowerment Index, 1990–2019

Gap report, they posit that it will take 162 years for women to obtain political parity with men if the current rate of progress continues (Zahidi, 2023).

Figure 1 plots the *Political Empowerment Index* (Coppedge et al., 2023b; Pemstein et al., 2023) in 146 countries between 1990 and 2019. Political empowerment is defined as “a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making” (Coppedge et al., 2023a, p. 302).²

Figure 1 reveals several important patterns in women’s political equality over time. First, the yearly median of the *Political Empowerment Index* has increased steadily over time, indicating that global empowerment has improved. Yet, the figure also reveals significant variation in the level of women’s political empowerment. While equality maybe increasing globally, there remain a significant number of countries in which women maintain very limited political power. Thus, while the general record of women’s political inequality has improved, we do see wide variation globally as well.

Because we are interested in the relationship between conflict and women’s political empowerment, we next turn to see whether there’s variation among

² The index is composed of three separate indices: the women’s *Civil Liberties Index*, the women’s *Civil Society Participation Index*, and the women’s *Political Participation Index* (Coppedge et al., 2023a).

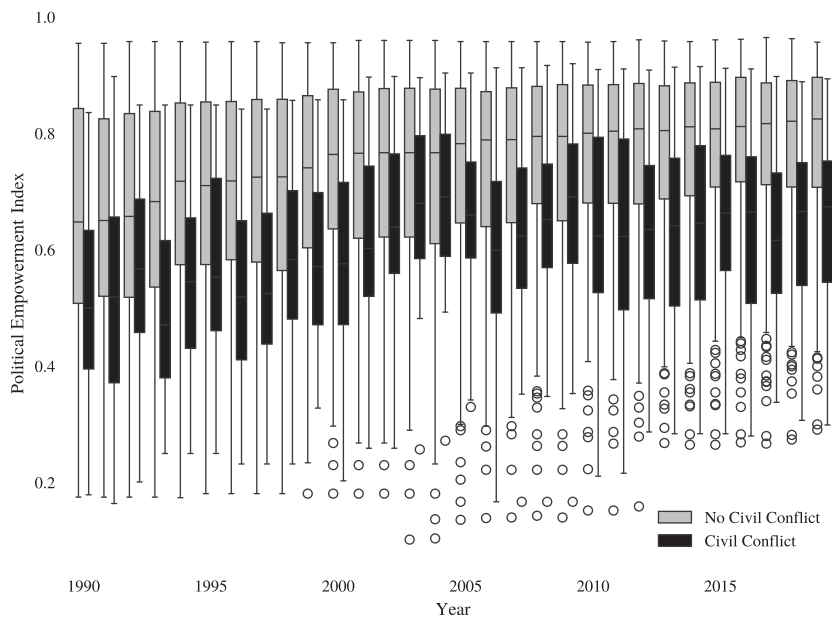


Figure 2 Political Empowerment Index by Conflict, 1990–2019

those countries experiencing civil conflict. The conflict variable indicates whether an intrastate conflict occurred in the country in a given year (Davies, Pettersson, & Öberg, 2022; Gleditsch et al., 2002). Figure 2 plots the *Political Empowerment Index* over time for countries with a civil conflict and those without. While, on average, women’s political equality is lower in conflict countries, we still see significant variation in the level of inequality in conflict cases.

Previous studies have found that states with higher levels of political inequality are more likely to engage in both interstate (Caprioli, 2000, 2003; Hudson et al., 2009; Regan & Paskeviciute, 2003) and intrastate wars (Caprioli, 2005; Melander, 2005). Focusing on civil war, these states also experience greater rates of conflict recurrence (Demeritt, Nichols, & Kelly, 2014). In international conflicts, less equal states are more likely to escalate to violence (Caprioli & Boyer, 2001).

States with higher levels of women’s political empowerment are less likely to employ violence than those with lower levels of gender equality at home. Violence toward women is a better predictor of a state’s likelihood of participating in conflict than democracy, wealth, or prevalence of Islam (Hudson et al., 2009).

Given the empirical pattern shown in Figure 2 as well as the previous scholarship linking political inequality to violence, we believe that understanding how women’s political inequality impacts health outcomes during times of conflict

requires taking into account the fact that conflict is more likely in those countries with weak gender equality. The ways that women experience conflict are in part explained by the conditions in their home countries prior to the beginning of the conflict.

Gendered Consequences of War

Not only are the causes of conflict gendered, but the consequences of war are gendered as well. Less research has been done on this side of the coin, but as was the case with the research on gender and conflict onset, the work on gender and consequences has been done in isolation. The connection between the two has been under appreciated.

The mechanisms linking gender and the consequences of war are less clear. Scholars have identified a range of ways that conflict may affect women differently than men (discussed in detail in this Element), but there has been less consideration of how inequality – particularly political inequality – influences the degree of those impacts. Where women are already in a subordinate position in society, the effects of war will come down harder upon them.

The economic, health, and social consequences that occur beyond the battlefield are felt first by women and children (Sjoberg, 2012) and are not gender-neutral (Minoiu & Shemyakina, 2012). Women's well-being may be affected by three different mechanisms according to the conflict literature: the economic damage effect, the displacement effect, and the sexual violence effect. All three of these can be understood with greater clarity when we combine them with gender inequality.

Gendered Health Outcomes

Economic Effects

In the countries where wars are fought, productive members of society are killed, infrastructure is damaged or destroyed, and long-term damage is done to the economic, educational, and public health systems (Allen & Lektzian, 2013; Ghobarah, Huth, & Russett, 2004; Iqbal, 2006; Lai & Thyne, 2007). Critically, resources are diverted away from public programs that help women and children. This shift will be more dramatic in societies where women's representation is limited and masculine values prioritizing violence are reflected in policy choices.

The diminished quality of social programs in gender unequal societies will be magnified as the destruction associated with war degrades economies and economic potential going forward. These indirect costs can negatively impact a country's standard of health for many years following the termination of