

Female Political Leaders: Shaping Attitudes Toward Gender Equality and Violence

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ABSTRACT

Studies have repeatedly reported that states with higher levels of gender equality are more peaceful. Similarly, research has shown that individuals who hold feminist attitudes also hold more peaceful attitudes. This paper argues that there is a lack of studies on the relationship between gender equality and peaceful attitudes on the individual level. Building upon studies suggesting that gender equality is key in working towards peace, this paper investigates whether female political leaders can affect attitudes to gender equality and to violence. By integrating experimental components in a comparative case study, this study gathered survey-evidence from two villages in Kerala, India. The findings suggest that continuous exposure to female political leaders lead to more approving attitudes of gender equality but do not find enough support suggesting that attitudes towards violence are affected. This study examines the influence of female political leaders on public attitudes toward gender equality and violence. By analyzing a range of case studies and survey data, the research highlights how the presence and policies of women in political leadership roles contribute to shifts in societal perceptions and behaviors related to gender norms and violence prevention. The findings suggest that female leaders play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and reducing tolerance for violence, thereby fostering more inclusive and safe communities.

Keywords: Female political leaders, gender equality, attitudes, violence prevention, societal perceptions, gender norms, leadership impact, political influence, inclusive communities.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality has been the focus of research and international policies for decades. Now recognized as a goal in and of itself, it is advocated for on both international platforms and on the national level. Furthermore, a lack of gender equality is argued to be a problem for all societies. Research shows that societies with low levels of gender equality lead to individual-level consequences, for example violence against women and discrimination. A lack of gender equality is now also found to not only have effects on women's security, but on state security as well (Hudson et al., 2008). Many studies show that low levels of gender equality are associated with a higher risk of both intra- and interstate conflict. In other words, societies with higher levels of gender equality are found to be more peaceful (Bjarnegård and Melander, 2011; Caprioli, 2005, 2000; Melander, 2005). In order to decrease the risk of both inter- and intrastate conflicts, the connection between gender equality and peaceful societies needs to be understood. A wide range of studies with various methods and cases have studied the link between gender inequality and conflict and have observed that men and women tend to differ in measures of public opinion. On foreign policy, women tend to hold more peaceful attitudes than men. Researchers have coined this a type of gender gap (Smith, 1984). Another gender gap is also found in violence and crime, as the majority of perpetrators are men (Lei et al., 2014). In order to explain the gender gap, some scholars have theorized that women are more peaceful than men due to biological factors (Fite et al., 1990; Wilcox et al., 1996). However, the idea that women should be biologically more peaceful is widely questioned and criticized (Conover and Sapiro, 1993; Melander, 2005). Instead, researchers have suggested alternative explanations which highlight the socially constructed gender roles in societies. These scholars point out how traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity affects individuals and their attitudes. For example, masculine stereotypes seem to influence men to hold more hostile attitudes compared to women. Furthermore, research has found that the gender gap disappears when controlling for feminist attitudes (Bjarnegård and Melander, 2017). Feminist attitudes is

in here defined as being favorable towards gender equality and recognizing the stereotypical ideas shaping gender roles in society. The fact that differences in men and women's attitudes towards foreign policy disappears when taking feminist attitudes into account suggests that the gender gap is actually a *feminist gap* (ibid). If feminist attitudes lead to more pacifying attitudes, states could decrease the risk of conflict by striving for positive attitudes to gender equality in society. Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) developed a theoretical perspective which suggest that exposure to feminist concepts and ideas can lead to more feminist attitudes. This is termed exposure-based change and can originate from the workplace, education or through political socialization. For example, political gender equality is often strived for by introducing mandated quotas for women in political institutions. Societies and individuals who are subjected to these quotas are thereby exposed to the idea of gender equality. A pressing question is whether and under what conditions gender quotas could produce more feminist attitudes, and if this could also result in more peaceful attitudes. This is especially relevant since political quotas have been found to affect individuals' attitudes, in particular continuous quotas (Beaman et al., 2009; Chauchard, 2014). Gender quotas have been introduced in a range of countries (Krook, 2014). India is an example of such expansion, as extensive gender quotas have been implemented on almost all levels of local governing bodies (Chandhoke, 2012). Perhaps including more women in political decision-making could not only be a way to stimulate gender equality but could also lead to more peaceful attitudes. Even though political quotas have been found to affect individuals' attitudes (Beaman et al., 2009; Chauchard, 2014), there is a lack of research on how gender quotas affect attitudes to gender equality. Building upon this research, it is necessary to investigate whether, and under what conditions, gender quotas can affect attitudes to gender equality, and to what extent gender equality attitudes correlates with peaceful attitudes. This paper argues that feminist attitudes can be produced through continuous exposure to female political leaders and that feminist attitudes lead to more peaceful attitudes. In order to support these arguments, this paper answers the following research question: How does continuous exposure to female political leaders affect attitudes to gender equality and violence?

To investigate this, this paper proposes a causal path explaining how feminist attitudes are produced and tests the relationship between feminist and pacific attitudes. This paper exploits

the presence of gender quotas in local governmental bodies in India in order to employ an observational case study with components of experimental studies. Using data from over 80 surveys collected from two villages in Kerala, India, this study gives insight into individuals' attitudes to gender equality and violence and provides further understanding of the relationship between gender equality and peaceful societies.

The paper begins with a literature review of the field of gender equality and conflict. This section also dives into the previous research on the gender/feminist gap and connects this to research on attitudes and gender quotas. The theoretical framework used in this study is then developed, as well as the proposed causal path and hypotheses. After, the research design is presented, including case selection, material and the process of conducting a field study in Kerala, India. The analysis of the data and results are then presented and discussed. Last, having summarized the findings, this paper discusses the implications of the findings as well as future research.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is comprehensively analyze. The impact of female political leaders on attitudes towards gender equality and violence towards its society's with low levels of gender equality lead to individual -level consequences, for example violence against women and discrimination.

1. To examine the historical evolution of Gender equality and violence towards its society.
2. To identify the key drivers and determinants of female political leaders on attitudes towards gender equality and violence towards its low levels of gender equality, violence against women, masculinity and femininity, security in society, including geopolitical considerations.

SAMPLING METHOD

The divisions into wards in the villages were used as sampling units. Each ward represents a geographical area in the village and could function as the sampling frame. Since the two wards

selected had a different number of wards, I used a random number generator to exclude two wards from one village. That ensured that the remaining wards in each village had an equal



probability of being selected for the surveys. Following this, I again used a random number generator to select four wards, within each village, to be visited for the surveys. I then followed this procedure in order to randomly select households and individuals

CASE SELECTION

This paper focuses on Kerala for a number of reasons: its political quota system, its high levels of literacy and last, its political history. In 1993 one of the world’s largest decentralization reforms came into effect in all states in India. Two constitutional amendments, the 73rd and 74th, were implemented that significantly altered the public administration and local governance system (Lindgren et al., 2009). The amendments required that regular elections should be held under the state level, in the local governing bodies referred to as Panchayati Raj Institutions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The three-tier local governance system in India

As this paper aimed to measure attitudes to violence on the general and local level, Kerala was a suitable case, where local violent occurrences could be used to measure attitudes to specific cases of violence. Testing attitudes on the general/abstract level and on the local/specific level is necessary in order to test the hypotheses. Single case studies allow scholars to develop more precise indicators, tailored to the context. Answers for questions referring to hypothetical scenarios and violence in general may differ from answers regarding actual situations or events (Conover and Sapiro, 1993). This further encourages a single case study that can allow more precise indicators in relation to attitudes on violence on both local and general level (Bjarnegård and Melander, 2017). In addition, measuring attitudes to gender equality in one cultural context allow for more precise results and limits potential confounders.

GENDER QUOTAS IN KERALA

The 1993 amendments ensured that in all three levels of local governance, one-third of all seats and one-third of all presidential (chairperson) seats are reserved for women. In addition, members of marginalized groups, categorized as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), are now also represented according to their proportion of the population (“Amendment Acts,” n.d.).

In Kerala, quotas were raised to 50% for the 2010 election. 50% of all seats in the three local governing levels are reserved for women and 50% of all presidential seats on the local governing bodies are reserved for women (KILA, 2013). This reservation is conducted through a rotation and applies to 50% of the local constituencies one election period and the other 50% the next period. As a result of this, every Panchayati Raj institution in Kerala has been assigned these reservations.

The state election commission assigns the seats and ensures the presence of female political leaders regardless of contextual factors. Thereby, a lot of confounding variables can be held constant, such as political culture, gender roles, history and gender-related development. Had the seats not been assigned, these variables would otherwise need to be treated as potential causal factors. Additionally, my case selection also solves the issue of causal direction, as individuals’ attitudes to gender equality and violence cannot affect the assignment of reserved seats, i.e. the presence of a female political leader. This would be a concern in governing

bodies where a woman has been selected in a general seat, these cases have therefore been excluded.

VILLAGE COUNCILS

Even though the reservations for women are assigned to all three levels of governance, the bottom level of self-governance, the Grama Panchayat or village council, was selected for study. The village councils have been chosen since it is the lowest level of government in Kerala. Consequently, it is more likely that the local population have been “exposed” to their local body presidents. The president of the village council is an important symbolic and decision-making figure, with minimum distance from the public. The president also has a range of functions that affects individuals and it is common for locals to have personal contact with the sitting president. For example, the president’s signature is often required for financial or welfare matters. This makes it likely that even if locals are not politically engaged or interested they have still come in contact with their president or at least are aware of who is president. This is less likely to be true for the other levels of governance, i.e. block or district level.

Table 1. Reservation history of villages

Village	Reservation in 2015	Reservation in 2010	Reservation in 2005	Reservation in 2000
Kaddakavoor	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Pothencode	No	Yes	No	Yes

Sources: Government of Kerala, Information Mission Kerala

Table 2. Village information

Village	Population	SC Population (%)	Literacy Rate	Number of Wards
Kaddakavoor	23037	7.3	87.99	16
Pothencode	24995	8.4	89.22	18

Sources: Government of Kerala, Information Mission Kerala

Kaddakavoor and Poth encode are both situated in Thiruvananthapuram district, with 23 km between them. The distance between them is both small enough to ensure that they have quite similar experiences of political events, as well as large enough to hopefully mitigate potential spillover-effects. Spillover-effects can occur when individuals in one treatment group communicate and transmit information to other groups, blurring the line between the continuously exposed and the other group (Sinclair et al., 2012). Kaddakavoor has been assigned two consecutive reservations (Information Mission Kerala), while Pothencode has only had sporadic reservations. This allows us to measure the effect of continuous exposure.

DATA COLLECTION THROUGH SURVEYS

The material for this paper consists of 89 individual surveys from two different villages situated in Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala, India. This section describes the operationalization of variables. This section also presents the survey development, population and sample, and last, survey deployment. Before moving on to the analysis of the data, the end of this section explains ethical considerations.

Survey development

In order to measure the respondent's attitudes to gender equality and to violence, on the general and local level, I created a questionnaire. To measure attitudes, researchers use a wide variety of techniques including direct self-reporting where the respondents attitude is directly measured, and indirect procedures where the researcher infers attitudes without asking directly (Albarracin et al., 2005 p. 24). In this paper I used the former, the direct self-reporting approach. Although researchers have used methods adjusted to measure more implicit biases and attitudes, such as vignettes and recordings (Beaman et al., 2009; Chauchard, 2014), these methods are more time-consuming and financially demanding than was plausible for my allocated time and resources.

However, different survey question structures have been included to attempt to gauge the attitudes in both direct and more indirect ways. Consequently, the questionnaire contained 43 closed questions divided into three sections (see appendix). Open-ended questions, i.e. questions where respondents write their own answer, are considered to provide a higher validity when measuring attitudes, since they reduce researcher induced measurement errors (Albarracín et al., 2005). However, open ended questions and their answers are more difficult to interpret and more time-consuming to code, especially if they first need to be translated. Therefore, closed questions were chosen over open ended ones, due to practical reasons and time-efficiency.

DATA ANALYSIS

With the data collected from the questionnaires, several linear regression models were built. Regressions are used to determine the strength of the relationship between the dependent variables, attitudes to gender equality and violence, and the independent variable, continuous exposure to female political leaders. The regression models developed here help explain the relationship between the variables.

The idea behind adding experimental components to this research design was to enable a simple analysis. Similar to Chattopadhyay and Duflo's (2004) and Chauchard's (2014) studies, this kind of research design isolates the effect of the independent variable. Since the research design and case selection have aimed at minimizing potential confounders, the only significant difference between the groups should be the treatment, i.e. continuous presence of female president. In this case, since the quotas are implemented from the state-level, individuals or village level characteristics cannot affect the likelihood of having a reserved seat for a village president.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Village 1(continuously exposed)		Village 2 (less exposed)	
Age	Mean: 43.45	Obs: 44	Mean: 40.56	Obs:41
	Std.dev: 17.64		Std.dev: 8.81	
Education	Mean: 4.12	Obs:43	Mean: 5.35	Obs:43
	Std.dev: 0.93		Std.dev: 0.95	
Occupational Condition	Mean: 3.41	Obs:41	Mean: 4.64	Obs:44
	Std.dev: 1.48		Std.dev: 0.80	
Income	Mean: 3.20	Obs:29	Mean: 4.44	Obs:36
	Std.dev: 1.54		Std.dev: 0.73	

Notes: 1. Village 1 includes 24 females and 21 men. 2. Village 2 includes 24 females and 18 men. 3. OccCon=Occupational Condition where 1=Unemployed, 2=Housewife without a paid job, 3= Student, 4= Part-time employee, 5= Full-time employee.

Table 3 presents the mean values and standard deviation for respondents' characteristics such as age, education, occupational condition and income. Village 1 represents the village with continuous exposure. As shown, some characteristics are overrepresented in both of these villages. Given the randomization during sampling, these differences are slightly surprising. However, it is not unusual that despite thorough random sampling, some characteristics are overrepresented. Some of these characteristics of the respondents may be correlated to the attitudes to gender equality and to violence. In order to solve this issue, the following analyses included some control variables which, in accordance with previous research on attitudes to gender equality and to violence, might account for variance in the dependent variable. Holding these variables constant allows the model to isolate the effect of the independent variable, a female president, on the dependent variables attitudes to gender equality and violence.

REGRESSIONS

Nine regression models are presented in this section, testing each hypothesis. The results for the first hypothesis H1a: Individuals who are exposed to female political leaders hold more positive attitudes to gender equality, is presented first. The variable for continuous exposure is coded as a dummy variable. To make interpretation easy and straightforward,

the other variables in the regressions are coded so that higher values indicate positive attitudes to gender equality and likewise, higher values indicate more peaceful attitudes.

Table 4. Regressions for continuous exposure and gender equality attitudes

VARIABLES	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	EqualRights		EqualLeader		MenShouldntCry	
Cont.Exposure	0.362*** (0.123)	0.489*** (0.161)	0.129 (0.124)	0.270 (0.163)	-0.333* (0.174)	-0.315 (0.236)
Education		0.072 (0.069)		0.118* (0.069)		0.140 (0.102)
Age<30		0.208 (0.172)		-0.298* (0.178)		0.183 (0.259)
OccCon		0.063 (0.058)		0.012 (0.060)		-0.024 (0.087)
Constant	3.227*** (0.084)	2.545*** (0.419)	3.205*** (0.085)	2.554*** (0.424)	3.070*** (0.119)	2.431*** (0.629)
Observations	83	77	83	77	81	75
R-squared	0.097	0.177	0.013	0.079	0.044	0.076

Notes: 1. Standard errors in parentheses*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. 2. Model 1 uses the statement *women and men should have equal rights* where 1 = strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4 = strongly disagree 5= I don't know (coded as missing value). 3. Model 2 uses the statement *women are equally good leaders as men* where 1 = strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4 = strongly disagree 5= I don't know (coded as missing value). 4. Model 3 uses the statement *men should not cry* where 1 = strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4 = strongly disagree 5= I don't know (coded as missing value) these values are recoded so that a higher number represents disagreement with this statement.

Table 4 display three different regression models. All three models test the relationship between continuous exposure and different indicators of gender equal attitudes. Model 1 tests the support for equal rights, model 2 tests the approval of women as leaders and model 3 tests whether respondents think it is acceptable for men to cry.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

Since the population of interest was residents in the two selected villages, a representative sample was drawn from each of the two villages. With approximately 24 000 citizens in each village, a probability sampling method was used. This ensured a properly randomized sample. Full details of the sampling process can be found in appendix. After having developed a sampling method and completed a pilot study (see appendix), I deployed the survey. During the distributions of the surveys I was accompanied by a

DISCUSSION

This paper highlights the connection between gender equality and lower risks of conflict and the need for this relationship to be understood on the micro level. Since approving attitudes to gender equality are connected to more peaceful attitudes, this paper aims to understand whether continuous exposure to female leaders can create more gender-equal attitudes. This paper therefore answers the research question: *how does continuous exposure to female leaders affect attitudes to gender equality and violence?*

The first observable implication from this study contributes to answering the above question and confirms the first hypothesis. From the results of the data analysis we find that individuals who are continuously exposed to female leaders have positive attitudes to gender equality. These results corroborate previous studies such as Beaman and co-authors (2009), showing that continuous gender quotas can lead to more gender-equal attitudes. In addition, the results from this study are in line with previous studies on ethnic quotas in India (Chauchard, 2009). This confirms that political quotas may be a tool for changing negative attitudes towards marginalized groups. The theory regarding exposure-based change developed by Bolzendahl and Myers (2004) is supported by these results. As the authors argue, exposure to feminist ideas, in this case a female political leader, produces more feminist attitudes.

CONCLUSION

This paper finds statistically significant support for the hypothesis connecting continuous exposure to female leaders with gender-equal attitudes. In contrast, this paper was unable to find support for its hypotheses regarding the correlation between gender-equal attitudes and more peaceful attitudes. By adding an experimental component, assigned gender quotas in Indian village councils, the issue of confounders was overcome. Moreover, this paper joins previous studies in employing feminist perspectives in research on conflict and violent attitudes. While this study has found support for Bolzendahl and Myers theory (2004) on exposure-based change, it also signals the need to further explore under what conditions gender equal attitudes affect individuals' attitudes to violence.

Looking forward, further research is needed in order to understand the effects of exposure to female political leaders on violent attitudes, as well as under what conditions feminist attitudes affect violent attitudes. More micro-level studies are needed to complement cross-national studies in order to understand how gender equality contributes to peaceful individuals and societies. In addition, the influence of gender roles and ideas on masculinity and femininity on attitudes, behavior and the security of societies should be taken into account. This paper joins a multitude of research in underscoring the need to further explore the connection between attitudes to gender equality and peaceful attitudes. The results of this study suggest that continuous exposure to feminist ideas, through gender quotas, could be a tool in producing more gender-equal attitudes. Further studies should investigate how robust these attitudes are in relation to time and changes in the political context. Since more gender-equal societies seem to not only decrease the risk of intra-and interstate conflict, but also decrease the risk of violent and criminal behavior by individuals, this research field cannot be overlooked.

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