

# External Security Threats and Attitudes toward Female Leaders

*A Series of Cross-National Studies*

Nam Kyu Kim

February 2026

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4. Evaluate methodological trade-offs in each research design
5. Discuss policy implications and future research directions

# The Puzzle

**About 50%** of the world's adults believe men make better political leaders than women (Anderson et al. 2021).

But why does this belief persist?

And why does it vary so dramatically across countries?

In some countries, over 80% agree. In others, fewer than 15%.

**Why Attitudes toward Female Leaders Matter**

What Determine Attitudes toward Female Leaders?

Why External Security Threats Matters?

A Series of Empirical Studies

Implications and Conclusion

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- Voters' attitudes about gender roles in politics shape their willingness to elect women.
- If large portions of voters believe men are more effective authorities, women inevitably face more difficulties becoming political leaders.

# Fear of a Female President

Hillary Clinton's candidacy has provoked a wave of misogyny—one that may roil American life for years to come.

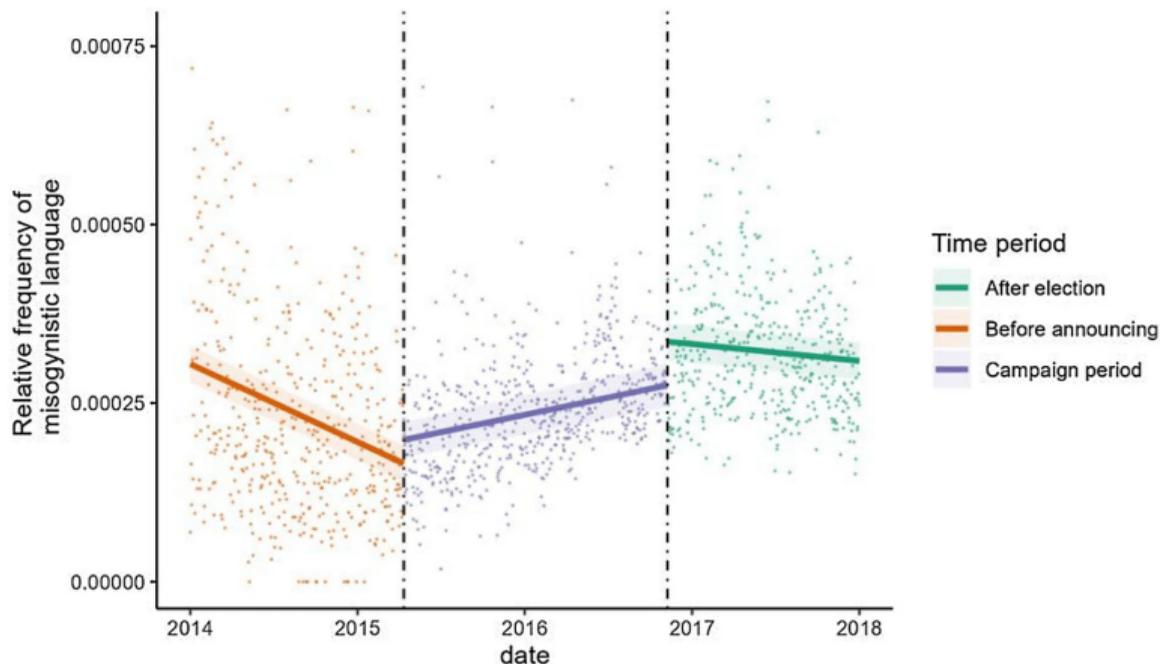
By Peter Beinart



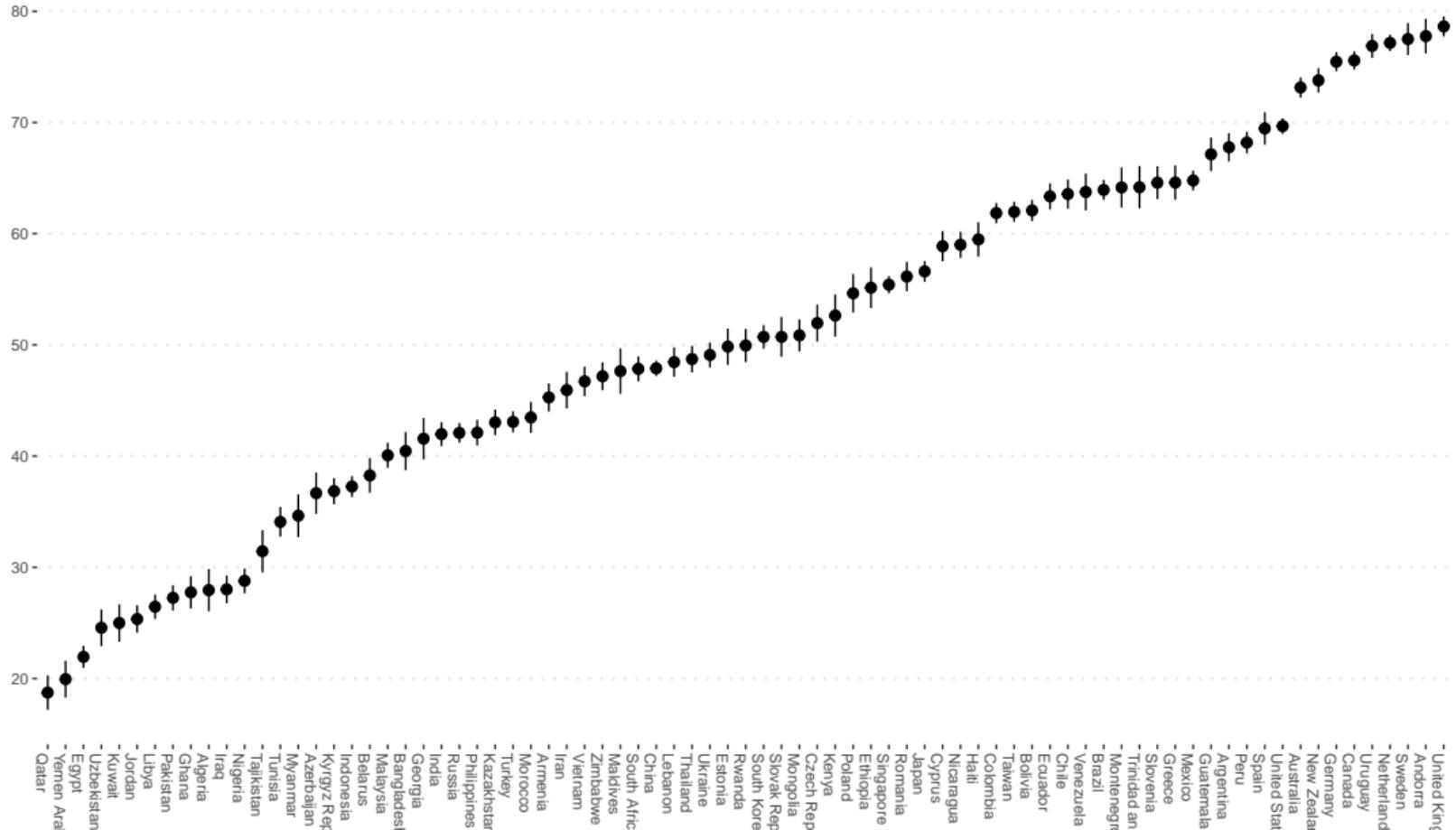
Edmon de Haro; Alex Wong / Getty

## E.g., Misogyny in the 2016 U.S. Election

Twitter misogyny associated with Hillary Clinton increased throughout the 2016 U.S. election campaign (Weaving et al. 2023).



## Attitude toward female leader (1–100)



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- **Employment:** Working women hold more egalitarian views.

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- **Culture:** Traditional values and patriarchal social norms suppress support for female leaders.

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- Women leaders cannot count on rallies following terrorist attacks — the public fails to rally around women (Holman et al. 2022).

## **The Curious Case of Theresa May and the Public That Did Not Rally: Gendered Reactions to Terrorist Attacks Can Cause Slumps Not Bumps**

MIRYA R. HOLMAN *Tulane University, United States*

JENNIFER L. MEROLLA *University of California, Riverside, United States*

ELIZABETH J. ZECHMEISTER *Vanderbilt University, United States*

**T**errorist attacks routinely produce rallies for incumbent men in the executive office. With scarce cases, there has been little consideration of terrorism's consequences for evaluations of sitting women executives. Fusing research on rallies with scholarship on women in politics, we derive a gender-revised framework wherein the public will be less inclined to rally around women when terrorists attack. A critical case is UK Prime Minister Theresa May, a right-leaning incumbent with security experience. Employing a natural experiment, we demonstrate that the public fails to rally after the 2017 Manchester Arena attack. Instead, evaluations of May decrease, with sharp declines among those holding negatives views about women. We further show May's party loses votes in areas closer to the attack. We then find support for the argument in a multinational test. We conclude that conventional theory on rally events requires revision: women leaders cannot count on rallies following major terrorist attacks.

We know **WHAT** factors matter.

But **HOW** do external threats  
shape gender attitudes?

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- We focus on **structural security environments** rather than just conflict events.
- “Peace is much more than the absence of war, . . . peace is a relationship, not an event” (Goertz et al. 2016).

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3. **Increasing the country's level of militarization**

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- E.g., a link between terrorist threat, gender stereotypes, and preferences for male leaders (Holman et al. 2016)

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- Social dominance orientation: preference for group-based hierarchy and inequality.
- Right-wing authoritarianism predicts men's benevolent sexism, while social dominance orientation predicts overtly hostile and domineering attitudes towards women (Sibley et al. 2007; Osborne et al. 2023).

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- The process of militarization reinforces traditional gender roles, as militaries are male-dominated institutions.
- Militarized societies socialize individuals to associate men with leadership in national security, increasing preferences for male over female political leaders.

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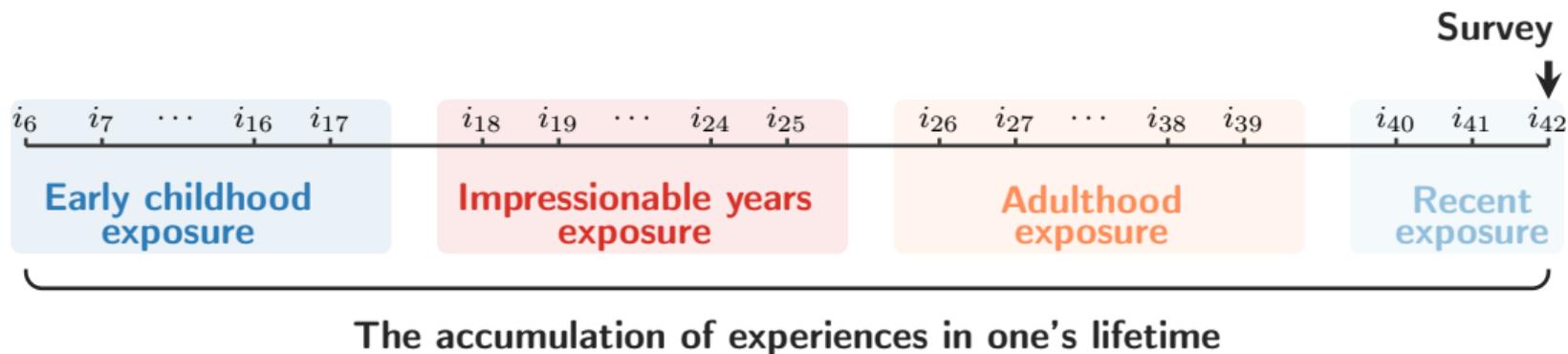
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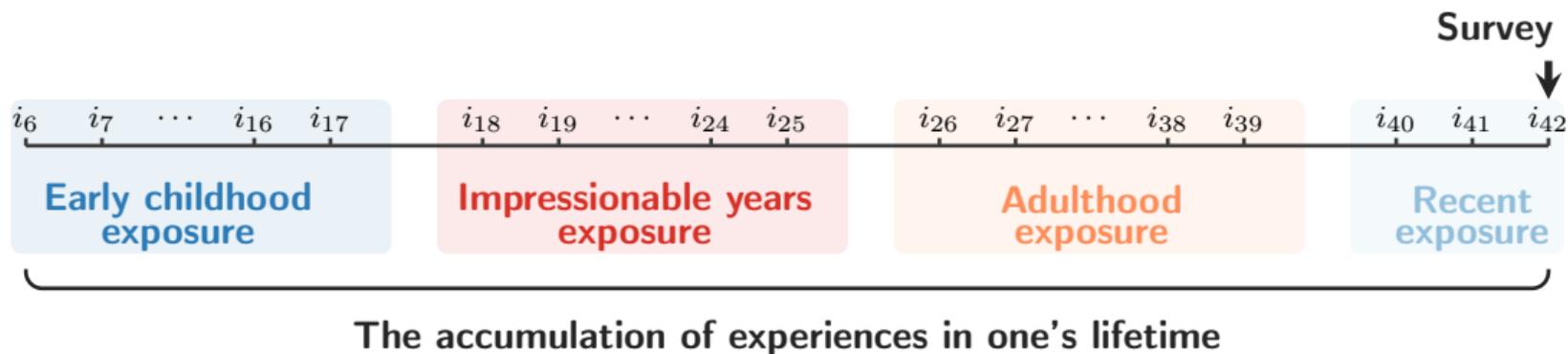
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- The **life course adaptation model** (Lersch et al. 2023): enduring dispositions from early imprinting, but capable of persistent adaptation.

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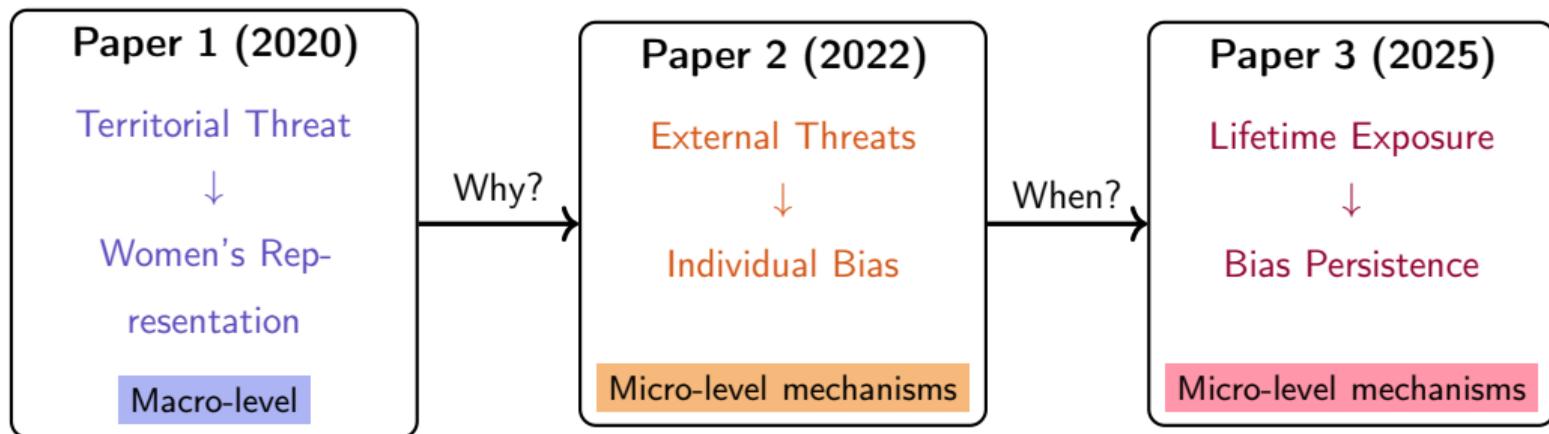
- Both **longevity** of exposure and **severity** of threats matter.
- **Hypothesis**: The longer individuals have experienced severe external threats to their country, the more they will prefer male over female political leaders.

We have a theory.

Does it match reality?

→ Three empirical tests

# How This Research Program Developed



Do threats matter  
at country level?

How do threats shape  
individual attitudes?

Do past exposures  
have lasting effects?

From aggregate patterns to individual mechanisms to temporal dynamics

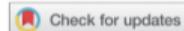
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## Territorial threat and women's legislative representation

Alice J. Kang <sup>a</sup> and Nam Kyu Kim <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science and Institute for Ethnic Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science and International Relations, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea

### ABSTRACT

Why do some countries have fewer women in parliament than do others? Recent studies find that women have less access to positions of political power in countries facing external threats. Existing studies, however, do not differentiate between types of threat. We theorize that territorial threats are a particular driver of gender inequality in national parliaments. When a country's land is under threat, people prefer having "tough" representatives in the national legislature who are competent on the military and defence more so than when a country faces other threats. Moreover, when countries face territorial threats, they build larger standing armies and adopt military conscription, raising the level of militarization in society, which negatively influences women's access to the national legislature. Using a time-series cross-sectional data set of 101 democracies, we find that countries facing external territorial threats have lower percentages of women in parliament compared to countries facing other or no external threats. Additionally, we find that countries with higher levels of militarization have fewer women in the national legislature.

# Paper 1: Kang and Kim (2020)

## *Democratization*

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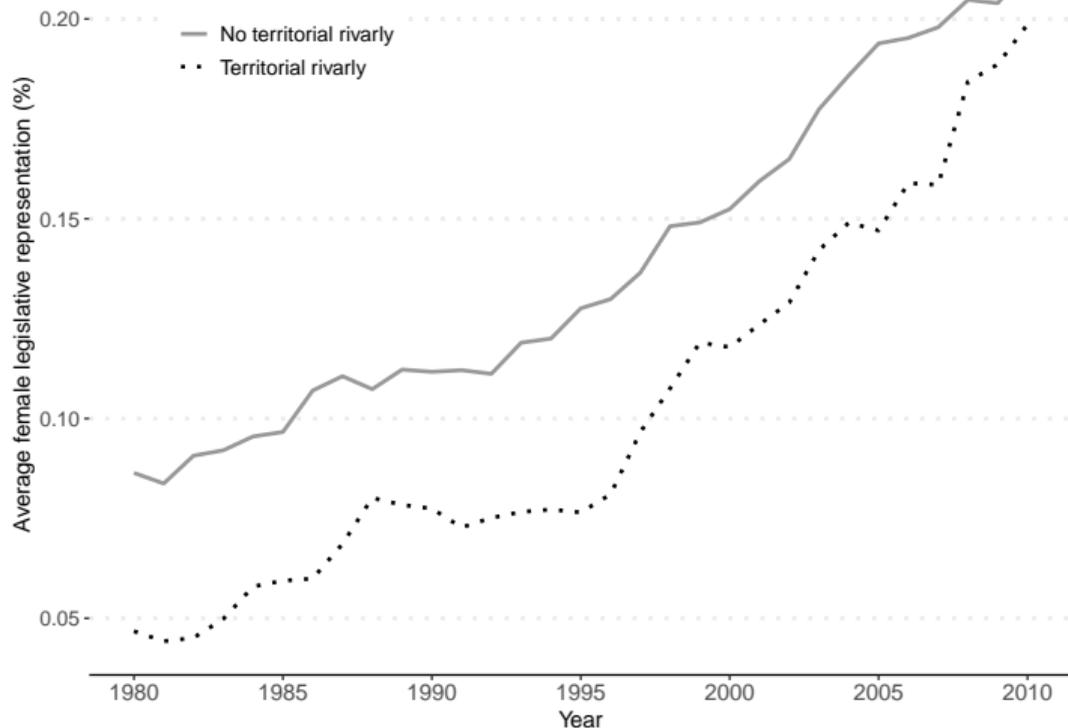
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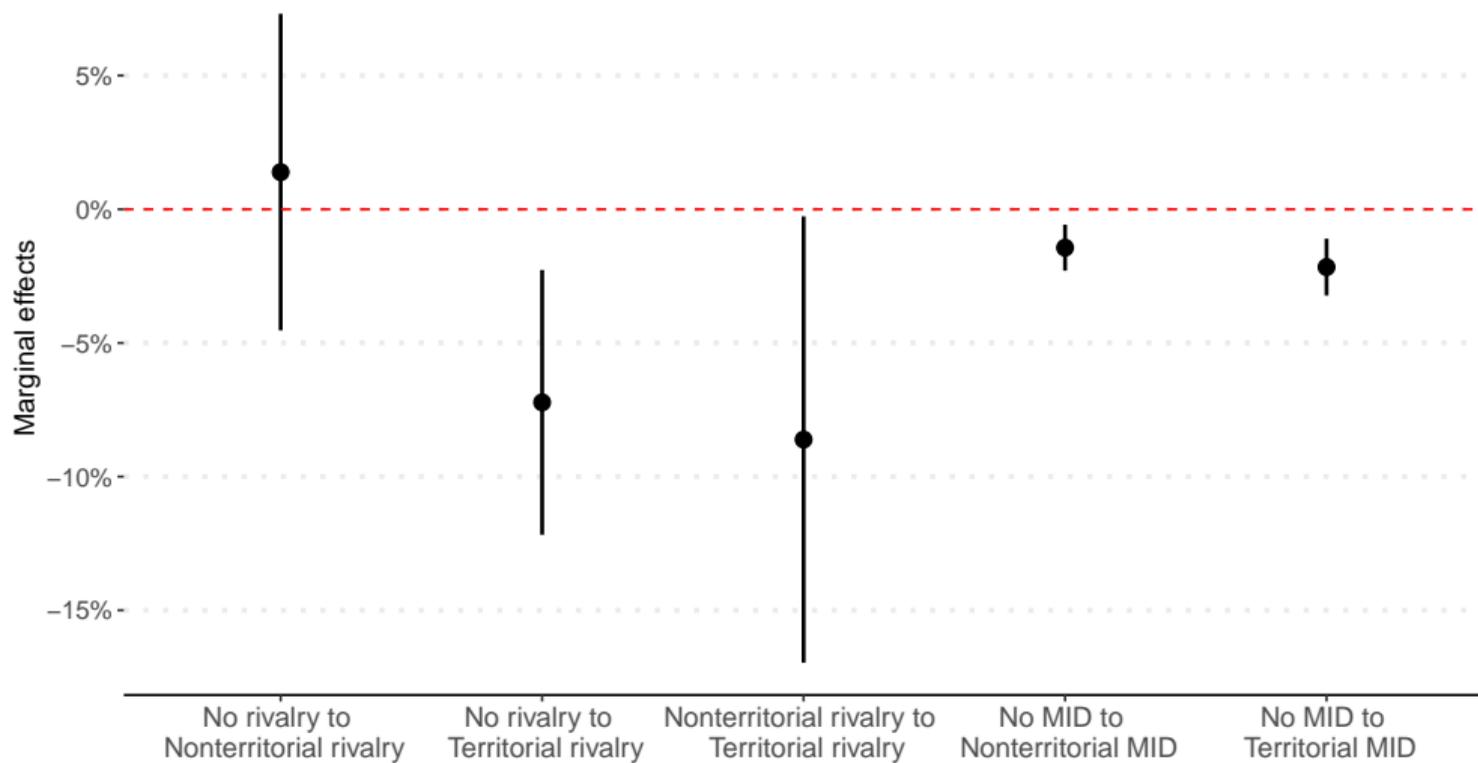
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- **Key finding:** Countries facing territorial threats have significantly **lower** levels of

# Paper 1: Women in national legislatures and territorial rivalries



	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Territorial rivalry	-0.088** (0.033)	-0.074** (0.025)	-0.051** (0.018)	-0.072** (0.025)	-0.072** (0.025)
Nonterritorial rivalry	-0.054* (0.026)	0.008 (0.031)	0.011 (0.025)	0.014 (0.030)	0.010 (0.031)
Territorial MID				-0.022** (0.005)	
Nonterritorial MID				-0.014** (0.004)	
Territorial MID target					-0.021* (0.009)
Nonterritorial MID target					-0.002 (0.004)
Territorial MID challenger					-0.014 <sup>+</sup> (0.007)
Nonterritorial MID challenger					0.005 (0.007)
Countries	101	101	101	101	101
N	1982	1982	1982	1982	1982

# Paper 1: Descriptive Evidence



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# External threat environments and individual bias against female leaders

Nam Kyu Kim<sup>1\*</sup>  and Alice J. Kang<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

We argue that a country's international security context influences individual bias against female leaders and propose three mechanisms: by increasing individual demand for defense, by shaping individual ideological orientations, and by increasing society's level of militarization. Using survey data of more than 200,000 individuals in 84 countries, we show the more hostile the country's security environment, the more individuals are likely to agree that men make better political leaders than do women. We also find support for some of our proposed mechanisms and that the effect of security environments is greater for men than women. Our study presents the first cross-national evidence that the country's international security environment correlates with bias against women leaders.

## Paper 2: Kim and Kang (2022)

*Political Science Research and Methods*

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  - 0 = strongly disagree/disagree; 1 = strongly agree/agree

## Paper 2

→ **Main explanatory variable:** country's external threat scale

$$\text{External Threat}_{it} = \sum_{j=1}^{N_{it}} \frac{1}{\ln(d_{ijt})} \times r_{ijt} \times p_{ijt}$$

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- $p_{ijt}$ : ratio of military power.

→ **Method:** Three-level mixed-effects models

## Paper 2: Main Results (H1)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
External threat	0.113** (0.014)	0.126** (0.020)	0.092** (0.020)
GDP per capita (log)		-0.001 (0.005)	-0.010+ (0.006)
Polity score		-0.003** (0.001)	-0.008** (0.001)
Muslim (%)		0.478** (0.065)	0.299** (0.065)
Catholic (%)		0.557** (0.042)	0.478** (0.043)
Female employment (%)		0.846** (0.106)	0.717** (0.109)
Female legislators (%)			-0.119** (0.038)
# of respondents	240,142	215,939	210,572

Note: +  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Individual-level controls included.

## Paper 2: Main Results (H1)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
External threat	0.113** (0.014)	0.126** (0.020)	0.092** (0.020)
GDP per capita (log)		-0.001 (0.005)	-0.010+ (0.006)
Polity score		-0.003** (0.001)	-0.008** (0.001)
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## Paper 2: Exploring Mechanisms

Dependent variables	Defense	Authority	Men better leader			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
External threat	0.032* (0.013)	-0.145** (0.019)				
Military conscription					0.063** (0.010)	
Military size (log)						0.023** (0.008)
Strong defense			0.042** (0.003)			
Respect for authority				0.019** (0.002)		

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Support for Mechanism 1 (defense salience) and Mechanism 3 (militarization).

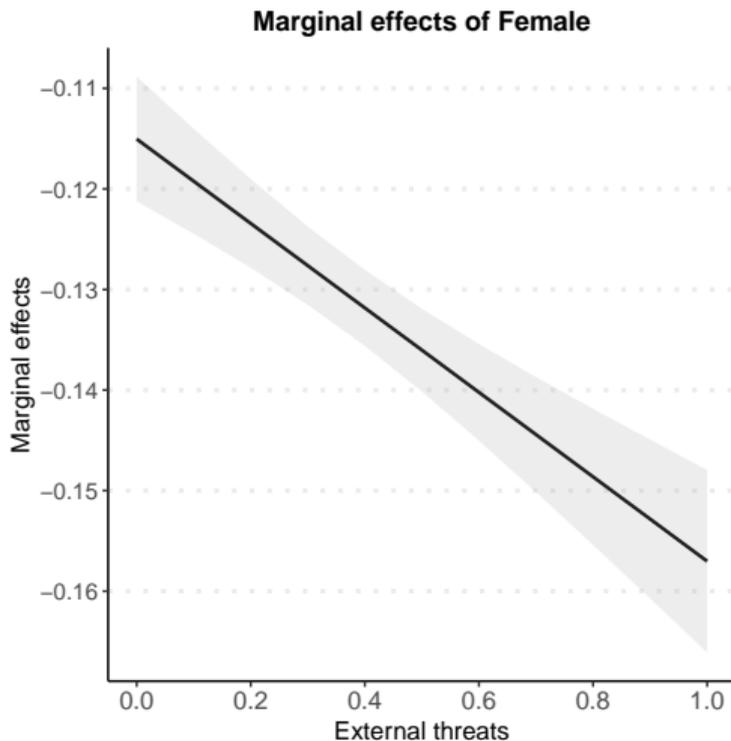
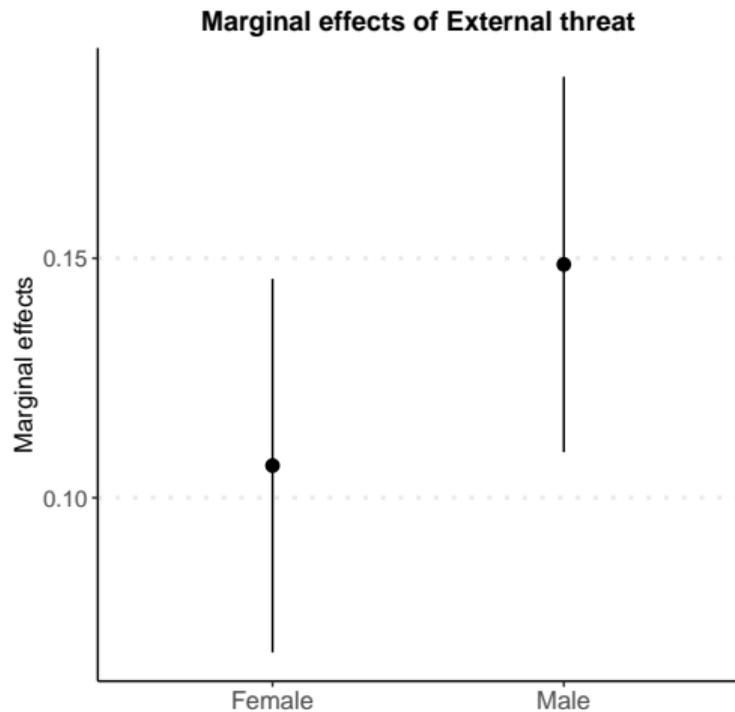
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## Paper 2: Interaction with Gender



The effect of security environments on preference for male leaders is **greater for men** than for women

## Paper 3: Kim and Kang

*Working Paper*

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→ **Key question:** Does *prior* (not just current) exposure to external threats shape attitudes about women leaders?

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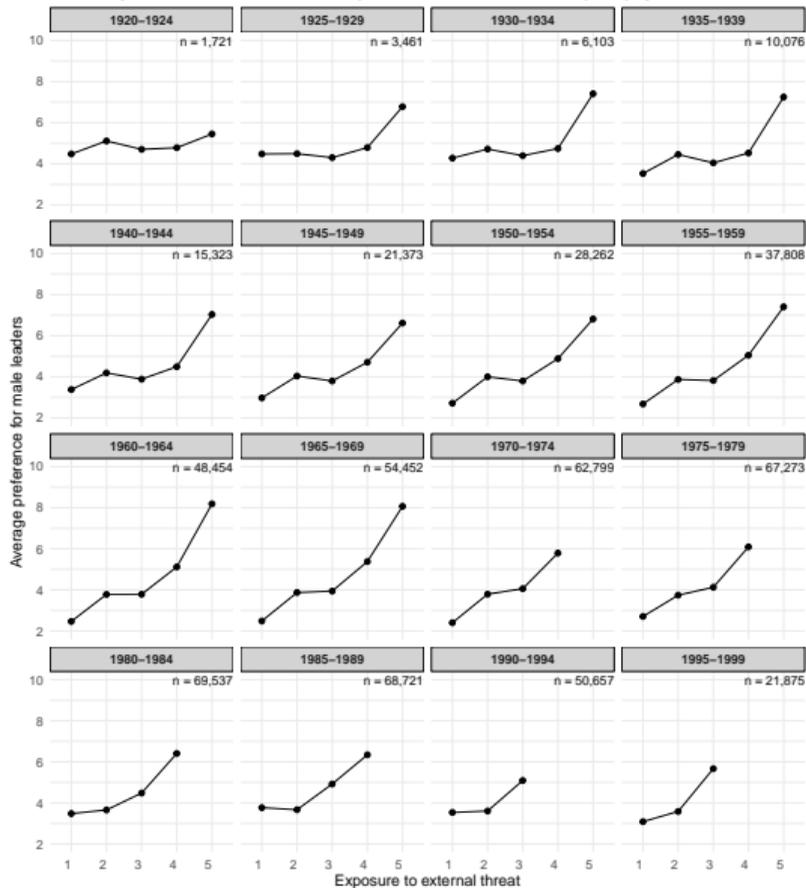
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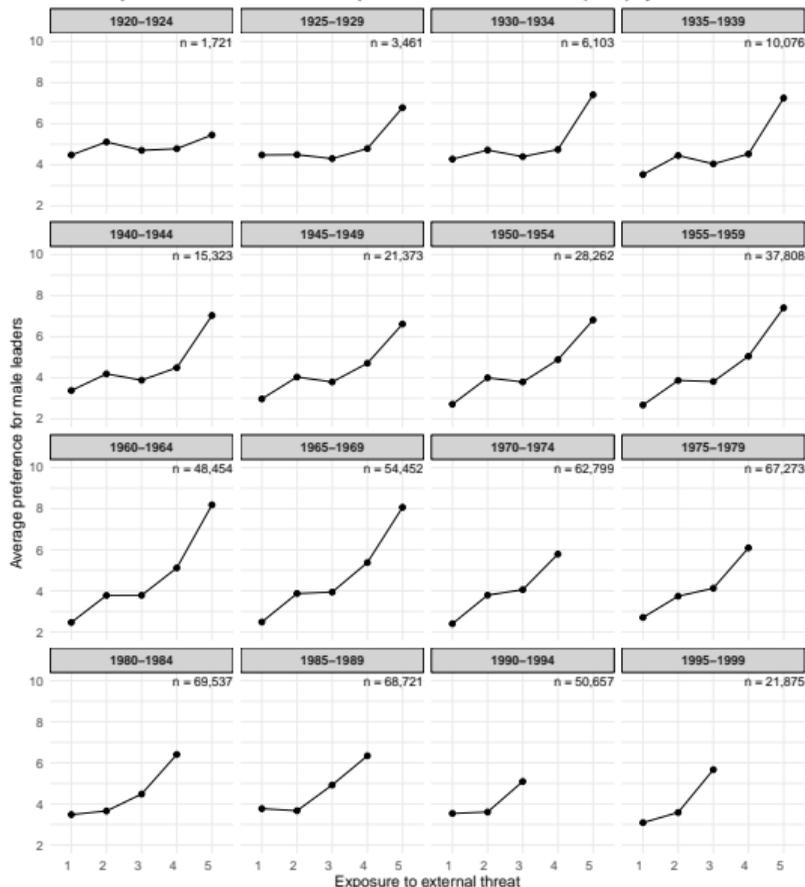
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- Within-cohort variation: individuals in the same birth cohort differ in attitudes based on accumulated exposure.



### Exposure to external threat and preference for male leaders (0-10) by birth cohort



Exposure to external threat and preference for male leaders (0-10) by birth cohort



## summary

Preference for male leaders by 5-year birth cohort and lifetime exposure to external threat.

## Paper 3: Main Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Lifetime exposure ( $\delta = 5\%$ )	0.039** (0.007)	0.062** (0.008)	0.060** (0.008)	0.060** (0.008)	0.060** (0.008)
External threat (current)			1.111** (0.385)	0.704+ (0.388)	0.647+ (0.382)
GDP per capita (log)				-0.340** (0.089)	-0.339** (0.085)
Democracy				-1.632** (0.348)	-1.345** (0.354)
Women's political participation					-1.340** (0.349)
Individual controls		✓	✓	✓	✓
# of countries	123	123	123	123	123
# of respondents	459,600	459,600	459,600	459,600	459,600

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## Paper 3: Does War Exposure Matter?

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Lifetime exposure to interstate war	0.098** (0.027)		
Lifetime exposure to existential war		0.108** (0.026)	
Lifetime exposure to non-existential war		0.028 (0.069)	
Lifetime exposure to intrastate war			0.039* (0.017)
Full controls	✓	✓	✓
# of countries	104	104	104
# of respondents	284,797	284,797	284,797

## Comparing the Three Studies

	<b>Paper 1 (2020)</b>	<b>Paper 2 (2022)</b>	<b>Paper 3 (WP)</b>
<b>Level</b>	Country	Individual	Individual
<b>DV</b>	% Women MPs	Attitude	Attitude
<b>Time span</b>	1960–2010	1995–2014	1981–2022
<b>Threat measure</b>	Territorial	Composite	Latent
<b>Key innovation</b>	Macro effect	Mechanisms	Lifetime
<b>N (countries)</b>	110	83	123
<b>N (individuals)</b>	—	222K	450K
<b>Method</b>	Panel FE	Multilevel	Multilevel+Cohort FE

**Consistent message:** External security threats — contemporary *and* historical — shape gender bias in political leadership.

Why Attitudes toward Female Leaders Matter

What Determine Attitudes toward Female Leaders?

Why External Security Threats Matters?

A Series of Empirical Studies

Implications and Conclusion

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- Individuals in countries facing structural external threats are more likely to prefer male over female leaders.
- The effect is not just about *current* threats — **lifetime exposure** to insecurity shapes enduring attitudes.
- **Existential threats** (from neighbors and major powers) matter most; non-existential threats have no effect.

## Broader Implications

- Confirming **negative consequences of external threats**: lower tolerance toward minorities, higher support for torture and civil liberty restrictions, greater support for power consolidation (existing literature).

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- **For gender equality**: Security contexts create an additional, structural barrier to women's political empowerment — beyond individual-level and cultural factors.
- **For electoral politics**: Female candidates in countries with hostile security environments face additional bias — implications for campaign strategies and party recruitment.
- **Intergenerational effects**: People who lived through insecurity may retain biases long after threats subside — explaining why bias persists in now-peaceful countries.

# Unanswered Questions

## *Future Directions*

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- Can attitudes change quickly?  
(what breaks the pattern?)
- Does threat type matter?  
(interstate vs. internal threats)

**Thank you!**

Nam Kyu Kim

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