

# How Portraying Women’s Wartime Victimization Shapes Perceptions of Their Leadership Potential

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## Abstract

Does portraying women as wartime victims shape citizens’ perceptions of their leadership potential? Conflict-related media coverage disproportionately frames women as victims of war, yet little is known about whether these portrayals shape public attitudes toward women’s political authority in security and foreign policy—domains in which women remain significantly underrepresented. Highlighting gendered victimization may increase support for women’s representation by casting women as especially attuned to humanitarian suffering and the needs of vulnerable populations. At the same time, such portrayals may activate paternalistic protectionism that undercuts confidence in women’s political authority. Analysis of over 15,000 Facebook posts from 17 major news outlets covering conflicts in Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and Ukraine-Russia shows that women’s wartime suffering is a persistent feature of conflict coverage, consistently outnumbering references to men’s victimization and frequently linked to children, sexual violence, and social vulnerability. An original preregistered survey experiment in the United States (N = 995) provides causal evidence that exposure to narratives emphasizing women’s wartime suffering increases support for women’s leadership in peacebuilding, including conflict resolution and post-conflict negotiations. These effects, however, do not extend to support for women’s leadership in militarized security domains such as national defense or warfare, revealing an asymmetry in how victimhood shapes gendered leadership evaluations. Exploratory analyses further indicate that although victimization narratives heighten support for women’s descriptive and substantive representation, they also strengthen benevolent sexism, which activates stereotypes that women lack the competence associated with hard security roles. Together, these findings suggest that highlighting women’s wartime experiences can broaden demand for their inclusion in peacebuilding, yet expanding their authority in militarized security roles will require long-term shifts toward gender-egalitarian norms.

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The experience of conflict is deeply gendered. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) remains one of the most devastating aspects of war, occurring as part of an established pattern of violence against women (Balcells & Stanton, 2021; C. K. Butler et al., 2007; Cohen, 2016; Davies & True, 2015; McDermott, 2020; Nordås & Cohen, 2021; Wood, 2009). Women are also subjected to other forms of conflict-related harm such as forced displacement and killing (Cohen & Green, 2012), which significantly increases the likelihood of violence persisting among children of the victimized families (Calderón et al., 2011). Yet women play a vital role in promoting peace and stability through their participation in political processes (Forsberg & Olsson, 2016; Good, 2024; Krause et al., 2018; Shair-Rosenfield & Wood, 2017; Ta-Johnson et al., 2022). Women are more likely to facilitate peace agreements (Nilsson, 2012), advocate for women's rights reforms during peace processes (Tripp, 2015), and achieve higher implementation rates for agreement provisions (Krause et al., 2018). By improving perceptions of trust and addressing the root causes of conflict, women's political representation helps break the cycle of violence (Shair-Rosenfield & Wood, 2017).

We now know that citizens are responsive to the gendered nature of conflict. CRSV increases public support for gender-sensitive military responses (Agerberg & Kreft, 2023) and norms surrounding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) are more frequently invoked in armed conflicts marked by widespread sexual violence (Benson & Gizelis, 2020; Johansson & Hultman, 2019). We also know that security threats shape perceptions of women leaders. Extensive evidence demonstrates a pro-male bias during times of security threats, as citizens associate crisis leadership qualities such as strength and decisiveness with men (Bauer, 2015; Bhatia & Monroe, 2023; Hadzic & Tavits, 2021; Holman et al., 2011, 2016; Lawless, 2004; Schroeder, 2017). What remains unclear, however, is whether depictions of women's wartime vulnerability shape public judgments of their capacity to lead. Given the extensive media attention to women's experiences in conflict zones (Carpenter, 2005, 2016), it is important to understand how portraying women as victims influences broader perceptions of women, including assessments of their suitability for

political leadership.

Building on prior research, this study investigates whether and how narratives of women's victimization translate into citizens' judgments about their leadership potential. The existing literature presents competing expectations. On one hand, drawing attention to women's casualties may increase support for women's representation by depicting women as particularly well-suited to address the human costs of conflict, including gender-specific forms of suffering. This aligns with evidence that citizens often view women as more attentive to social issues that disproportionately affect women (Clayton et al., 2019). In contexts of armed conflict, exposure to the gendered impact of war may lead individuals to view women as particularly capable of bringing perspectives that address the challenges women confront in warzones. On the other hand, emphasizing women's victimhood may reinforce existing gender norms that depict women as dependent on men's protection (Agerberg & Kreft, 2023). While paternalistic protectionism casts women as deserving of care, it also positions them as "low in competence" in traditionally male-dominated fields (Bracic et al., 2019; Hideg & Ferris, 2016). Narratives emphasizing women's wartime victimization therefore risk reinforcing stereotypes that undercut confidence in women's political authority.

Based on an analysis of 15,413 Facebook posts by news media outlets covering major global conflicts, I first present descriptive evidence that women's victimhood is a recurring theme in media discourse. Building on these findings, I conducted an original survey experiment in the United States (N = 995) to assess how portrayals of women's suffering in war zones influence perceptions of their leadership in peacebuilding and security. While previous studies have examined third-country public responses to international conflicts involving women's victimization (Agerberg & Kreft, 2023; Benson & Gizelis, 2020; Johansson & Hultman, 2019), less is known about whether such perceptions affect attitudes toward women's representation in conflict-related decision-making positions. Given the United States' central role in major global conflicts and the prominence of these issues in domestic political debate, portrayals of women's suffering in war zones are likely to influence how Americans judge women's broader leadership capacities.

I find that narratives emphasizing women's victimhood increase public support for women's political leadership. Individuals exposed to information about women's wartime suffering express significantly stronger support for including women in conflict-zone decision making and post-conflict negotiations than those who read about non-gendered civilian victimization. These effects, however, do not extend to militarized security domains such as national defense or warfare, revealing an asymmetry in how victimhood shapes leadership evaluations. Exploratory analyses further show that while gendered victimization narratives strengthen support for women's descriptive and substantive representation, they also heighten benevolent sexism, which diminishes perceptions of women's competence associated with masculine-coded security roles. Together, these patterns help explain why increases in support are concentrated in peacebuilding contexts and do not carry over to national defense and warfare.

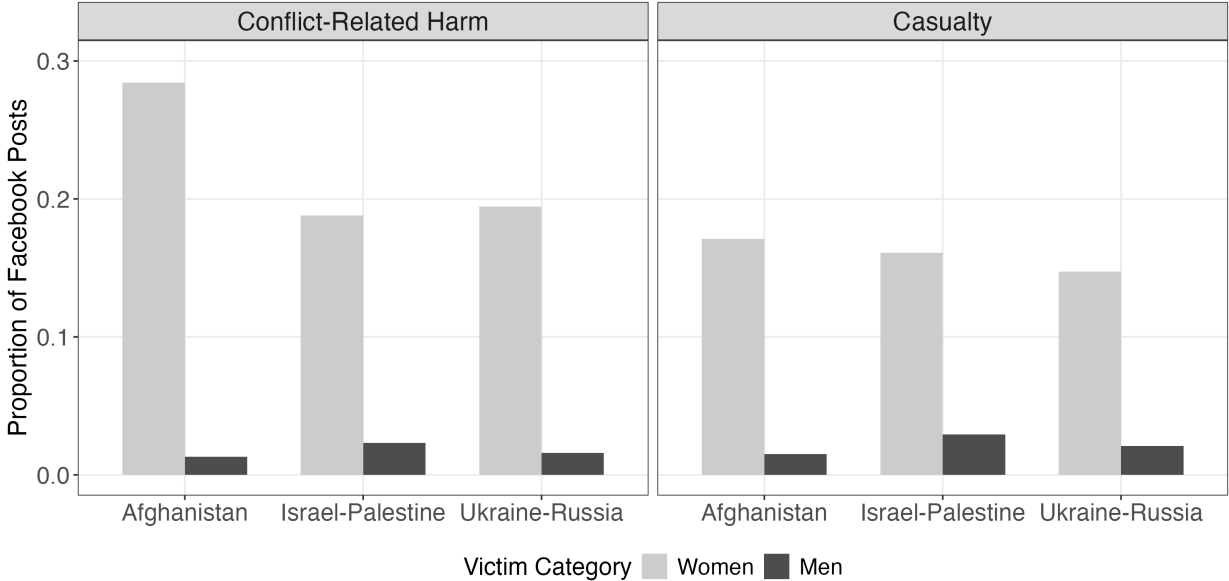
This study contributes to the expanding body of research on the influence of women's victimization on public opinion (Agerberg & Kreft, 2023) and women's political leadership in conflict-affected settings (D. M. Butler et al., 2023; Hadzic & Tavits, 2019, 2021; Tripp, 2015). While each has attracted increasing scholarly interest, their intersection remains underexplored. This study is among the first to examine this link within the domains of security and foreign policy, where women continue to face structural barriers to full inclusion.

More broadly, this research connects three well-established yet distinct literatures: the impact of women's conflict victimization (Benson & Gizelis, 2020; Carpenter, 2005; Johansson & Hultman, 2019; Kreft & Agerberg, 2024; Kreutz & Cardenas, 2017), the role of narrative framing (Bos et al., 2020; Kinder, 1998; Manekin & Wood, 2020; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Zaller, 1992), and attitudes toward women in politics (Bjarnegård, 2013; Clayton et al., 2019, 2020; Håkansson, 2021). By bringing these literatures together, this study demonstrates that portrayals of women's suffering in war, often assumed to be apolitical, carry significant political consequences for how global audiences evaluate women's leadership.

# GENDERED WAR VICTIMIZATION NARRATIVES

To assess whether narratives of women’s victimization have the potential to shape public attitudes, it is first necessary to determine how prominently they appear in media coverage. Given that roughly 70% of adults in the United States obtain news through social media, with Facebook serving as the primary platform for political information, posts from major news outlets offer a useful lens into the visibility of these narratives in everyday information environments (Levy, 2021; Liedke, 2023). I analyzed 15,413 Facebook posts published between March 2019 and March 2024 by 17 news outlets, focusing on coverage of three major global conflicts during this period: Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and Ukraine-Russia (Appendix A.2 provides detailed information on the coding process).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: Proportion of War Narratives by Victim Types



*Note:* This figure displays the proportion of Facebook posts that mention civilian *women* and *men* as victims within the context of major global conflicts. Posts were categorized according to whether they referenced *conflict-related harm*, a broad category that includes displacement, sexual violence, and loss of access to basic needs, or the more narrowly defined category of *casualty*, limited to death and injury.

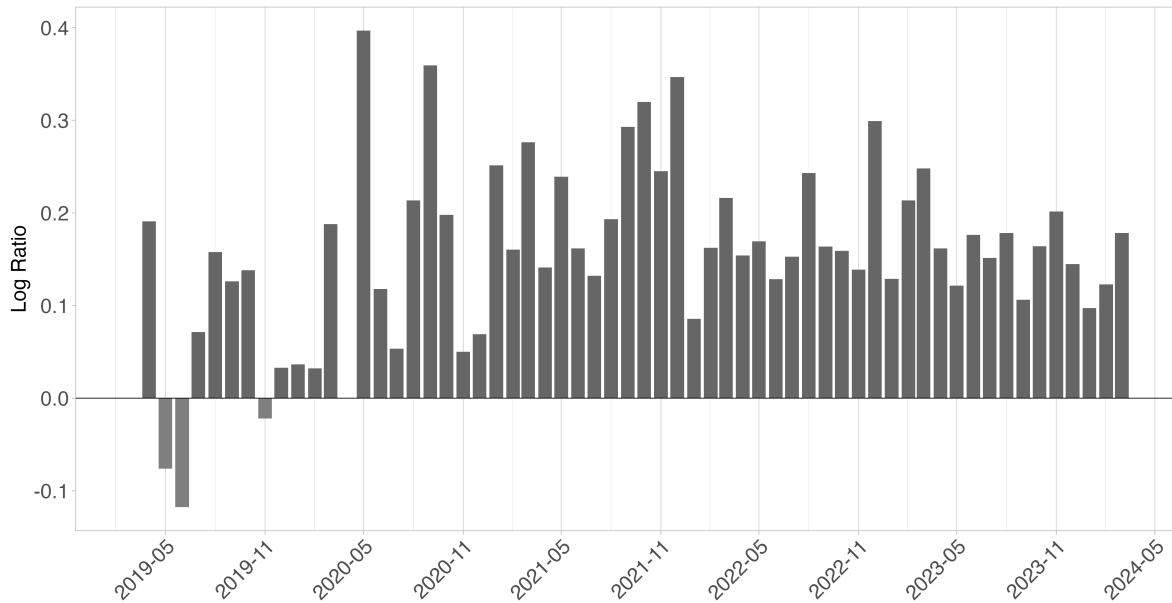
<sup>1</sup>News media included in this analysis are Bloomberg, CNET, Forbes, CBS, CNBC, NBC, NBC News, Fox News, MSN, CNN, New York Post, NPR, The New York Times, Yahoo, BuzzFeed, Reuters, and Huffington Post.

Figure 1 presents a descriptive overview of how civilian victimization is portrayed in media coverage. Women consistently receive media attention across all three conflict contexts, reflecting a recurring emphasis on their wartime suffering as a standard feature of news reporting. In posts about civilian death and injury, references to women are more than five times greater than those to men in conflicts in Israel-Palestine, over six times greater in Ukraine-Russia, and more than eleven times greater in Afghanistan. When the scope expands to include other forms of conflict-related harm such as displacement, sexual violence, and loss of access to basic needs, the disparity grows even larger, with posts about women exceeding those about men by eight, twelve, and twenty-one times in the respective conflicts.

The relative neglect of civilian men in media coverage is notable, given that men also experience substantial harm during war. As Kreft and Agerberg (2024) state, “men and boys are disproportionately affected by lethal violence, including massacres like those in Srebrenica, but also by (legal) forced conscription or (illegal) forced recruitment into nonstate armed groups, as recently observed in the Russian war against Ukraine” (p. 274). As posts referencing boys’ suffering were categorized under *men* during the coding process, the findings suggest that both men and boys are largely overlooked in media portrayals despite their extensive exposure to wartime violence.

Figure 2 plots the relative volume of posts about women’s and men’s wartime victimization over a five-year period, reaffirming the broader pattern of disproportionate focus on women’s suffering. The log ratio remains above zero throughout the period, indicating that the greater attention to women’s suffering reflects a sustained pattern rather than a temporary surge. As a robustness check, I replicated the analysis using a stricter definition of victimization that counts only posts explicitly referencing injury or death. The results remain unchanged, showing that women’s suffering continues to receive greater emphasis (see Appendix A.4).

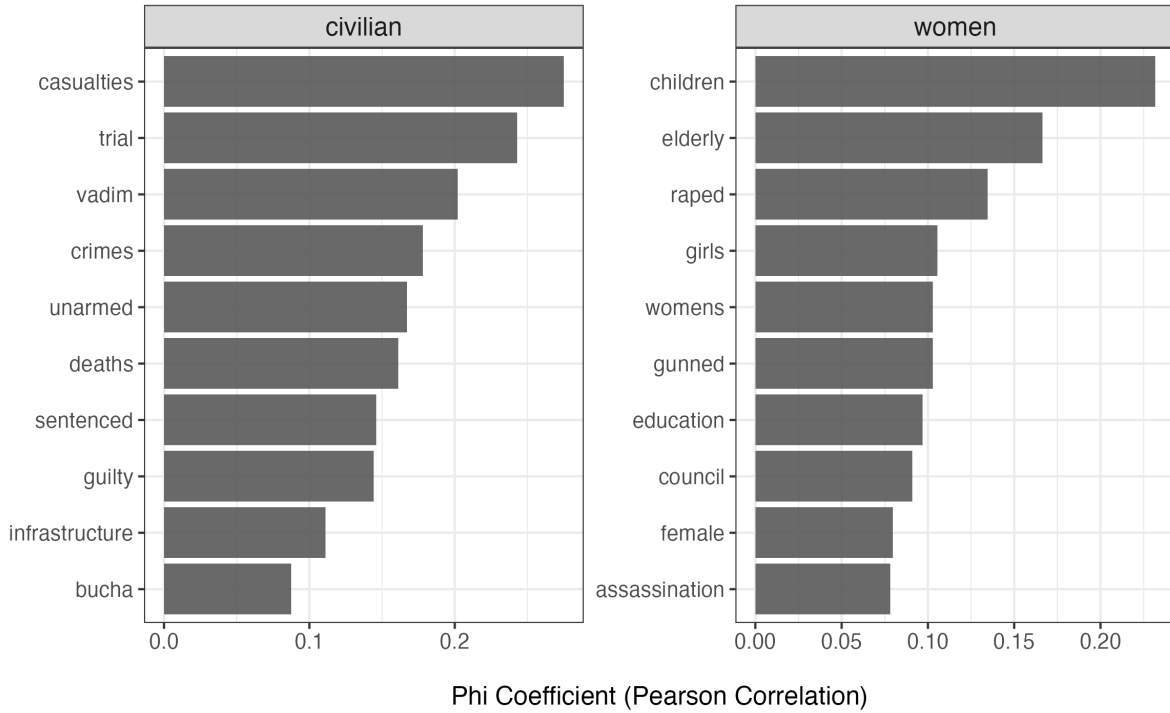
Figure 2: Log Ratio of Women Posts to Men Posts Across Time



*Note:* This figure presents the log ratio of Facebook posts mentioning women’s victimization compared to those mentioning men’s victimhood. For each month, the log ratio was calculated as the natural logarithm of the proportion of posts about women to posts about men.

I now turn to how references to women are constructed in contrast to the more general term *civilian*, which is commonly used in war reporting without explicit reference to gender. As shown in Figure 3, posts referencing civilians most often include terms such as *casualties* and *unarmed*, emphasizing the broad human cost of war. References to women, by contrast, frequently co-occur with *children*, *girls*, and *elderly*, framing women’s victimization through the lens of social vulnerability. In fact, more than half of the posts describing harm to women also mention children. In posts specifically about death or injury, this share rises to 60%. This suggests that women’s victimization is often framed through their connection to children, particularly in the most severe depictions of violence. In addition, the term *rape* appears among the words most strongly associated with women, revealing that portrayals of their suffering center on gender-specific forms of violence.

Figure 3: Pairwise Correlation in War Victimization Narratives



*Note:* This figure displays common word pairs that co-appear with *civilian* and *women* in Facebook posts. The analysis uses pairwise correlation, operationalizing the phi coefficient as a measure of associative strength between lexical features across posts. This metric captures whether two terms tend to appear in the same posts more frequently than expected by chance, based on their overall distribution across the corpus.

These framing patterns carry important implications for how audiences interpret gendered victimization. The association of women with other socially vulnerable groups may amplify benevolent sexism that depict women primarily as dependent and in need of paternalistic protection, constraining perceptions of their political agency. At the same time, the visibility of gendered harms such as sexual violence can bolster arguments for women’s political inclusion by portraying them as especially attentive to concerns that male leaders may overlook.<sup>2</sup> In the following section, I examine how these competing narratives shape public perceptions of women’s

<sup>2</sup>For readers interested in the comparison between agency and victimization narratives, Appendix A.5 presents this analysis and discusses how these different frames might influence public support for women’s political representation.

leadership potential.

## **EFFECT OF GENDERED VICTIMIZATION NARRATIVES ON PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL**

Media coverage plays a central role in shaping perceptions of women's roles, influencing both how women assess their own capacity to lead and how the public evaluates their political competence (Heilman et al., 2024; Schwartz & Blair, 2020; Simon & Hoyt, 2013). Much of this influence stems from portrayals of women not only in political office but across public life more generally (Cohen et al., 2021). Just as images of women succeeding in male dominated fields can enhance perceptions of their competence, portrayals of women as victims may shape how the public interprets their broader roles and abilities. This study draws on two theoretical perspectives to explain how narratives of women's wartime experiences might expand or constrain support for their political representation.

### **Positive pathway: Narratives on women's victimization increase support for women's political leadership**

One set of research suggests that highlighting women's victimization may increase support for women's political leadership. Studies show that women's wartime suffering elicits stronger responses than other forms of harm. Armed conflicts marked by widespread sexual violence are more likely to trigger appeals to protection norms (Benson & Gizelis, 2020; Johansson & Hultman, 2019), and both the United Nations and regional organizations are more inclined to authorize peacekeeping deployments when reports of sexual violence increase (Kreutz & Cardenas, 2017). Similar patterns appear in high level deliberations. The UN Security Council is more likely to foreground women's protection in peace operation mandates when sexual violence is especially salient (Benson & Gizelis, 2020; Kreft, 2017). By making the human costs of war more vivid and

emotionally compelling, media portrayals of women's suffering can heighten public support for peace and reconciliation (Martikainen & Sakki, 2024). This may, in turn, strengthen support for women's leadership, given the common association of women with peacemaking and conflict resolution (Barnes & O'Brien, 2018).

Furthermore, the distinct forms of violence women experience during conflict can reinforce the belief that their suffering requires targeted policy responses. This perspective aligns with arguments for descriptive and substantive representation, which emphasize the importance of including women in decision-making roles based on shared identity and lived experience. In this view, women are often seen as particularly well-equipped to address gendered harms in conflict settings because they are understood to have firsthand insight into these challenges (Agerberg & Kreft, 2020; Lawless, 2015; Schneider & Bos, 2019). As a result, increased awareness of women's conflict experiences may raise the perceived value of including women in conflict resolution, humanitarian response, and post-conflict reconstruction, where their involvement is seen as essential for developing effective responses to gendered violence (Tripp, 2015).

Finally, violence against women in conflict can generate broader demands for gender equality by exposing how gender hierarchies shape every stage of war. Women are excluded from decisions to initiate conflict (Forsberg & Olsson, 2016), subjected to sexual violence during fighting (Cohen, 2016), and later marginalized in reconstruction processes that overlook their needs (Almagro & Schulz, 2022). Confronted with these patterns of exclusion, women have mobilized in many contexts of civil war and institutional collapse to demand structural reform and greater political inclusion (Baines, 2015; Bakken & Buhaug, 2021; Berry, 2018; Kreft & Schulz, 2022; J. Zulver & Stallone, 2025). As Kreft (2019) shows, sexual violence by insurgent and state forces can act as a catalyst for collective action, prompting women to organize protests that call for systemic change. Highlighting women's wartime suffering may therefore strengthen the argument that women's leadership is necessary not only for addressing the harms they disproportionately bear but also for advancing broader efforts toward gender equality.

**Hypothesis 1:** War narratives depicting women's victimization *increase* support for

women's political leadership.

### **Negative pathway: Narratives on women's victimization decrease support for women's political leadership**

On the other hand, an alternative body of research suggests that emphasizing women's victimization can diminish support for women's political leadership. In conflict environments, pervasive insecurity often strengthens gender stereotypes that privilege male leadership in matters of security (Bhatia & Monroe, 2023; Glaurdić & Lesschaeve, 2023; Holman et al., 2016). A substantial literature documents a pro-male bias during periods of heightened threat, when citizens associate traits such as strength and decisiveness with men and view them as better equipped to manage national security crises (Holman et al., 2011, 2022; Lawless, 2004). Importantly, merely directing people to think about security in experimental settings reduces support for leadership traits stereotypically associated with women, even in the absence of any immediate threat (Holman et al., 2016; Lawless, 2004). This suggests that media portrayals of women in war can strengthen the association between femininity and vulnerability among international audiences, both through explicit accounts of violence and through the broader conflict narratives they circulate.

Emphasizing women's victimhood may also reinforce existing gender norms that portray women as dependent on men's protection. Glick and Fiske (1996) describe this protective paternalism as "benevolent sexism," a form of gender bias grounded in affection and a perceived duty to shield women from harm. Although paternalistic protectionism casts women as valued and in need of care, it also sustains beliefs that women are low in competence in traditionally masculine domains (Bracic et al., 2019; Hideg & Ferris, 2016).

The frequent rhetorical pairing of 'women' with 'children' in media narratives (Enloe, 2014) amplifies this dynamic. Depictions that present women alongside children as shared victims reduce perceptions of women's agency and obscure their roles as protectors or autonomous actors. This framing draws on longstanding gendered assumptions historically used to justify women's exclusion from decision-making roles (Carpenter, 2005). Even when they are not portrayed as

direct victims, women are often depicted in relational roles shaped by caregiving responsibilities. Images of grieving mothers or children mourning maternal loss convey the idea that women's suffering is inseparable from their maternal identity. These portrayals, in turn, restrict how the public views women's capacity to exercise political power and authority (Tiessen, 2015; Young, 2003).

**Hypothesis 2:** War narratives depicting women's victimization *decrease* support for women's political leadership.

Viewed together, these two pathways suggest that depicting women as victims can generate moral urgency for their political inclusion while also reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability that weaken public confidence in their leadership. As a result, narratives of women's victimization may shape support for women's political leadership, but theory offers competing expectations about the direction of this effect.

## **Women's leadership in national security and peacebuilding**

Having examined whether victimhood narratives influence support for women's leadership in general, I now turn to whether this effect varies across specific domains of security leadership. I focus on two areas where women remain significantly underrepresented despite recent political gains: national security and peacebuilding. These domains are theoretically distinct, both in the kinds of leadership they demand and in the gendered expectations they tend to activate.

National security leadership is associated with roles culturally coded as masculine, including military strength, strategic deterrence, and defense policymaking. Women in these positions frequently face heightened scrutiny and stereotype-based evaluations, especially during periods of conflict. This makes it plausible that narratives emphasizing women's victimhood could further depress support for their leadership in a domain so closely linked to masculinity (Barnes & O'Brien, 2018; Humayun, 2025; Itzkovitch-Malka, 2024). At the same time, the very fact that this domain has long restricted women's access may strengthen arguments for expanding their

representation. This leads to the following expectation:

**Sub-Hypothesis 1:** War narratives depicting women's victimization influence public perceptions of women's leadership capabilities in national security roles.

In contrast to national security, peacebuilding involves negotiation, civilian protection, and post-conflict recovery. Although women have long been excluded from these processes, their participation has been shown to produce more inclusive and effective outcomes (Almagro & Schulz, 2022; Forsberg & Olsson, 2016). Narratives emphasizing women's victimization may heighten the perceived moral imperative for their inclusion, especially when the public views women as better equipped to address the suffering of vulnerable populations. These perceptions align with a widespread stereotype of women leaders as more pacifist than men, less inclined to rely on military force, and more oriented toward peacebuilding than militarization (Bendix & Jeong, 2020; Schwartz & Blair, 2020). This leads to the second sub-hypothesis:

**Sub-Hypothesis 2:** War narratives depicting women's victimization influence support for women's inclusion in peacebuilding roles.

## **EMPIRICAL STRATEGY**

To test these hypotheses, I conducted an original pre-registered survey experiment in the United States (N = 995). An experimental design addresses a central challenge in observational research on this topic, which is the confounding of women's victimization with broader patterns of civilian war damage. Because information about violence against women is typically embedded within reports of overall civilian casualties, observational data cannot easily disentangle whether public reactions arise from general exposure to wartime destruction or from specific concern about harm to women. By using an experimental design, I isolate the causal effect of women's victimization through a placebo vignette in which the control group receives information about harm to a civilian subject without reference to gender.

The impact of wartime violence against women extends well beyond the boundaries of conflict zones. As Agerberg and Kreft (2023) argue, women’s victimization can shape public opinion in Western democracies through widespread media coverage, public discourse, and social media campaigns featuring celebrities. This phenomenon is especially salient in the United States, where sustained engagement in major global conflicts has made foreign policy a central feature of domestic political debate (Harris et al., 2023; Hubbard, 2024). These factors make the U.S. an important setting for examining how narratives of women’s wartime victimization influence public attitudes.

I conducted the experiment online in August 2024 with a sample of 1,000 participants recruited through Prolific.<sup>3</sup> After completing demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition. The treatment group received a vignette adapted from a 2024 UN Women report and contemporary news coverage describing women’s victimization in conflict settings, dated November 20, 2023, and March 27, 2024.<sup>4</sup> The vignette reads as follows:<sup>5</sup>

**Women and Children Suffering in the Israel-Palestine War:**<sup>6</sup> The outbreak of the Israel-Palestine war in 2023 has witnessed widespread violence against women on both sides of the conflict. More than 17,000 Palestinian women or children have been killed in the Gaza Strip, making up 70 percent of the casualties since 7 October 2023. Nearly 1 million women and girls have been displaced, and the entire population of Gaza is in crisis levels of acute food insecurity or worse. Severe violence against women also occurred at several locations during the Oct. 7 Hamas-led attack, a team

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<sup>3</sup>Although Prolific prescreens respondents to include only individuals residing in the United States, I added a JavaScript based bot detection protocol at the start of the survey to block users attempting to access the study through VPNs from outside the country.

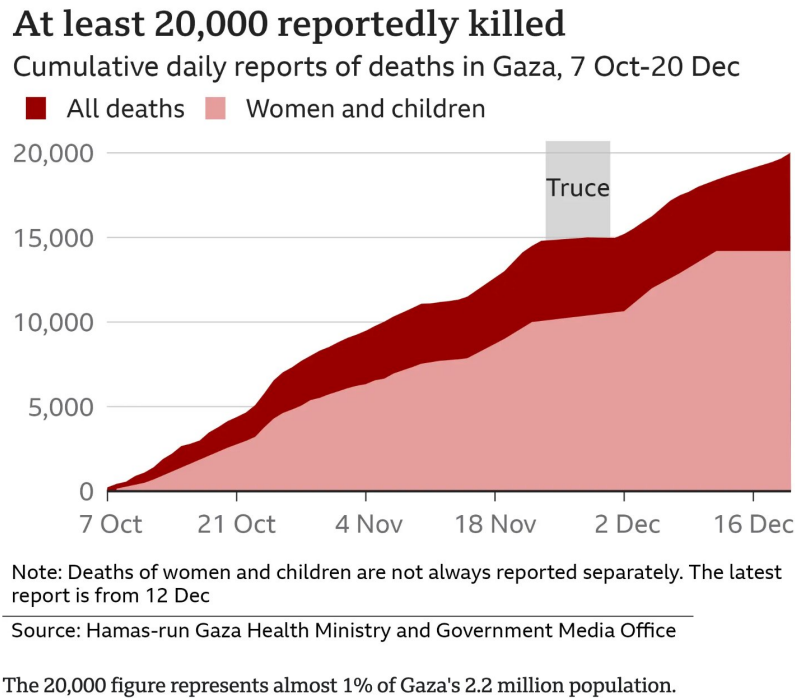
<sup>4</sup><https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/01/gender-alert-the-gendered-impact-of-the-crisis-in-gaza>, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/israel-hostages-hamas-explained.html>, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68673960.amp>

<sup>5</sup>Reports of CRSV are omitted from the vignette, as this experiment aims to examine whether audience responses vary based on the victim’s gender rather than the specific nature of the violence.

<sup>6</sup>I selected the Israel-Palestine conflict as the vignette, as it has been receiving substantial media and public attention in the United States. While not all global conflicts garner the same level of focus from the American public, the U.S.’s involvement in major global wars makes the findings of this study to offer insights into how awareness of women’s wartime suffering in highly visible conflicts can influence public perceptions of women’s leadership in the U.S.

of United Nations experts reported. Israeli officials say that over 105 hostages taken were women and children, and about 1,200 people were killed on Oct. 7.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 4: Treatment image



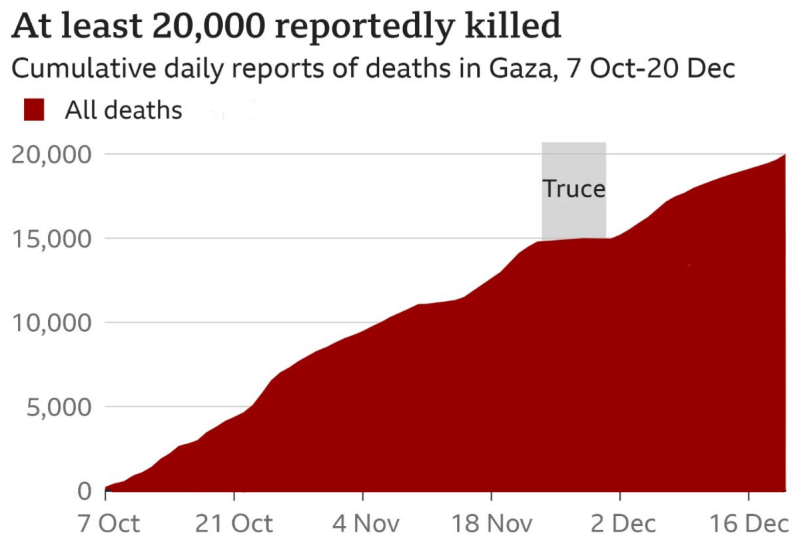
Given that exposure to information about war casualties or pre existing attitudes toward conflict could influence the outcome, the control group received a placebo vignette. Participants in this group were shown the same text as those in the treatment condition, with all references to women’s victimization removed. Instead, the vignette described harm to civilians more generally:

**Civilians Suffering in the Israel-Palestine War:** The outbreak of the Israel-Palestine war in 2023 has witnessed widespread violence against civilians on both sides of the conflict. More than 24,620 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip since 7 October 2023. Nearly 1.9 million civilians have been displaced, and the entire population

<sup>7</sup>This bundle treatment of “women and children” could increase the treatment effect. However, women and children are frequently linked together in real-world casualty reports, and it is precisely such framing of equating the two that facilitates “viewing women as not fully competent adults” (Cohen et al., 2021; p. 653). I deliberately chose to implement the bundled treatment despite the risk of bias, as isolating women alone would limit external validity.

of Gaza is in crisis levels of acute food insecurity or worse. Severe violence against civilians also occurred at several locations during the Oct. 7 Hamas-led attack, a team of United Nations experts reported. Israeli officials say that 240 hostages were taken, and about 1,200 people were killed on Oct. 7.

Figure 5: Control image



Source: Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry and Government Media Office

The 20,000 figure represents almost 1% of Gaza's 2.2 million population.

To further prime (or not prime) women's victimization, I coupled each vignette with visualized statistics. The treatment group received a graph illustrating the cumulative number of deaths in Gaza, with a breakdown highlighting the proportion of women and children among the casualties (Figure 4). Respondents in the control condition viewed an otherwise identical graph that reports only the total number of deaths without demographic disaggregation (Figure 5).<sup>8</sup> Survey participants viewed the original image with the BBC logo intact, although the logo has

<sup>8</sup>The treatment image is based on an original BBC visualization, and the control graph is digitally edited from this image by removing the demographic breakdown while preserving the total death count and overall layout. The information is drawn from actual data reported in UN sources and news coverage; the only modification is the omission of references to women in the control condition.

been removed from the version reproduced here for copyright reasons.<sup>9</sup> After exposure to the vignette and graph, respondents completed a series of questions on their views regarding women’s political representation.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of interest is support for women’s leadership. To measure these attitudes, I examine two domains of security leadership: peacebuilding and militarized national security. The *Peace Process* index captures support for women’s political representation in peacebuilding by averaging two items that ask whether women should be included in political decision making during active conflict and in post-conflict negotiations. Both items are measured on a six-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement and 6 indicates strong agreement. The *National Security* index averages three items that assess support for women’s leadership in militarized settings: perceptions of their ability to lead during wartime, their suitability to serve as Secretary of Defense, and confidence in their capacity to address national security threats. The first two items are measured on a six-point agreement scale, while the item on managing national security uses a five-point scale with a midpoint indicating that men and women are equally capable. All items were rescaled to a 0–1 range prior to index construction to ensure comparability across outcomes. Both indices exhibit high internal consistency, with standardized Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.82 for *Peace Process* and 0.95 for *National Security*.

## RESULTS

The main analysis includes 995 participants out of 1,000 recruited individuals who successfully passed the pre-treatment attention check.<sup>11</sup> The sample is nationally representative of the United States population with respect to age, sex, and political affiliation (see Table 1 in Appendix B.1

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<sup>9</sup>The presence of the BBC logo in the original stimulus may have influenced respondents’ perceptions of the information, for example by affecting trust in the reported figures. The original article is available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67764664>.

<sup>10</sup>It is possible that respondents may skip the rest of the paragraph upon first reading the casualty reports on Gaza given the partisan associations with the Israel-Palestine War in the United States. I randomize the order of news regarding Gaza and the Hamas-led attack to address the concern. Appendix B Table 6 demonstrates that the differences between the two versions of the vignettes across main outcome variables are not statistically significant.

<sup>11</sup>The pre analysis plan registered additional hypotheses, but this paper focuses on those related to perceptions of women’s leadership. The remaining hypotheses are reserved for future studies.

for detailed sample statistics). Demographic characteristics are well balanced across the treatment and control groups, indicating that randomization was successful (Table 2 in Appendix B.2). Although sociodemographic covariates are included in the main models to improve estimation precision, the results are substantively unchanged when these covariates are omitted (Table 5 in Appendix B.7).

## Perception on Women’s Political Leadership

I fit the following OLS regression:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i$$

where  $Y_i$  refers to the post-treatment outcome of interest for individual  $i$ ,  $T_i$  indicates treatment assignment, and the estimated  $\beta$  captures the effect of being exposed to information about women’s victimization. The term  $X$  refers to a vector of individual-level control variables,<sup>12</sup> and  $\epsilon_i$  is an error term.

Before examining treatment effects, I first outline baseline levels of support for women’s leadership. In the control condition, the average score on the *Peace Process* index was 0.69 (SD = 0.31), and the average on the *National Security* index was 0.56 (SD = 0.23). Because both indices are scaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating stronger agreement with women’s inclusion in politics, these values suggest a moderately high level of support for women’s involvement in conflict and post-conflict negotiations, alongside a more reserved view of their leadership in national security and defense.<sup>13</sup> Although the variables are approximately normally distributed, some show evidence of heteroskedasticity. To account for this, all models are estimated with

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<sup>12</sup>In addition to key demographic variables such as age, sex, ethnicity, and education, I control for party identification and Jewish identity. Among the sample, 37.8% of respondents identified as independents and were subsequently asked whether they lean more toward the Democratic or Republican Party. For the main analysis, independents who expressed a partisan leaning were grouped with the corresponding party. As shown in Table 8, Appendix B, the results remain consistent in both direction and statistical significance when using an alternative model specification that treats party identification as a factor with three levels (Democrat, Republican, and Independent) instead of a binary Democrat control.

<sup>13</sup>For full sample descriptive statistics, see Table 3 in Appendix B.5.

heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

Table 1 presents the regression results across two composite indices and their constituent items. The *Peace Process* index captures support for women’s inclusion in political roles in conflict-affected regions and post-conflict negotiations. The *National Security* index reflects perceptions of women’s capacity to contribute to domains traditionally associated with militarism and hard security. The five columns that follow present the individual items underlying each index. *During Conflict* and *Post-Conflict* correspond to the *Peace Process* index, and *Strong Leadership*, *Secretary D.*, and *Handle Security* constitute the *National Security* index.

Column (1) shows that exposure to women’s victimization narratives significantly increases support for women’s leadership in peace processes. Exposure to the gendered narrative increases the predicted index score by 0.058 points on the 0-1 scale, rising from 0.693 (95% CI: [0.669, 0.716]) in the control condition to 0.751 [0.729, 0.772] in the treatment condition ( $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>14</sup> Descriptively, 78.5% of respondents in the treatment group agreed that women’s inclusion in politics is important in regions experiencing conflict, compared to 69.3% in the control group. The proportion agreeing that women should be included in post-conflict negotiations was 81.9% under the treatment, compared to 72.8% under the control.

This pattern holds when the two components of the index are examined separately. For the item measuring support for including women in politics during conflict, exposure to the gendered narrative increases the predicted score on the 0-1 scale by 0.061 points, from 0.681 [0.656, 0.706] under control to 0.742 [0.719, 0.765] under treatment ( $p < 0.001$ ). For the item measuring support for women’s inclusion in post-conflict negotiations, predicted scores increase by 0.055 points, from 0.704 [0.681, 0.728] to 0.759 [0.737, 0.781] ( $p < 0.001$ ).

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<sup>14</sup>On the original six-point scale from which these items were normalized, this corresponds to an increase of approximately 0.29 scale points. A table showing predicted scores can be found in Appendix B.6.

Table 1: The Effect of Women's Victimization Narrative

	Peace Process	National Security	During Conflict	Post-Conflict	Strong Leader	Secretary D.	Handle Security
Treatment	0.058*** (0.016)	-0.005 (0.012)	0.061*** (0.017)	0.055*** (0.016)	-0.028+ (0.016)	0.004 (0.015)	0.011 (0.012)
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001+ (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Women	0.103*** (0.017)	0.063*** (0.012)	0.109*** (0.018)	0.097*** (0.017)	0.021 (0.016)	0.100*** (0.016)	0.068*** (0.012)
Education (Low)	-0.115*** (0.029)	-0.065** (0.022)	-0.114*** (0.030)	-0.116*** (0.028)	-0.030 (0.027)	-0.074** (0.028)	-0.091*** (0.020)
Education (Medium)	-0.029 (0.018)	-0.019 (0.013)	-0.030 (0.019)	-0.028 (0.018)	-0.035* (0.017)	-0.003 (0.017)	-0.019 (0.013)
Democrat	0.301*** (0.017)	0.211*** (0.013)	0.306*** (0.018)	0.295*** (0.017)	0.200*** (0.016)	0.256*** (0.016)	0.178*** (0.013)
White	0.033 (0.041)	0.051* (0.024)	0.039 (0.043)	0.027 (0.042)	0.032 (0.036)	0.087** (0.030)	0.034 (0.027)
Hispanic	0.024 (0.042)	0.037 (0.023)	0.038 (0.042)	0.011 (0.044)	0.007 (0.035)	0.063* (0.029)	0.042+ (0.025)
Black	-0.049 (0.043)	-0.002 (0.028)	-0.037 (0.045)	-0.060 (0.044)	0.011 (0.041)	0.041 (0.034)	-0.059* (0.030)
Asian	0.003 (0.050)	-0.018 (0.028)	0.015 (0.055)	-0.010 (0.049)	-0.052 (0.042)	-0.011 (0.035)	0.007 (0.031)
Jewish	0.009 (0.045)	-0.013 (0.035)	0.008 (0.049)	0.010 (0.048)	-0.027 (0.044)	0.020 (0.048)	-0.031 (0.034)
Num.Obs.	989	989	989	989	989	989	989
R2	0.294	0.265	0.279	0.280	0.146	0.256	0.227

Signif. Codes: + $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,

Note: The first row reports results for the two composite indices used to assess the effect of treatment, and the five rows that follow present the individual items comprising each index. Table entries include unstandardized OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

The results for both the composite index and its individual items provide clear evidence that exposure to war narratives depicting women's victimization shapes attitudes toward women's political leadership. The main hypotheses were grounded in competing expectations, allowing for the possibility that such narratives could either increase support by eliciting empathy or moral obligation or decrease it by reinforcing perceptions of women as vulnerable or lacking authority. The findings resolve this tension as the treatment consistently increases support for women's inclusion in peace processes. This pattern also affirms Sub-Hypothesis 1, which similarly proposed that gendered portrayals of wartime suffering would influence perceptions of women's leadership during peace processes. Here as well, the data show a positive effect. Rather than diminishing perceptions of women's political capability, exposure to women's victimization appears to strengthen their perceived importance in security domains tied to conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

However, gendered victimization narratives have no statistically significant effect on support for women's representation in security leadership roles associated with traditional militarism. As shown in Table 1, Column (2), the estimated treatment effect on the National Security index is not statistically significant ( $p = 0.704$ ). Predicted support under the control condition is 0.567 [0.550, 0.583], compared to 0.562 [0.546, 0.578] under treatment, representing a difference of  $-0.005$  on the normalized 0–1 scale with overlapping confidence intervals. These results do not support Sub-Hypothesis 2, which posited that gendered victimization narratives would shape perceptions of women's leadership in national security domains.

The individual items that make up the index likewise show no statistically significant effects. As shown in Column (5), exposure to narratives of women's victimization is associated with a modest decline in predicted support for women's strong leadership during wartime, from 0.568 [0.547, 0.589] under control to 0.540 [0.518, 0.563] under treatment ( $p = 0.074$ ). Similar patterns appear in the items assessing whether a woman could serve effectively as Secretary of Defense (Column 6) and whether women can handle national security matters (Column 7). In both cases, the differences between the treatment and control groups are statistically indistinguishable ( $p =$

0.794 and  $p = 0.382$ , respectively).<sup>15</sup>

Viewed alongside the positive effects observed in the *Peace Process* index, the results reveal an asymmetry in how gendered victimization narratives shape support for women's leadership across domains. Exposure to women's wartime suffering increases backing for their inclusion in peacebuilding and post-conflict roles, but it does not affect perceptions of women's leadership in militarized areas of security.<sup>16</sup> With these findings in mind, I now turn to the mechanisms that explain why gendered victimization narratives generate support in some leadership domains but not others.

## MECHANISMS

I examine two potential mechanisms that may account for the observed effects of women's victimization narratives on support for women's leadership. First, I consider whether benevolent sexism acts as a barrier to support for women's leadership in national security domains. Second, I assess whether beliefs about descriptive and substantive representation explain increased support for women's inclusion in peace processes. Both analyses are exploratory and offer suggestive rather than definitive evidence about the pathways through which narratives of women's wartime suffering shape public attitudes.

### Benevolent Sexism

The first mechanism addresses why support for women's leadership did not extend to militarized national security domains. One possible explanation is that framing women primarily as victims activates beliefs associated with benevolent sexism, which can suppress support for their leadership in traditionally masculine domains. To assess the role of benevolent sexism in shaping attitudes toward women's leadership, I asked respondents how much they agree that men need

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<sup>15</sup>For further discussion of the validity of averaging these three items into a single index, see Appendix B.3.

<sup>16</sup>As a robustness check, Appendix B.11 presents a parallel set of results using ordered probit models with robust standard errors. For analyses of heterogeneous treatment effects by gender and partisanship, see Appendix B.9.

to protect women (Schaffner, 2022). Responses of “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” and “somewhat disagree” were coded as 0, and “somewhat agree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree” were coded as 1 to create a binary measure of *Benevolent Sexism*. Using the same regression specification, I estimated whether exposure to women’s victimhood increases endorsement of this belief. Respondents exposed to the gendered narrative were significantly more likely to endorse benevolent sexist views. Predicted endorsement increased from 0.726 [0.688, 0.764] in the control group to 0.814 [0.781, 0.847] in the treatment group, reflecting an 8.8 percentage-point shift ( $p < 0.001$ ).

If benevolent sexism constrains support for women’s leadership in militarized domains, the positive effects of victimization narratives should be most apparent among those least susceptible to such beliefs. Consistent with this pattern, women’s victimization narratives increase support not only for peace processes but also for national security leadership among individuals who reject benevolent sexism. Among respondents who disagree that men should protect women, exposure to the gendered narrative increases predicted support for women’s inclusion in peace processes by 0.102 on the 0-1 scale, which is nearly twice the average treatment effect. In this subgroup, exposure also increases support for women’s leadership in national security domains ( $\beta = 0.044, p = 0.017$ ).<sup>17</sup>

To provide additional descriptive evidence on the effect of benevolent sexism, I conducted a mediation analysis using 1,000 bootstrap simulations.<sup>18</sup> The estimated Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACME) visualized in Figure 6 indicate that benevolent sexism indeed serves as a significant mediator, diminishing the positive impact of exposure to women’s victimization on beliefs about both women’s representation in peace processes and national security issues.

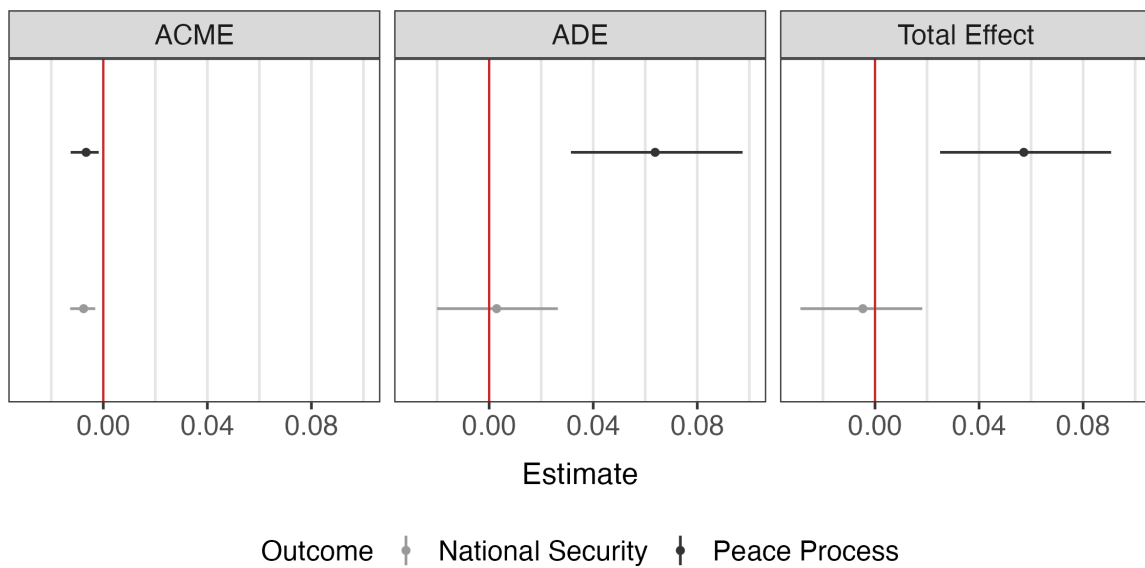
The findings on benevolent sexism do not imply that eliminating it would necessarily have produced a significant positive shift in support for women’s leadership in militarized security roles. Instead, the results point to two broader insights. First, absent the rise in benevolent sexism, support for women’s inclusion in peace processes would likely have been even stronger. Second,

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<sup>17</sup>Compared to those who endorse benevolent sexism, individuals who reject it are more likely to be women, have higher levels of education, and identify as Democrats.

<sup>18</sup>Sensitivity analyses assessing the robustness of these mediation effects to potential unobserved confounding are presented in Appendix [B.10](#)

Figure 6: Mediation Analysis: The Effect of Benevolent Sexism



*Note:* The three figures present the point estimates and 95% credible intervals from a mediation analysis based on 1,000 bootstrap simulations. The first figure on the left displays the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME), which represents the portion of the total effect mediated by the mediator variable. The second figure in the middle shows the Average Direct Effect (ADE), capturing the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable that is not mediated by the mediator. The third figure on the right illustrates the total effect, which is the sum of the ACME and ADE.

a similar pattern appears in assessments of women’s leadership in traditional national security roles, where support may have been higher had benevolent sexism not exerted a countervailing influence. Taken together, these patterns indicate that benevolent sexism remains a substantial barrier to expanding women’s authority in security settings. The next section examines a second factor that may help account for the pronounced rise in support for women’s leadership in peace processes.

## **Descriptive and Substantive Representation**

One reason women’s victimization narratives increase support for women’s political representation may be their association with both descriptive and substantive representation. Voters often believe that women in office are more likely to address issues affecting women and view such institutions as more responsive and effective (Clayton et al., 2019, 2023; Stauffer, 2021). Building on this research, I examine whether the belief that women are better equipped to address gendered harms contributes to greater support for their inclusion in politics.

I asked participants whether they believed male or female politicians are better suited to address violence against civilians during armed conflicts. Response options were “men,” “women,” or “no difference.” Respondents were then asked to estimate what percentage of civilian casualties are women and children using a slider from 0 to 100, which served as a manipulation check. Participants in the treatment group reported a significantly higher estimated proportion of women and children among civilian casualties, confirming that the treatment was successfully administered and perceived as intended (see Figure 2 in Appendix B.4).

If support for women’s representation reflects the belief that women are better equipped to address gendered wartime suffering, we should observe a positive relationship between respondents’ estimates of the share of civilian casualties who are women and children and their preference for women politicians to manage civilian violence. This is because respondents who perceive women and children as the primary victims of conflict are more likely to interpret questions about civilian violence as speaking directly to women’s and children’s needs, and consequently to favor

women politicians as better suited to confront the harms women and children disproportionately bear.

I find suggestive evidence supporting this explanation. Respondents who estimate that women and children constitute more than half of civilian casualties exhibit significantly higher predicted agreement that women are better suited to managing civilian violence (0.474, 95%CI [0.452, 0.496]) compared to those who estimate the share as half or less (0.403, 95%CI [0.366, 0.440];  $p = 0.001$ ). Exposure to the women's victimization narrative also increases the predicted belief that women are better suited to managing civilian violence, from 0.438 ([0.412, 0.464]) under the civilian victimization condition to 0.472 ([0.445, 0.498]), with the estimate falling just short of conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p = 0.076$ ). Taken together, these patterns suggest that when wartime suffering is perceived as disproportionately borne by women and children, respondents are more inclined to view women politicians as particularly well-positioned to address civilian violence.

The mediation analysis offers further evidence that part of the treatment's influence on beliefs about women's capacity to address civilian violence operates through shifts in participants' estimates of the proportion of women and children among civilian casualties. The estimated ACME is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.017, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that exposure to women's victimization narratives increases respondents' perceptions of how many civilian victims are women and children, which in turn elevates support for women's ability to manage civilian violence. The direct effect of the treatment, after accounting for this mediator, is not statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.015, p = 0.444$ ), suggesting that much of the overall effect may operate through this channel.<sup>19</sup> Taken together, the results provide suggestive evidence that perceptions of women's vulnerability in war contribute to support for their representation in peace processes.

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<sup>19</sup>Mediation analyses can illuminate potential mechanisms, but they rely on strong assumptions, including sequential ignorability and the absence of omitted variable bias. These findings should therefore be interpreted with caution and understood as descriptive rather than definitive.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While extensive research has documented the profound effects of war on women (Almagro & Schulz, 2022; Balcells & Stanton, 2021; C. K. Butler et al., 2007; Cohen & Karim, 2022; Reiter, 2015; Wood, 2009), far less attention has been given to how public discussions of these gendered experiences shape attitudes toward women's political leadership. This study is among the first to show that highlighting women's wartime victimization influences perceptions of their leadership potential in security and foreign policy—domains in which women remain significantly underrepresented despite broader gains in political participation. The results demonstrate that awareness of women's wartime suffering increases support for their inclusion in peace processes but does not meaningfully shift views about their leadership in militarized areas of national security. Exploratory analyses suggest that narratives of women's suffering strengthen the perceived importance of their descriptive and substantive representation, yet also reinforce beliefs that women require protection from men. This protective framing activates stereotypes that women lack the competence associated with hard security roles, which helps explain why increased support for women's leadership in peacebuilding does not extend to traditionally masculine domains of national defense.

What do these findings imply for efforts to advance women's leadership in security? Prior expectations pointed in opposite directions: victimization narratives could broaden support for women's representation by presenting women as especially responsive to civilian suffering, or they could reinforce paternalistic attitudes that undermine perceptions of women's authority. The results point to a more nuanced outcome. Narratives emphasizing women's wartime suffering increase support for their participation in peacebuilding, yet leave evaluations of their leadership in militarized security largely unchanged. Even so, the absence of any negative effect is noteworthy. Exposure to these narratives does not diminish support for women in traditionally male-dominated security roles, and the overall pattern is consistent with a gradual shift toward viewing women as legitimate political actors whose involvement is seen as essential to post-conflict recovery.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the impact of narratives about women's victimization may be stronger in contexts where women are actively participating in ongoing conflicts. High-intensity violence has created openings for women's collective action and increased demands for political representation in response to insecurity (Agerberg & Kreft, 2020; Bakken & Buhaug, 2021; J. M. Zulver, 2021). In some settings, women have also taken on visible combat roles, which may lead the public to view their leadership potential through a lens of agency and resilience rather than vulnerability. In these cases, perceptions of women's political leadership may be shaped by recognition of their direct involvement in conflict and their capacity to confront violence themselves. Although ethical constraints prevent conducting this study in active war zones, future research could replicate this design in conflict and post-conflict environments to assess whether the patterns observed here hold in different settings.

The evaluation of women's leadership potential is also likely to differ across societies with varying levels of openness to women's political inclusion. In contexts with more egalitarian gender attitudes and weaker stereotypes, narratives highlighting women's suffering may increase support for their leadership not only in peace processes but also in national security. In more conservative settings, by contrast, support for women's participation in peacebuilding may remain limited regardless of exposure to narratives about wartime victimization. These possibilities point to the importance of examining how the effects identified in this study may vary across diverse social and political environments, shaped by cross-national differences in gender norms, conflict experiences, and public acceptance of women in security roles.

Finally, several avenues remain for future research. The Facebook data that motivated this study showed that only about 2.3% of sampled posts depicted women as combatants, while the vast majority portrayed them as civilians. Because depictions of women in armed roles were so limited, this study concentrated on narratives of victimization and their influence on public perceptions. Future work should examine how framing women as combatants rather than solely as victims shapes attitudes toward political leadership and civilian harm. Additionally, broadening the analysis to include other forms of political engagement and examining the impact of men's

victimization would offer important directions for further inquiry.

The findings of this study align with global initiatives to expand women's participation in peacebuilding. Since the unanimous adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325, the United Nations has emphasized increasing women's involvement in mediation and peace negotiations, preventing violence against women, and addressing women's needs in post-conflict recovery (Newby & Sebag, 2021). The results of this study indicate that highlighting women's wartime experiences—a central effort of UN Women—can strengthen public support for the UN gender mainstreaming agenda by increasing demand for women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes. Expanding support for women's leadership in militarized security roles, however, will require additional long-term effort, including institutional reforms, greater representation of women within the security sector, and broader societal movement toward gender-egalitarian norms.

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## **Competing interests**

The author declares no competing interests related to this work.

## **Data availability statement**

The dataset, codebook, and R-files for the empirical analysis in this article, along with the Online Appendix, are available at <https://www.prio.org/journals/jpr/replicationdata>. All analyses were conducted using R.

## **AI Usage**

ChatGPT and Claude were used for minor copyediting and for troubleshooting code.

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