

Global Beliefs about Female Representation in Public Management

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Globally, women have made great advances into almost all spheres of the workforce ([Bertrand, 2020](#); [Goldin, 2014](#)). Particularly, in the historically male-dominated area of public administration, women are now either over-represented or at parity with men in about 60 % of countries worldwide ([UNDP, 2021](#)). However, women are still lacking in the more powerful, decision-making positions of public *management*. In spite of great differences in social norms, culture and history, this tendency is global, meaning that countries as diverse as Denmark, Nigeria, Indonesia and the US all have less than 30 % women in top-level public management positions (*ibid.*).

Such statistics only retell a well-known story, as so-called *glass ceiling effects* in a variety of areas are well documented ([Ross et al., 2022](#); [Bertrand, 2018](#); [Begeny et al., 2020](#)). Thus, calls for action to advance women's position in the workplace are abundant, emerging from a diverse set of powerful actors ([OECD, 2014](#); [UNDP, 2021](#); [McKinsey & Company, 2022](#)). These calls to action have a particular weight when it comes to public administration, as public organizations are compelled not only by efficiency and economy but also by social equity ([Frederickson, 1971](#)), and because powerful bureaucrats make decisions that affect the entirety of our societies.

The arguments underlying these calls tend to fall into two different categories. First, there is the more general argument that striving for gender equality is in itself desirable and fair, often highlighting that as women make up half the population, they should also make

up half of the people who govern (on all echelons) ([Pitkin, 1972](#); [Phillips, 1998](#)). Second, there is the argument of "women as a business case", which rests on a large literature from all over the social sciences, showing how having women in decision-making positions can have positive consequences for the organization in question, society as a whole or women in particular ([Fenizia, 2022](#); [Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004](#); [Hoobler et al., 2018](#); [Sukhtankar et al., 2022](#)).

Thus, policies to advance women into public management could potentially benefit our societies, but due to a number of reasons it might be politically challenging to implement them. Particularly, recent research shows that on a global level, affirmative action policies receive mixed reactions from citizens ([Bursztyn et al., 2023](#)). Contrary to what one might expect, [Bursztyn et al. \(2023\)](#) find that women in more gender equal countries are less supportive of affirmative action than their counterparts in more unequal countries. Moreover, policies that promote diversity are at risk of creating backlash effects ([Sanbonmatsu, 2008](#)), and as public opinion - or at least policy-makers perception thereof - is essential for political prioritization, it could impact the likelihood that politicians find it viable to implement gender mainstreaming policies ([Ashworth, 2012](#); [Page and Shapiro, 1983](#)). At the same time, citizens often overestimate the actual share of women and minorities in positions of power, which might affect both their perceptions of whether this is an issue at all as well as their support for policies to increase diversity ([Stauffer, 2021](#); [Peyton et al., 2022](#)).

In this article, we rely on data from two survey experiments fielded in 12 different countries to investigate these matters on a global level. First, we examine the degree to which people have an accurate perception of the level of female representation in public management in their own country. Next, we implement an experiment to test whether correcting any misperceptions can affect the degree of support for policies to advance women's position as well as their perception of the legitimacy and performance of government work. Lastly, to get an understanding of the possible backlash effects, we set up a second experiment in which we ask respondents to imagine a near future where gender parity in public management has been accomplished by the use of a "hard" or "soft" policy or no policy at all. We then investigate whether this has an effect on perceptions of legitimacy and performance of the public administration overall and specifically in more gendered areas of public administration.

1 Case selection

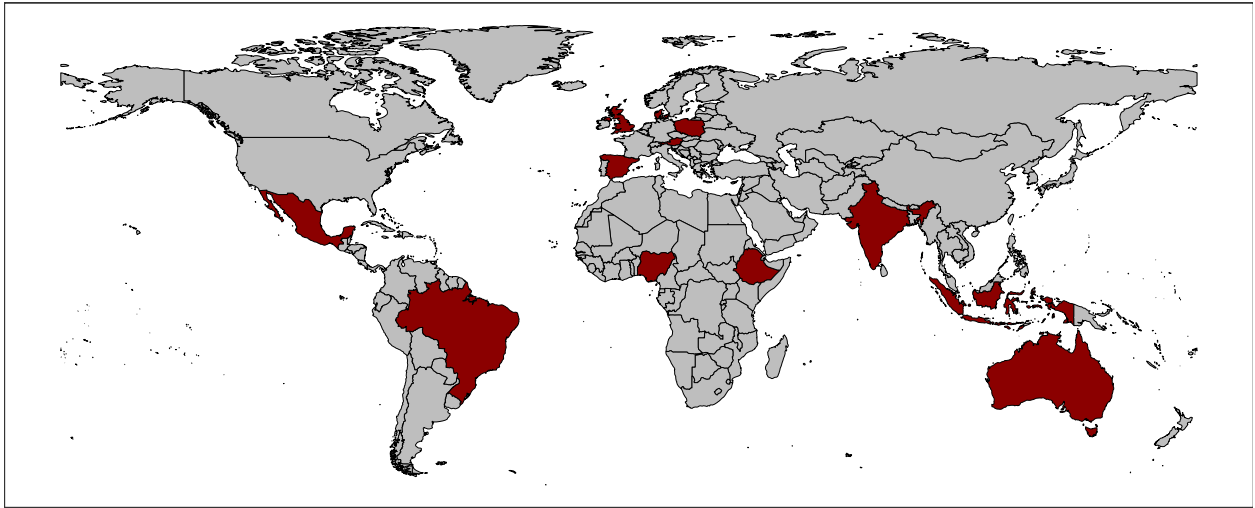
The study has the ambition to map global beliefs about women representation in public management. We cannot survey all countries in the world but we will likely have resources to survey 500-1000 representative individuals in about 12 countries. While norms about women vary widely among countries ([Bursztyn et al., 2023](#)), we also know that most countries share the common fact that women are underrepresented in public management positions ([UNDP, 2021](#)).

There are basically two approaches to global studies of the type we aim to conduct. The first type is rather agnostic about the country selection but the main goal is to get a wide and diverse selection. In this approach there is often no theoretical interest or hypothesis regarding country or country group differences. The ambition is to probe if a general hypothesis is robust across many contexts. Often the theoretical backdrop is some fundamental cognitive or social psychology, a moral dilemma or some other aspect of human life which can be heterogeneous across context but not in a theoretically predictable way.

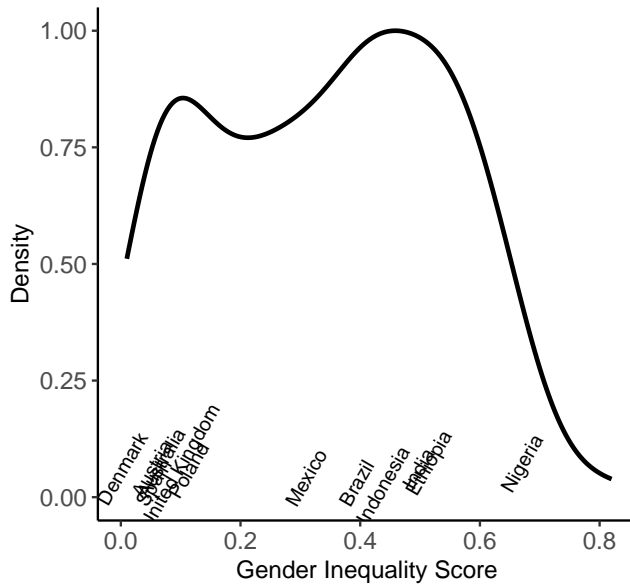
The second type of country selection draws in theoretical expectations to country-level variation to draw a set of countries or groups of countries that vary along this dimension. For our case, this variable could be general societal gender norms. A potential issue here is that our specific research interest does not provide us with strong expectations about how country-level differences would affect the treatments in our study. Particularly because some evidence suggests that women in more gender egalitarian countries are more opposed to affirmative action policies.

The country selection below captures a set of countries with very different regimes, bureaucracies and gender norms. At the same time the selection captures a representation of a large part of people in the world.

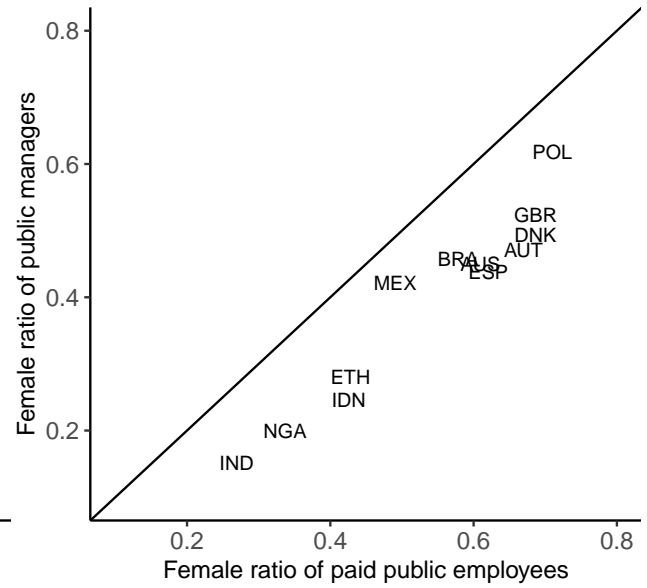
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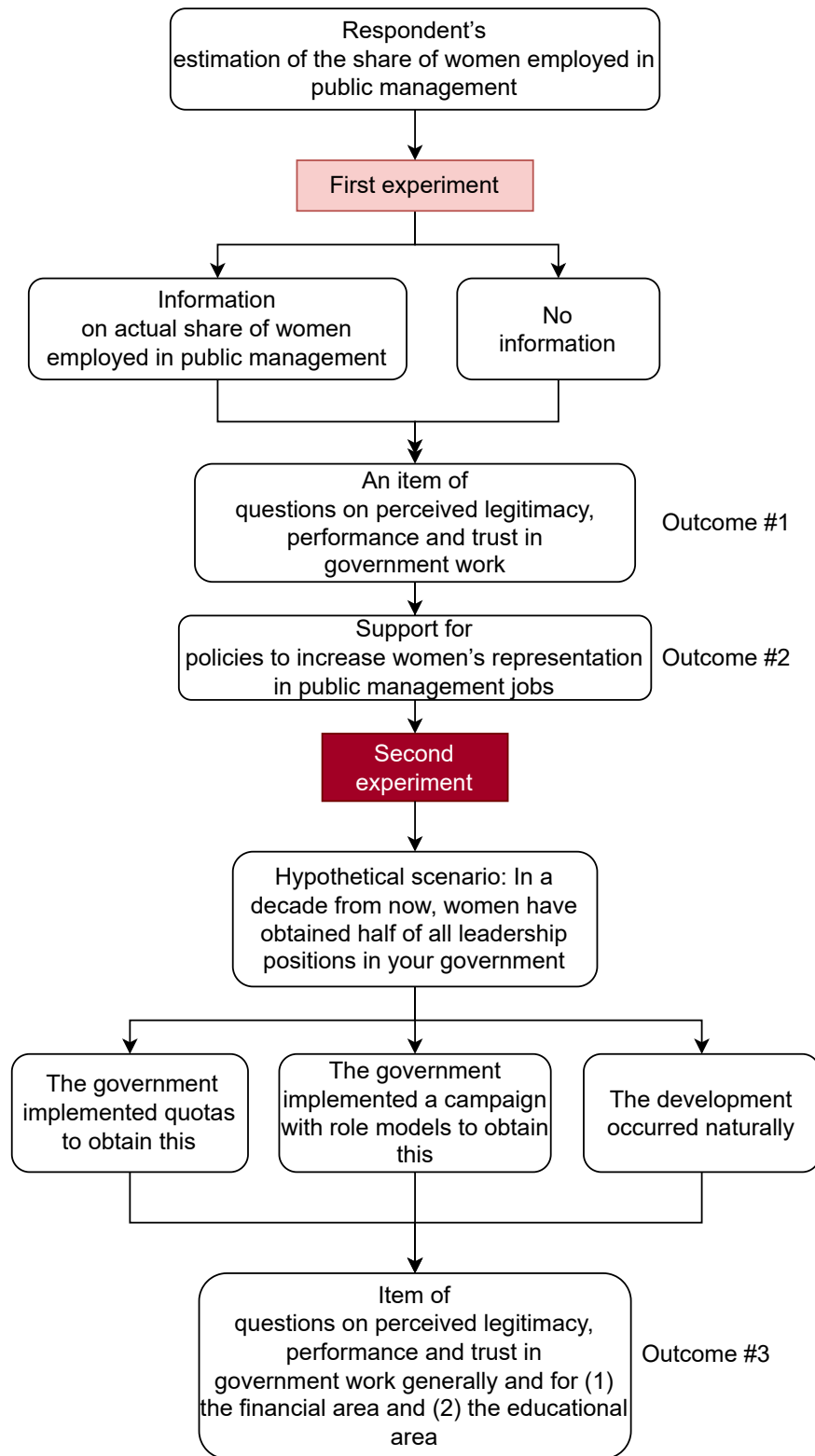
2 Experimental Design

On the following page we present a flow-chart of the possible survey design. First, we wish to ask the respondents a range of questions on their opinion on the public sector and among those, their estimation of how many women are employed in public *management*. These descriptives will be interesting in and of itself.

Next, the first experiment begins, when we treat half of the respondents with the correct percentage, retrieved from either the World Bank or UNDP ¹, and half will be in the control group. The first outcome is their opinions of legitimacy and performance of the government and the next is their support for a number of policies to advance women's position. Afterwards we will have a middle part, where we will ask a series of questions to try to avoid that the previous experiment will influence the next.

The last experiment is a vignette with a hypothetical scenario where we ask the respondent to imagine that in a decade or so, women have obtained half of all leadership positions in the administration of their country. We will then vary whether this is due to a "hard" policy, a "soft" policy or a natural occurrence. Outcomes will be perceived legitimacy and performance of the government as such but also particularly for the financial area (male-typed) and the educational area (female-typed).

¹Where we will find the data is still up in the air. The World Bank data can be found [here](#).



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