

The Role of Female Political Representation in Mitigating Arms Risk

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Approximately one billion small arms and light weapons (SALW) – rifles, pistols, and light machine guns – are circulating across the globe. Many of these are in the ‘wrong hands’, meaning that they are in the possession of criminals, terrorists, or extremists. Dr Cassandra DiRienzo and Dr Jayoti Das argue that greater female political representation has both a direct and an indirect effect on arms risk, or the risk that SALW fall into the ‘wrong hands’. This vital work reveals how women in politics can, directly and indirectly, reduce the dangers posed by SALW, offering hope in the fight against the devastating consequences of these weapons.

The Global Small Arms and Light Weapons Crisis

The world is awash with small arms and light weapons (SALW). Highly portable, durable, and easy to use, an estimated one billion SALW are in circulation globally. The United States is the world’s top producer and exporter of these weapons. However, a significant portion of SALW end up in the hands of criminals, fuelling armed conflicts, transnational organised crime, terrorism, and regional instability.

The toll of SALW violence is staggering. Between 2010 and 2015, these weapons were used in nearly half of all violent deaths, contributing to approximately 200,000 fatalities each year. Notably, women and children are disproportionately affected. SALW are frequently used to commit gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence, and their prevalence leads to increased numbers of female-headed households and displaced women and children.

Investigating the Role of Female Political Representation

Dr Cassandra DiRienzo and Dr Jayoti Das are at the forefront of research investigating the role of female political representation in mitigating the risk posed by SALW. They propose that greater female representation in national parliaments has both a direct and an indirect effect on reducing ‘arms risk’ – the likelihood that SALW will fall into the wrong hands.

The direct effect, as Dr DiRienzo and Dr Das argue, stems from the tendency of female politicians to support SALW regulation. Extensive research has shown that women in politics are more likely to advocate for issues that disproportionately affect women, such as healthcare, childcare, and education. Given the gendered nature of SALW violence, gun control can be seen as a women’s

issue. Indeed, studies consistently show that women are more likely than men to support gun control measures.

The indirect effect, as posited by Dr DiRienzo and Dr Das, relates to the role of female politicians in mitigating the socio-economic conditions that facilitate the illicit trade of SALW. A large body of research associates women in politics with lower levels of corruption. Countries with a higher proportion of parliamentary seats held by women tend to have less severe corruption.

Corruption, in turn, is intrinsically linked to the shadow economy – the realm of unregistered economic activities. SALW are frequently traded in these underground channels. By reducing corruption, female political representation indirectly shrinks the size of the shadow economy, thereby making the illicit trafficking of SALW more difficult.

Looking Closely at Cause and Impact

To test their predictions, Dr DiRienzo and Dr Das employed a sophisticated statistical technique called causal mediation analysis. Using data from different countries, they examined the direct effect of the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women on the Cato Institute’s Arms Sales Risk Index, which measures the risk that United States arms sales to a country will result in SALW falling into the wrong hands. They simultaneously investigated the indirect effect through the size of countries’ shadow economies, as estimated by [Leandro Medina and Friedrich Schneider](#) in 2018.

The results were striking. A greater proportion of parliamentary seats held by women was associated with a significantly lower arms risk score, supporting the direct effect hypothesis. Moreover, countries with higher female political representation tended to



have smaller shadow economies, which correlated with lower arms risk. This finding corroborated the indirect effect hypothesis. In numerical terms, a ten percentage point increase in the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women was estimated to lower a country's arms risk score by 4.8 points on the 100-point scale.

Empowering Women, Mitigating Arms Risk

These findings underscore the multifaceted influence of female political representation on the complex issue of SALW proliferation and misuse. Women in politics play a crucial role in mitigating arms risk by directly supporting weapons regulations and indirectly reducing the size of the shadow economy.

The research by Dr DiRienzo and Dr Das aligns with the spirit of United Nations Resolution 1325, which acknowledges women's vital contributions to disarmament, peace, and security discussions and calls for their inclusion in these critical conversations. As the world continues to grapple with the devastating consequences of SALW violence, the work of these researchers highlights the untapped potential of women's political empowerment as a means to curb this global scourge.

The implications are far-reaching. Increasing women's representation in national parliaments emerges as a promising strategy to reduce arms risk, complementing conventional approaches to SALW control. Empowering female politicians to enact and advocate for weapons regulations while also addressing the underlying socio-economic drivers of the shadow economy could have a profound impact on global security and the well-being of vulnerable populations.

The Path Forward

As the team continues their vital work, they aim to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms through which female political representation influences arms risk. Future research may explore additional pathways, such as the role of women in peacebuilding initiatives and post-conflict reconstruction, which could further reduce the demand for and availability of SALW.

The ultimate goal is to translate these research findings into concrete policy actions. Encouraging women's political participation, equipping female politicians with the resources and platform to champion SALW regulation, and addressing the root causes of the shadow economy could yield significant dividends in the fight against arms risk.

In a world where the spectre of gun violence looms large, the research of Dr DiRienzo, Dr Das, and their colleagues offers a glimmer of hope. By unveiling the pivotal role of women in politics in mitigating arms risk, they have identified a powerful tool in the quest for a safer, more peaceful world. As we move forward, it is imperative that we heed their findings and empower women to take their rightful place at the forefront of the battle against SALW proliferation. The stakes could not be higher, and the time for action is now.



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MEET THE RESEARCHERS



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Dr Cassandra DiRienzo obtained her PhD in Economics with a minor in Statistics from North Carolina State University in 2002. She has been Professor of Economics at Elon University since 2014. Her research focuses on cross-country studies of human trafficking, corruption, shadow economies, diversity, gender, and culture. Dr DiRienzo has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, and her work has been recognised with several awards, including the Dean's Award for Excellence in Scholarship from Elon University's Love School of Business.



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Dr Jayoti Das received her PhD in Economics from the University of Cincinnati in 1993. She is Professor of Economics and the Lincoln Financial Professor at Elon University, positions she has held since 2008. Dr Das also serves as the Director of the Business Fellows program at Elon. Her primary research fields include international trade and finance, industrial organisation, economics of development, and economics of gender. Dr Das has an extensive record of peer-reviewed publications and has received numerous awards for her scholarship, including the Dean's Award for Excellence in Research from Elon University's Love School of Business.



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FURTHER READING

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