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Men For War; Women For Children

Popular Perceptions on Female Representation and Public Policy

Hermann Thiel¹

In Namibia, as elsewhere in the world, campaigns and policy reforms are being undertaken to increase the number of women in representative positions. Although Namibia shows significant improvements in this respect, gender parity is still some distance away. This paper looks at the views of ordinary Namibians on the issue. Firstly, it reports on public support for an increase in the number of women in positions of power, and secondly, it reports on gendered views regarding public policy.

The paper shows that there is broad-based support for an increase in women in positions of power, meaning that policies to achieve this should not, at least in theory, be met with widespread discontent. Almost 70% of respondents felt that Namibia needs more women in positions of power. More women (75%) than men (60%) felt this way, but the difference was not statistically significant. The paper also found that socio-biographical variables, such as urban/rural location, education, gender and employment, offered no explanations for support for more women in positions of power. In addition, the data suggests that there is no gender-gap among those willing to stand as electoral candidates – men and women are equally willing. Men and women are also equally interested and active in politics. These findings, therefore, dispute the existence of gender-gaps in political participation and activity, such as are often proposed in gender theory. Finally, the paper shows that Namibians do have some gender-based preferences with regard to policy domains. While men are preferred to deal with issues of war and national defence, women are preferred to deal with children's rights. For all other policy issues Namibians have no clear gender preferences.

¹ Hermann Thiel worked as a special consultant at the IPPR during November 2002.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with female involvement in representative and executive politics in Namibia. Internationally, women are far less represented than men in powerful positions in politics, irrespective of the level of government. According to Inglehart and Norris (forthcoming), women worldwide represent only one in seven parliamentarians; one in 10 cabinet ministers; and one in 20 heads of state.

Namibia ranks fairly well when it comes to female representation in parliament. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)² reported on 25 October 2002, that Namibia ranked twenty-third in the world, with 25% of the National Assembly being women (18 out of 72 members). The only African countries ranking higher than Namibia were Mozambique (ranking 10th, with 30%); South Africa (11th, with 29.8%); and Rwanda (21st, with 25.7%). In 2001, 40% of Namibia's local authority councillors were women and a number of women were also elected as mayors. At a regional level the picture is less rosy. Women represent only 4% of regional councillors (elected by means of a first-past-the-post system) and only two out of 26 members of the National Council. Of the 13 governors only two are women and of 22 members of cabinet, again, only two are women. They are the Minister of Health and Social Services and the Minister of Women Affairs and Child Welfare.³

Why are women represented more highly in some societies than others? Various theories are commonly presented to explain this. Inglehart and Norris (forthcoming) summarised them as follows: *structural factors* (such as inadequate child care, literacy and education; health; and overall levels of socio-economic development); *institutional factors* (such as the level of democratisation in a society and the electoral system); and *cultural factors* (attitudes in society towards female participation).

This paper focuses on the latter – cultural factors. What do Namibians think of female involvement in politics? To what extent should attempts be made to include more women in positions of power? At what levels of government should women be represented? And which areas of government are appropriate for women to deal with?

The point of departure is to recognise that cultural factors are important. If it can be shown that Namibians in general are opposed to greater female involvement in representative politics, that could partly explain why parity has not yet been reached in the levels of representation between men and women. If, however, it can be shown that Namibians in general are in favour of greater female involvement in representative politics, one would have to look elsewhere for explanations. Structural or institutional factors may explain the lack of equality better. Alternatively, one may have to look at the attitudes of the political elites rather than the general population.

² The complete *Women in National Parliaments* report is available at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

³ Since the submission of this paper, Saara Kuuugongelwa-Amathila was appointed as the country's first female Minister of Finance.



These issues were explored in a national survey done for IPPR by Research Facilitation Services. Interviews were conducted with 2,000 Namibians 18 years or above. Of these 44.4% were male and 55.6% female. 62% of respondents lived in rural areas and 38% in urban areas. All interviews were conducted face to face. Respondents were selected by means of a three-step probability-proportional-to-Size (PPS) sampling procedure prepared with the help of the Central Statistical Office of the National Planning Commission.

The paper is divided into two main sections – the first focusing on the level of support for more women in positions of power in Namibia and the second looking at different policy areas and whether Namibians prefer men or women to deal with each of these policy areas.

2. Support for Women in Positions of Power in Namibia

Are Namibians in support of including more women in positions of power? To explore this, respondents were presented with a general question: *"Do you feel Namibia needs more women in positions of power?"* In response to this question, over two thirds (68%) of the total sample said that Namibia does need more women in positions of power; only 13% said no; and 19% were unsure.

Table 1: Gender and women in positions of power (%)

	Women	Men	Total
No	8	19	13
Don't know	17	22	19
Yes	75	60	68

Question: "Do you feel Namibia needs more women in positions of power?"

Factors often used to explain different attitudes towards women include gender (women tend to be more supportive of improving conditions for women); the rural/urban divide (urbanites supposedly being more 'modernised' and thus more supportive of gender equality); employment status and level of education (the more wealthy and the better educated are thought to be more supportive of gender equality).

One might expect a big difference between support from men and women, with women being much more supportive of having more women in positions of power. The figures in Table 1 show that there is some difference, but, contrary to expectation, the difference is rather small⁴. Three quarters (75%) of women felt Namibia needs more women in positions of power compared with 60% of men.

Other variables one could expect to have an influence on whether people thought more women should be involved in representative politics include whether people live in rural or urban areas;

⁴ Eta = 0.18, significant at the 0.001 level.



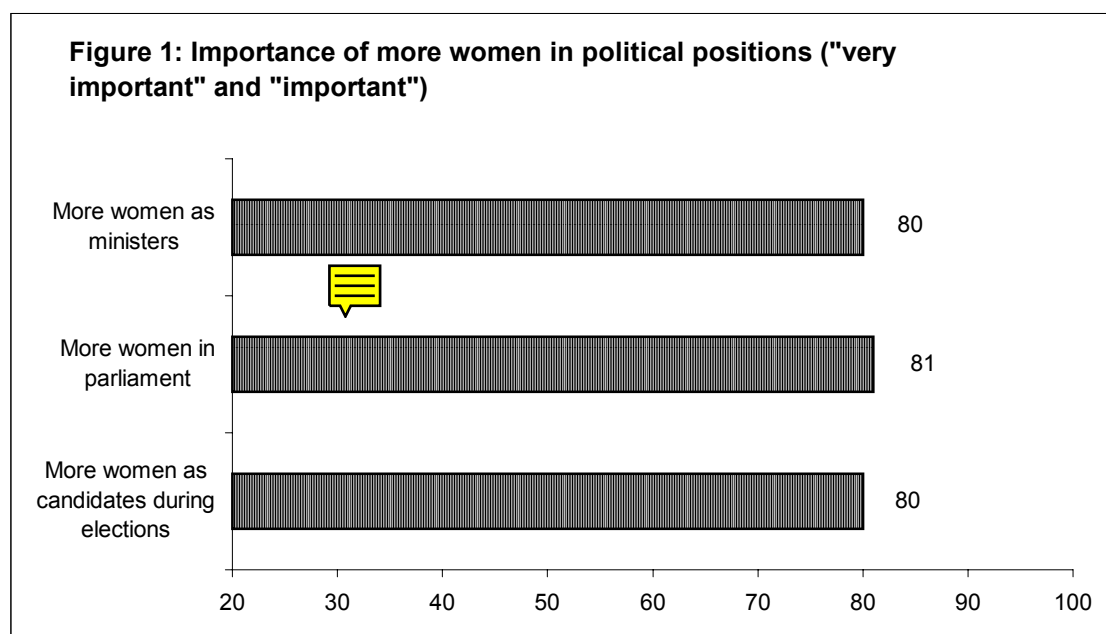
whether they are employed or unemployed⁵; and their level of education. The expectation is that urban, employed people with higher levels of education would be more inclined to support this policy. However, our analysis indicates that none of these factors have any significant correlation with respondents' views on this issue, as demonstrated in Table 2. The observable differences between urban (70%) and rural (67%); and employed (69%) and unemployed (68%) people, who think it is important to include more women in positions of power, are negligible. Although people with higher levels of education are slightly more inclined to think that there should be more women represented, this difference is also minimal and not statistically significant.

Table 2: The rural/urban divide; employment status; level of education; and women in positions of power (%)

	Rural	Urban	Employed	Unemployed	No Education	Primary schooling	Secondary schooling	Tertiary schooling
No	13	12	13	13	11	13	13	17
Don't know	20	18	19	20	28	20	17	12
Yes	67	70	69	68	62	68	70	72

Question: "Do you feel Namibia needs more women in positions of power?"

In a slightly differently phrased set of questions, respondents were asked whether they thought *it was important or not* to have more women as candidates in elections and parliament, and more women as cabinet ministers. This question probes for both the importance of increased representation and the political level at which it should occur. In response to these questions (see Figure 1 below) an even higher percentage (80% or more) thought that it was important for a country like Namibia to have more female representatives participating at different levels of politics. Even more significant is that support for women is equally strong at all levels of representative politics.



Question: "Please tell us whether you think each of the following is important for a country like Namibia"

⁵ In this variable the 'employed' category includes those who are in part-time employment, while the 'unemployed' category includes those not seeking work because they are either too old or unhealthy, and students.



Overall, there is a high level of support for the number of women in representative politics and powerful positions in Namibia to be increased. Although Namibia ranks high internationally with respect to female representation in parliament, parity between the sexes in political representation is still a long way off. Let us now turn to some other factors that could explain this.

Willingness to Participate as Candidates

One reason for this phenomenon could be a difference between genders in the levels of desire to be involved in active politics. To test this, respondents were asked: *"Would you yourself like to stand as a candidate for a party during an election?"* The responses to this question, broken down by gender, are presented in Table 3. It is clear that there is almost no difference between men and women's respective desire to be involved in active politics. This finding is very instructive, since it is sometimes argued that even if it were possible for women to participate in higher numbers, they would not want to do so. Clearly this is not the case. If women and men are equally eager to become involved and run as candidates, one could argue that they should have equal opportunities to do so.

Table 3: Gender and desire to be candidates during elections (%)

	Women	Men	Total
No	66	63	64
Yes	35	37	36

Question: "Would you yourself like to stand as a candidate for a party during an election?"

It could also be argued that women, even if they want to participate as candidates, are not involved in the everyday political activities in their communities. To test the level of active involvement, respondents were asked about their attendance of meetings organised in their communities and their own initiative in contacting their local representatives. The findings represent a similar pattern to that illustrated above.

Political Activity and Interest

When asked whether they participate in meetings organised by political parties or ministries, there was again almost no difference between men and women, as seen in Table 4. These results show that it cannot be argued that men take more of an interest than women in the political issues facing their communities, nor that they are more informed about them.

Table 4: Gender and attendance of meetings organised by political parties (%)

	Women	Men	Total
Normally I do not attend at all	29	29	29
Normally I attend once in a while	11	11	11
Normally I attend when I can	18	16	17
Normally I attend most of the time	17	19	18
Normally I always attend	26	26	26

Question: "Below is a list of events that are organised for the public to participate in. Please tell us whether or not you participate in meetings organised by a political party."

Another measure of political participation is how often people are actually in contact with their elected representatives. Respondents were asked whether they had contact with a number of



political figures, including elected representatives, at different levels of government – national, regional and local. An index was constructed from which one could ascertain whether respondents contacted no elected representatives or whether they contacted representatives on one or more of the three levels. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Gender and contacting elected representatives (%)

	Women	Men	Total
Contacted none	78	72	75
Contacted one out of three	18	21	19
Contacted two out of three	3	6	4
Contacted three out of three	1	2	2

Question: "In the past year, have you had contact with _____?" Percentages indicate the proportion of people who had contact with representatives at one, two or three levels of government: local ("a councillor from your town"); regional ("a regional councillor"); and/or national ("a member of parliament").

Again, the results show virtually no difference between the sexes regarding their active role in contacting representatives. When asked whether they were members of any political party, exactly the same percentage (55%) of men and women indicated that they are card-carrying party members. This further supports a conclusion that there is no reason to believe that women and men have inherently different levels of willingness to be involved in active politics in Namibia.

Taking this into account, we should now expect find little, if any, difference between women and men regarding their levels of interest in politics and the frequency of their political discussions. As Table 6 illustrates, this is indeed the case. Around a third of both men (35%) and women (30%) indicated that they have a lot of interest in politics. When it comes to discussing politics, men are only slightly more likely to have regular political discussions than women – 45% of men indicated they have political discussions often, compared with 41% of women.

Table 6: Gender and political interest (%)

	Women	Men	Total
Not at all	22	18	20
A little	49	46	48
A lot	30	35	32

Question: "How interested are you in politics?"

This section has shown that that there is a high level of support among Namibians for including more women in positions of power. It was also shown that there is almost no difference between men and women when it comes to their willingness to become candidates in elections; their levels of political participation; or their levels of political interest. Given this, the question remains – should measures be implemented to improve the actual levels of representation of women in politically powerful positions?

In a previous paper (Thiel 2003), we looked at support for a gender quota related to the candidate lists which political parties present for elections. In that paper, it was shown that although a very high percentage (81%) of Namibians said that it was important "to have equal numbers of men and women as candidates", less than half (48%) said they were in favour of a measure whereby at



least 50% of the candidates on the candidate lists had to be women. The paper argued that support for gender equality does not necessarily translate into support for measures, such as gender quotas, which would ensure (and enforce) equal representation.

In this paper, it has clearly been shown that there is almost no difference in opinion between men and women, or for that matter between rural and urban, educated and less educated, wealthy and poor Namibians, with respect to their support for the need to include more women in representative politics. It was also shown that women have the same desire to be involved in representative politics as men and that patterns of participation in political activities are similar for women and men. Based on this information, it seems plausible to argue that there are currently very few cultural barriers to female participation in representative politics in Namibia. This suggests that there would be few, if any, potential political costs for those undertaking such reforms.

So, if public opinion presents no real obstacles, why are women still under-represented at all levels of government? The real explanation is more likely to be found at the elite level; i.e. at the level capable of undertaking the necessary reforms. It is necessary, therefore, to look at the patterns of politics and the perceptions on gender in the hallways of power, where many of the decisions about prospective candidates and appointments to executive positions are made.

The next section deals with the question of whether men and women should be involved with different policy areas when they do become active in politics. It explores public perceptions on whether or not some policy areas are 'more suitable' for male or female decision-makers.

3. Gender roles in politics

It is often said that, if women are appointed to executive positions in government, it is normally to portfolios considered to be 'softer' and more within the 'female domain'. Such ministries are usually those dealing with social welfare and development issues rather than security, defence, policing and the economy – the latter being portfolios normally considered to be within the 'male domain'. This is clearly the case in Namibia, given that the country's only female ministers are in charge of health and social services and women affairs and child welfare respectively.⁶

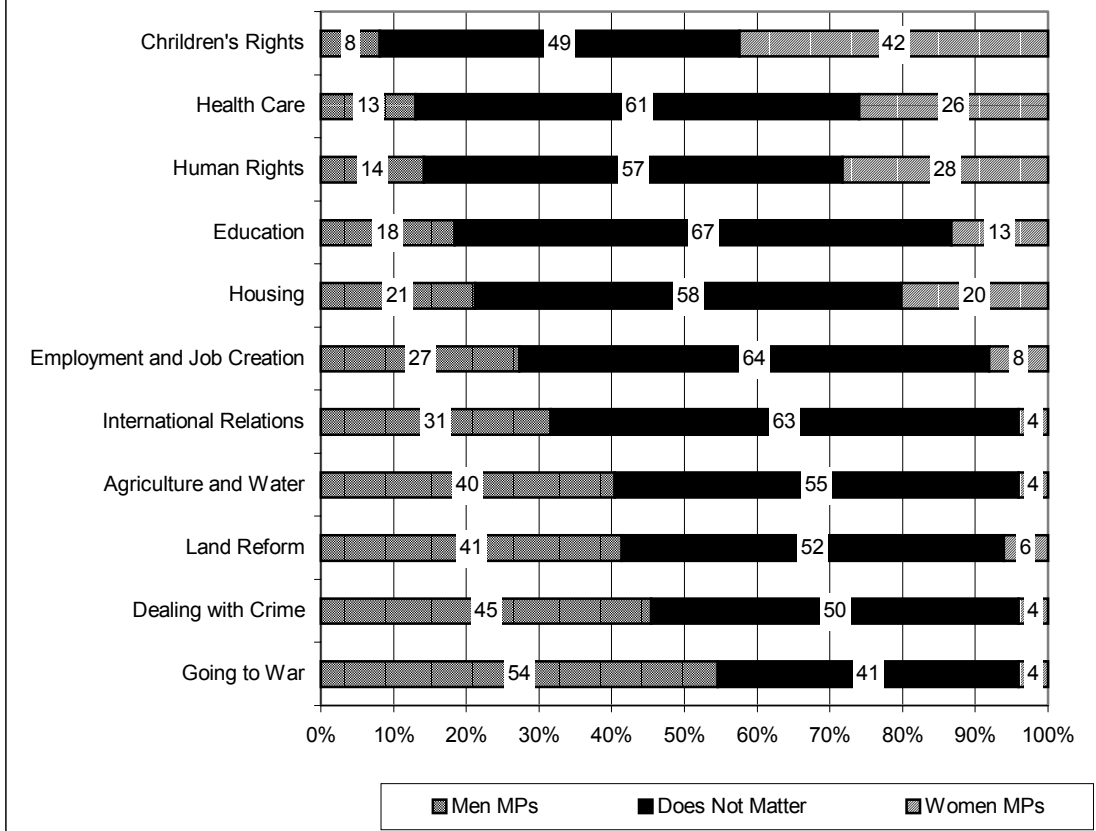
So, do Namibians have any preferences as to whether certain ministries – and thus policy areas – are handled by either men or women? To investigate this, respondents were presented with a number of policy areas which Members of Parliament (MPs) have to deal with, and were asked whether they believed men or women MPs would be better at dealing with each of the issues or whether it does not matter. Figure 2 presents the responses to 11 different policy areas⁷. The policy areas were ranked according to the proportion of respondents who indicated men would be better at handling that specific policy area.

⁶ See footnote 3 above.

⁷ The original battery of questions in the questionnaire included a twelfth policy area - 'national reconciliation'. This is a policy peculiar to Namibia and as such not a usual policy area in democracy. For that reason, it was excluded from the analysis. Interestingly, on this issue, nearly three quarters (71 %) indicated that it does not matter whether men or women MPs deal with this policy area.



Figure 2: Perceived Gender Roles in Public Policy



Question: "Below are a number of issues that Members of Parliament have to deal with. Some people say that women MPs would be better and others say men MPs would be better. Other people say that it does not matter whether the MP is male or female, both would be equally good. What do you think – who would be best at bringing the following issues to the people of Namibia?"

To determine whether there were any underlying dimensions in the way respondents answered the questions, a factor analysis was performed on the 12 indicators⁸. The following factors were identified:

- **Factor 1: The Male Policy Domain⁹**

- Deciding when to go to war or defend the country against outside attacks (male MPs 54%; female MPs 4%)
- Dealing with crime (male MPs 45%; female MPs 4%)
- Land reform (male MPs 41%; female MPs 6%)
- Agriculture and water (male MPs 40%; female MPs 4%)

⁸ Factor analysis is a statistical method often used to determine whether there are underlying dimensions in the way respondents answer a given set of questions. In this description, the factor analysis (principle components analysis with orthogonal rotation) is divided into three factors. Each of these factors had an eigenvalue of more than one.

⁹ The *male policy domain* includes all those issues that are regarded best suited to male MPs by the majority of respondents. The numbers in parenthesis show the distribution of the responses favouring male and female MPs.



- International relations (male MPs 31%; female MPs 4%)
- Employment and job creation (male MPs 27%; female MPs 8%)

- **Factor 2: The Female Policy Domain**¹⁰

- Children's rights (female MPs 42%; male MPs 8%)
- Human rights (female MPs 28%; male MPs 14%)
- Health care (female MPs 26%; male MPs 13%)

An equal preference for male and female MPs was recorded for two policy areas – education and housing (**Factor 3**):

- Education (“does not matter” 67%; male MPs 18%; and female MPs 13%)
- Housing (“does not matter” 58%; male MPs 21%; and female MPs 20%)

Looking at Figure 2, and keeping the results of the factor analysis in mind, the following is evident:

- The patterns of responses indicate that Namibians do have gender-based perceptions of public policy areas, specifically on who should deal with what.
- Children's rights could be considered the quintessential ‘female policy domain’ . 42% of respondents indicated that female MPs are better at dealing with children's rights, compared with 8% who indicated that male MPs would be better.
- Defence policy could be considered the quintessential ‘male policy domain’. 54% of respondents indicated that male MPs are better at "deciding whether to go to war or defend the country against outside attacks", compared with 4% who indicated female MPs would be better.
- For all the policy areas, except children’s rights and "deciding whether to go to war or defend the country against outside attacks", a majority (50% or more) of respondents indicated that "it does not matter" whether men or women are appointed to deal with the issue. This could be interpreted as an indication that despite the overall gender-based pattern, the majority of respondents have open minds and no particular gender preferences regarding the role of women in public policy.

Given the overall trend, do men and women have different views of the roles of male and female MPs respectively? Separate factor analyses for men and women both follow the pattern demonstrated above very closely, which suggests that men and women have the same gender preferences.

Statistical analysis also indicates that there are only very small correlations between the ‘male policy domain’ factor and socio-biographical and political variables, including:

¹⁰ The *female policy domain* includes all those issues that are regarded as best suited to female MPs by the majority of respondents. The numbers in parenthesis show the distribution of the responses favouring male and female MPs.

- Gender: There is no statistically significant correlation suggesting that men and women have the same opinions with regard to what men and women should do.
- Level of education: Those more highly educated tend to have more gender-neutral views, but only slightly more so than those less well educated (Pearson's $R = -0.11$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- Rural/urban residential location: Whether someone lives in an urban and rural area does have an effect on his or her perceptions on gender roles. The effect, although statistically significant, is quite small ($\text{Eta} = 0.13$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- Employment status of respondents: Whether someone is employed or not also has a small, but statistically significant, effect on their perceptions of gender roles ($\text{Eta} = 0.16$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- An individual's general opinion on whether it is important to have more women in positions of power would also shape their perceptions on gender roles in public policy. Those who feel that it is important to have more women in power are less likely to have strong gender preferences with regard to issue areas. This correlation is weak though (Pearson's $R = -0.11$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- Whether the respondent supports the ruling or opposition party also has a statistically significant effect on their perceptions on gender roles in public policy. Again, this relationship is negligible ($\text{Eta} = 0.06$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- Interest in politics has a statistically significant but negligible effect on gender preferences in public policy (Pearson's $R = 0.09$, significant at the 0.001 level).
- Whether respondents are politically active or not also shapes their gender preferences – those that are more politically active have less clear gender preferences with regard to public policy (Pearson's $R = 0.11$, significant at the 0.001 level).

Given the lack of clear, strong correlations among the variables listed above, it is difficult to explain why Namibians hold the gender perceptions they do. They cannot be ascribed to socio-economic status, gender, or political affiliation, activity or interest. This issue does require further analysis, however, with many more variables and different methods.

4. Conclusion

This paper looked at female representation and public policy in Namibia. The first part of the analysis focused on public attitudes towards more women in representative positions, while the second part focused on gendered perceptions on public policy preferences.

Analysis of data from the IPPR Gender and Politics Survey leads to three main conclusions:

- The majority of Namibians support increasing opportunities for women to participate in politics and think that it is important to have more women representatives at all levels of government. Despite this, a sizeable minority of respondents still think that politics is a man's world.
- There is virtually no difference between the levels of political participation of men and women, nor their desire to participate in representative politics.
- Namibians tend to think that male MPs are better at dealing with certain policy areas (defence; policing; foreign policy; economic development; agriculture; and land reform),



while female MPs are better at dealing with others (children's rights and welfare; health; and human rights). Despite this, gender activists should find it encouraging that the majority of respondents thought that it does not matter whether male or female MPs deal with specific policy areas.

Data from this survey indicates that there are few cultural barriers among the general population to increasing female participation in representative politics. It is not clear, however, whether or not this high level of support extends beyond the attitudinal level. If cultural factors are excluded, one has to look elsewhere for explanations for the remaining disparities between the levels of representation of men and women at different levels of government. Such explanations could include structural factors (such as the electoral system at regional level) and elite attitudes. This should be the focus of future research and action.

Furthermore, it is difficult to explain gender attitudes. There are few socio-biographical and political clues with a strong influence on the views presented here. Extensive further research is required before any authoritative explanations as to the causes of gender perceptions can be offered. What is certain, however, is that these attitudes are far more complex than we are often made to believe.

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