

# The Limits of Language: Gender Apartheid and Public Opinion

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*Accepted at International Affairs*

## Abstract

In 2023, Afghan and Iranian human rights activists launched the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, calling for the global recognition of the crime of gender apartheid. A key component of the campaign's strategy is to mobilize social movements of resistance akin to the South African anti-apartheid movement. The assumption is that the framing of gender apartheid evokes a stronger response among the public than alternatives, such as the language of gender persecution. We test the effectiveness of this rhetorical frame in a survey experiment of 1,200 Americans and 100 elites, finding null effects. However, informing respondents that the systematic oppression of women violates international law significantly increases support for policy action. Legal codification may thus have a stronger impact on public opinion than subtle rhetorical framing related to the severity and scope of human rights abuses. We also uncover evidence of a spillover effect across distinct human rights issues, where more pro-Israeli individuals are less responsive to the gender apartheid frame than pro-Palestinian respondents, likely because Israel has itself been accused of apartheid. Overall, our study contributes to broader academic debates about the impact of language, the efficacy of international law, and the possibility of backlash effects in response to human rights shaming.

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Debates over language are omnipresent in politics. From who qualifies as a “man” or a “woman” to whether using the term “illegal immigrant” rather than “undocumented immigrant” stirs public opinion, the meaning and impact of language are sharply contested in both the public sphere and academic discourse.<sup>1</sup> The use of particular language, including by human rights organizations and norm entrepreneurs, is often a strategic choice to mobilize public and elite support for action<sup>2</sup> and attempt to generate mass social mobilization.<sup>3</sup> This has recently been seen in the deployment of the term “gender apartheid” to describe the oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan and Iran. In 2023, a group of prominent policymakers, jurists, scholars, and activists launched an organized campaign using the hashtag #EndGenderApartheid.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, pressure has been building from top United Nations officials (including the UN Secretary-General), the European Parliament, human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), prominent former policymakers (e.g., Hillary Clinton and Gordon Brown), and Nobel laureates (e.g., Malala Yousafzai and Shirin Ebadi) to label the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan gender apartheid and codify the crime into international law.<sup>5</sup>

A key aim of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign is for this terminology to evoke a global anti-apartheid mass movement akin to the anti-racial apartheid protests against the South African government throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Although part of the argument is that this language

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, ‘Framing theory’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, 2007, pp. 103–26, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054>; Zoe Oxley, ‘Framing and political decision making: an overview’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, publ. online 29 May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1250>.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Activists beyond borders: advocacy networks in international politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, ‘Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, 2000, pp. 611–39, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>; Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: social movement and contentious politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Gissou Nia, ‘Gender apartheid is a horror. Now the United Nations can make it a crime against humanity’, *Atlantic Council*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/gender-apartheid-is-a-horror-now-the-united-nations-can-make-it-a-crime-against-humanity/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jacqui True and Farkhondeh Akbari, ‘Geopolitical narratives of withdrawal and the counter-narrative of women’s rights activism in Afghanistan’, *Global Studies Quarterly* 4: 3, 2024, pp. 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae051>.

will create a legal obligation for states to act, supporters also contend it can produce mass social movements because it connotes a greater severity and scope of human rights abuses than alternatives like gender persecution.<sup>6</sup>

We extend the literature on framing to evaluate the impact of language in this noteworthy case. Prior research demonstrates that frames that provide new and objective information or statistics on human rights abuses can move public opinion,<sup>7</sup> as can more subtle frames that hold constant substantive information but vary whether it is presented in a positive or negative light.<sup>8</sup> However, the language of gender apartheid versus salient alternatives, such as gender persecution, is particularly subtle. Both frames indicate that what the perpetrator is doing is a serious violation of human rights, just different degrees of severity. This raises doubt about whether framing will have the intended effect in this context.

To test the arguments and strategies of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, we conducted preregistered survey experiments on the US public and a sample of US elites from academia, government, and NGOs that leaned left on average. This approach enabled us to hold constant potentially confounding factors (e.g., the specifics of how women and girls are being mistreated and the source of information about these claims) and randomly vary the language used to describe

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<sup>6</sup> Sareta Ashraph et al., *Amending the crime against humanity of apartheid to recognize and encompass gender apartheid* (End Gender Apartheid Campaign, 2023), <https://endgenderapartheid.today/download/2025/EGA%20Legal%20Brief.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Kyla Jo McEntire, Michele Leiby and Matthew Krain, 'Human rights organizations as agents of change', *American Political Science Review* 109: 3, 2015, pp. 407–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000295>.

<sup>8</sup> Adam J. Berinsky and Donald R. Kinder, 'Making sense of issues through media frames: understanding the Kosovo crisis', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68: 3, 2006, pp. 640–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00451.x>; Donald P. Haider-Markel and Mark R. Joslyn, 'Gun policy, opinion, tragedy, and blame attribution: the conditional influence of issue frames', *Journal of Politics* 63: 2, 2001, pp. 520–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00077>; Thomas E. Nelson, Rosalee A. Clawson and Zoe M. Oxley, 'Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance', *American Political Science Review* 91: 3, 1997, pp. 567–87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952075>; Rune Slothuus and Claes H. de Vrees, 'Political parties, motivated reasoning, and issue framing effects', *Journal of Politics* 72: 3, 2010, pp. 630–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002238161000006X>; Alexa Spence and Nick Pidgeon, 'Framing and communicating climate change: the effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations', *Global Environmental Change* 20: 4, 2010, pp. 656–67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2010.07.002>.

what is happening (gender apartheid or gender persecution). We find no statistically significant evidence that using the language of gender apartheid significantly impacted the views or policy preferences of our respondents, and the substantive effect size was small—less than one percentage point on average.

Our null results are particularly striking since two of our analyses were relatively easy tests for finding effects. In one treatment arm in our public experiment, we included background information about the meaning of apartheid and its historical origins in South Africa. Although the power of framing can be diminished when respondents lack knowledge about a frame, we show that providing this contextual information is not sufficient to shift attitudes. The null effect in our elite experiment is also striking given that we might expect a sample of predominantly left-leaning academics and NGO officials to find the accusation of apartheid particularly concerning.

One piece of evidence that may help to explain this null result is that there was no clear consensus among respondents that gender apartheid is a more severe transgression than gender persecution. Moreover, even respondents who did rank gender apartheid as a worse violation of human rights than gender persecution were not more likely to support policies that could ameliorate their suffering. No matter their relative ranking, respondents generally viewed both gender apartheid and gender persecution as serious violations, meaning the framing of gender apartheid versus gender persecution was too subtle to significantly impact their opinions.

While comparing the language of gender apartheid to gender persecution is logical in light of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign's claim that this distinction can influence public opinion, this comparison constitutes a harder test of the gender apartheid frame than one against a more neutral conceptual baseline such as gender discrimination. Additionally, relative to a control condition where no information was provided to respondents, the language of gender apartheid

may very well have significantly moved the public's views. Consequently, our null results should not be interpreted as suggesting the language of gender apartheid has no resonance with the public; simply that it does not have a marginal effect relative to another strong frame (gender persecution).

Nevertheless, we do find two noteworthy significant effects in line with our preregistered hypotheses. Even when controlling for other factors, the gender apartheid frame has a stronger effect on policy preferences for respondents who are more pro-Palestinian and a weaker effect for those who are more pro-Israeli. This is likely due to accusations that Israel has created an apartheid state, which has been met with significant pushback from Israel's supporters. This finding indicates that there can be spillover effects from one issue-area to another, and that unintended consequences can result from human rights pressure campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with extant research,<sup>10</sup> we also find strong evidence that information about international law significantly impacts respondents' policy preferences. Informing respondents that *gender* apartheid is technically not illegal under international law reduces their willingness to support policies to help women and girls being oppressed. The opposite effect holds if respondents are instead presented with the fact that *apartheid* is illegal under international law (a true statement, though only in the case of *racial* apartheid). This indicates that information about legality has a stronger impact on public opinion than subtle label framing related to the severity and scope of human rights abuses. However, informing respondents that *gender persecution* is illegal under

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Rochelle Terman, *The geopolitics of shaming* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Charli Carpenter and Alexander H. Montgomery, 'The stopping power of norms: saturation bombing, civilian immunity, and U.S. attitudes towards the laws of war', *International Security* 45: 2, 2020, pp. 140–69, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00392](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00392); Stephen Chaudoin, 'Promises or policies? An experimental analysis of international agreements and audience reactions', *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 235–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000386>; Sarah E. Kreps and Geoffrey P.R. Wallace, 'International law, military effectiveness, and public support for drone strikes', *Journal of Peace Research* 53: 6, 2016, pp. 830–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316657405>; Geoffrey P.R. Wallace, 'International law and public attitudes toward torture: an experimental study', *International Organization* 67: 1, 2013, pp. 105–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000343>.

international law also had a similar effect, suggesting the gender apartheid frame is unnecessary for legal information to be effective.

Overall, our project makes several contributions. First, it adds to the literature on framing. It illustrates the limits of language by demonstrating that subtle framing differences related to the severity and scope of human rights abuses may have minimal aggregate effects on public opinion. Even increasing respondent knowledge about the gender apartheid frame by providing background information about apartheid is insufficient to make it effective. Our work also speaks to whether and when frames related to one issue can spillover and impact others, which is debated.<sup>11</sup> Although spillover is unlikely to occur between relatively dissimilar issue-areas, it can manifest between more proximate domains, such as accusations of racial *apartheid* against Israel and the reaction to accusations of gender *apartheid* against Afghanistan and Iran. Scholars and activists must therefore take into account the interdependence between different human rights campaigns. Second, our findings contribute to research on international law and public opinion by reinforcing the significant effect information about legality can have. Third, this paper contributes to debates on elite-public gaps by providing further evidence that they are smaller than many assume.<sup>12</sup>

Our project also speaks to an important real-world movement—the #EndGenderApartheid campaign. The null results from our experiments suggest that policymakers and advocates should not necessarily expect simply using the language “gender apartheid,” rather than alternatives like “gender persecution,” will mobilize the public and produce a large-scale social movement. Nevertheless, even if gender apartheid is not instrumentally effective as a public communications

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Coppock and Donald P. Green, ‘Do belief systems exhibit dynamic constraint?’ *Journal of Politics* 84: 2, 2022, pp. 725–38, <https://doi.org/10.1086/716294>; Daniel J. Hopkins and Jonathan Mummolo, ‘Assessing the breadth of framing effects’, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 12: 1, 2017, pp. 37–57, <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00015139>; Kristin Lunz Trujillo et al., ‘COVID-19 spillover effects onto general vaccine attitudes’, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88: 1, 2024, pp. 97–122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad059>.

<sup>12</sup> Joshua D. Kertzer, ‘Re-assessing elite-public gaps in political behavior’, *American Journal of Political Science* 66: 3, 2022, pp. 539–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12583>.

frame, labeling the systematic oppression of women and girls as apartheid rather than the less precise gender persecution may still hold intrinsic value and thus be a worthwhile cause. Moreover, we find evidence that legal arguments may be more persuasive as part of a global campaign to rally the masses. This implies that current efforts to codify gender apartheid as illegal under international law in the draft crimes against humanity treaty may be a more fruitful avenue to pursue.<sup>13</sup> More generally, our work suggests a strategy of legal codification and shaming violators may be more effective in rallying public support for action than subtle rhetorical framing.

### **From Racial Apartheid to Gender Apartheid**

The word apartheid originated in South Africa, where it means “apartness” in Afrikaans. The term was used to describe the policies of systematic segregation and oppression of Black South Africans from 1948 to 1994. The mistreatment of Black South Africans by white Afrikaners provoked a mass global social movement against these policies and practices, including diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions, that pressured the South African government to end their system of institutionalized racial discrimination.

The crime of apartheid was codified as illegal under international law in the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid. That convention defines apartheid as “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing domination by one *racial* group of persons over any other *racial* group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”<sup>14</sup> Notably, it also created a legal requirement for states to adopt “legislative or other measures necessary to suppress as well as to prevent any encouragement of the crime of apartheid...and to punish persons guilty of that crime.” In 1998, the crime of apartheid

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<sup>13</sup> Nia, ‘Gender apartheid is a horror’.

<sup>14</sup> UN General Assembly, A/Res/3068(XXVIII), 30 Nov. 1973.

was incorporated into the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as a crime against humanity, using a slightly different definition: “...an *institutionalized regime* of systematic oppression and domination by one *racial* group over any other *racial* group.”<sup>15</sup> Although apartheid was conceptualized in these treaties as exclusively applying to oppression based on race, there is little reason why the definition could not also be applied to systematic gender oppression.<sup>16</sup>

The impetus for the creation of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign was the severe mistreatment of women and girls in Afghanistan and Iran. Per the spirit of the legal definition of racial apartheid, women in Afghanistan are subject to an institutionalized regime in which they are systematically dominated and oppressed by men under Taliban rule.<sup>17</sup> Since August 2021, the Taliban have issued over 100 edicts separating and segmenting women and girls from the rest of society and fundamentally subordinating them in both public and political life. Women are banned from secondary and university education, from holding public or political office, from parks, baths, and gyms, from television and radio presenting, from being treated by male doctors, from renewing their law licenses, from obtaining their university transcripts and certificates, and from leaving their homes without a male chaperone.

International organizations, scholars, and activists have pointed to similar oppression and restrictions on Iranian women and girls as constituting a system of gender apartheid.<sup>18</sup> In September 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini—at the hands of the Iranian morality police—for the alleged crime of improperly wearing her hijab, sparked large-scale protests throughout the country. Iranian women are prohibited from obtaining a passport and traveling abroad without their legal

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<sup>15</sup> UN Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries, ‘Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court’, 17 July 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Karima Bennoune, ‘The international obligation to counter gender apartheid in Afghanistan’, *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 54: 1, 2022, pp. 1–88, <https://hrlr.law.columbia.edu/files/2022/12/Bennoune-Finalized-12.09.22.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *The phenomenon of an institutionalized system of discrimination, segregation, disrespect for human dignity and exclusion of women and girls* (New York: UN, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Nia, ‘Gender apartheid is a horror’.

guardian's permission, are constitutionally banned from top political positions, are denied the right to study certain university fields (e.g., aerospace engineering), and are not equal to men in inheritance, divorce, marriage, or custody.<sup>19</sup>

There are several arguments for why the concept of gender apartheid is needed according to proponents. First, there are key conceptual distinctions between gender persecution and gender apartheid. Persecution is defined as the “intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group.”<sup>20</sup> Apartheid, in contrast, entails a greater scope and severity of abuses—it is an *institutionalized* and *systematic regime* of oppression.<sup>21</sup> Distinct crimes require distinct concepts and legal statutes to avoid gaps in accountability.

Second, the assumption is that using the language of gender apartheid and codifying it under international law would spur tangible policy action to address the harm. As Bennoune, one of the primary scholarly supporters of the concept of gender apartheid, writes,

“In fact, the symbolic and expressive importance of applying the apartheid concept to a situation like Taliban Afghanistan is profound. Like ‘genocide,’ using the term ‘apartheid’ enhances the ‘mobilization of shame’...It does so more effectively than terms such as ‘discrimination’...This framing puts pressure on governments, international organizations, and transnational corporations.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, ‘Shattering women's rights, shattering lives’, *International Bar Association*, 4 March 2024, <https://www.ibanet.org/New-Publication-The-Gender-Apartheid-Inquiry-Report-into-the-situation-of-women-and-girls-in-Afghanistan-and-Iran>.

<sup>20</sup> UN Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries, ‘Rome Statute’. The “groups” included here encompass a wider swath of identity categories than the crime of apartheid: political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, and *gender*.

<sup>21</sup> Bennoune, ‘The international obligation’, p. 55; Ashraph et al., *Amending*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Bennoune, ‘The international obligation’, p. 58–59.

Similarly, the organizers of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign argue,

“As in the South African context, the legal recognition of the crime...emboldens and further mobilizes diplomatic, legal, and social movements in their allied struggle to dismantle and hold accountable systems of egregious oppression. The word ‘apartheid’ itself carries significant gravitas, which would help encourage states to act.”<sup>23</sup>

There are multiple avenues through which proponents argue the concept of gender apartheid may yield tangible action. One is legal. As noted above, international law on apartheid not only condemns the perpetrators, but includes a requirement for state parties to adopt measures to ameliorate the harm. A second key pathway relates to the formation of mass social movements, like in the South African case. The idea being that the stigma of apartheid, especially given the precedent of South Africa, will mobilize mass opposition and put pressure on governments to take action. This goal of the gender apartheid movement goes back to the 1990s. In 1998, Emma Bonino, an Italian senator and minister of foreign affairs, organized the Flower for the Women of Kabul campaign, whose “goal was to mobilize public opinion against gender apartheid in Afghanistan and elsewhere.”<sup>24</sup> However, the argument that the language of gender apartheid can impact public opinion and spur social movements is an assumption that requires empirical testing.

### **The Impact of Framing on Public Opinion**

A large area of study among scholars of public opinion<sup>25</sup> and mass social movements<sup>26</sup> relates to the impact of framing, which is “the way the story is written or produced, including orienting

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<sup>23</sup> Ashraph et al., *Amending*, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Gallagher, ‘The international campaign against gender apartheid in Afghanistan’, *UCLA Journal of International Affairs* 5: 2, 2000, pp. 367–402 at p. 389, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45302146>.

<sup>25</sup> Chong and Druckman, ‘Framing theory’; Oxley, ‘Framing and political decision making’.

<sup>26</sup> Benford and Snow, ‘Framing processes and social movements’; Tarrow, *Power in movement*.

headlines, the specific word choices, the rhetorical devices employed.”<sup>27</sup> There are two broad types of frames—equivalence frames and issue (or emphasis) frames. Equivalence frames relate to “how the use of different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases (e.g., 5% unemployment or 95% employment) causes individuals to alter their preferences.”<sup>28</sup> Issue frames involve changes in language that entail more substantive differences. For example, they can stress different values at stake in an issue, such as whether a Ku Klux Klan rally is a manifestation of hate speech or free speech.<sup>29</sup> Issue frames can also relate to the degree or severity of something, such as whether the killing of civilians rises to the level of genocide.<sup>30</sup>

As discussed above, there are salient definitional and legal distinctions between gender apartheid and gender persecution, meaning these two frames are *not* equivalent in meaning. Gender apartheid is supposed to connote a greater severity and scope of human rights abuses—it involves an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination, rather than solely a deprivation of fundamental rights. Consequently, using the language of gender apartheid versus gender persecution falls under the heading of issue framing rather than equivalence framing. Similarly, Valentino and Weinberg argue that using the language of genocide rather than mass killing is a type of issue framing.<sup>31</sup>

Different issue frames, which can involve quite subtle variations, often structure how audiences view an issue or event, even when they do not change the factual content of the

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph N. Capella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of cynicism: the press and the public good* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> James N. Druckman, ‘The implications of framing effects for citizen competence’, *Political Behavior* 23: 3, 2001, pp. 225–56 at p. 228, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015006907312>.

<sup>29</sup> Nelson et al., ‘Media framing’.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin A. Valentino and Ethan M. Weinberg, ‘More than words? Genocide, holocaust analogies, and public opinion in the United States’, *Journal of Human Rights* 16: 3, 2017, pp. 276–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2016.1239067>.

<sup>31</sup> Valentino and Weinberg, ‘More than words?’, p. 278.

information being conveyed. On topics as diverse as public support for war,<sup>32</sup> gun rights,<sup>33</sup> environmental policy,<sup>34</sup> and social welfare spending,<sup>35</sup> scholars have found evidence that issue framing can matter. These dynamics suggest that it is plausible that using the language of gender apartheid rather than gender persecution will impact public opinion. If this type of framing can move the views of a sufficiently large number of individuals, then it could increase the likelihood of a mass social movement forming. Indeed, some scholars argue that framing is key to the formation of social movements, as it can help diagnose a problem, identify potential solutions, and motivate individuals and groups to take action.<sup>36</sup> The language of gender apartheid relates directly to the identification of a problem, and this kind of “injustice frame” is common throughout historical social movements,<sup>37</sup> including the campaign against apartheid in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States. Many social movement scholars also argue that frames can motivate individuals to take action by shaping their perceptions of the severity of the problem. For example, anti-nuclear activists highlighted the possibility that nuclear weapons could cause global Armageddon rather than “just” a mass casualty event.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, using the language of gender apartheid rather than gender persecution is meant to connote a greater degree of severity of human rights abuses.

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<sup>32</sup> Berinsky and Kinder, ‘Making sense’.

<sup>33</sup> Haider-Markel and Joslyn, ‘Gun policy’.

<sup>34</sup> Spence and Pidgeon, ‘Framing’.

<sup>35</sup> Slothuus and de Vrees, ‘Political parties’.

<sup>36</sup> John Wilson, *Introduction to social movements* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>37</sup> William A. Gamson, *Talking politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Robert D. Benford, ‘You could be the hundredth monkey: collective action frames and vocabularies of motive within the nuclear disarmament movement’, *The Sociological Quarterly* 34: 2, 1993, pp. 195–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1993.tb00387.x>.

However, there are various factors that can reduce the impact of framing on public opinion.<sup>39</sup> As Oxley writes, “framing effects are not automatic. Neither are they inevitable.”<sup>40</sup> If members of the public have a strong predisposition about an issue, then framing is less likely to move them. Relatedly, if they have deeply held views about a particular frame, that might affect its impact. If the source of a frame (e.g., media outlet or international organization) lacks credibility, then framing is less likely to be effective. When respondents are presented with multiple competing frames, a single frame is also less likely to have an impact. A lack of preexisting knowledge about a frame (e.g., the concept and value of free speech) may further render it rationally and emotionally inert.

Per this logic, some empirical analyses yield null or mixed effects. Most relevant to this study is the work of Valentino and Weinberg, which found that framing an event as “genocide” rather than the large-scale and intentional “killing” of civilians has little impact on US public opinion.<sup>41</sup> Like the concept of apartheid, genocide involves a greater severity and scope of human rights violations than large-scale “killing,” and many policymakers, scholars, and activists believe the language of “genocide” will uniquely rally world opinion and compel policy action. Moreover, like (racial) apartheid, a determination that a country is committing genocide obligates third parties to take action under international law to ameliorate the harm. Yet, the distinction between genocide and large-scale killing did not have the expected effect in a controlled experiment. The likely explanation is that the public surveyed believed both “genocide” and large-scale “killing” were reprehensible, and did not make a significant distinction between them. Indeed, respondents

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<sup>39</sup> For an overview, see, e.g., Chong and Druckman, ‘Framing theory’; Benford and Snow, ‘Framing processes and social movements’.

<sup>40</sup> Oxley, ‘Framing and political decision making’, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Valentino and Weinberg, ‘More than words?’

registered high levels of support for the contention that the “perpetrators should be punished” and the “perpetrators are evil” no matter which frame they were randomly assigned.

This null finding brings into question the arguments of scholars and activists like Bennoune, who contend, “like ‘genocide,’ using the term ‘apartheid’ enhances the ‘mobilization of shame’...”<sup>42</sup> The framing of apartheid may simply be too subtle to have a significant impact. Relative to issue frames that suggest entirely different ways of viewing an issue (e.g., the KKK is engaged in hate speech versus free speech), a gender apartheid frame compared to a gender persecution frame is more subtle because they both suggest what the actor is doing is abhorrent, but to different degrees. In other words, compared to frames that have a positive versus a negative valence (e.g., whether a gun law is framed as increasing safety or infringing on Constitutional rights), issue frames that hold valence constant as negative (e.g., whether the mistreatment of women and girls is framed as gender persecution or gender apartheid) may be less likely to cause respondents to fundamentally rethink their stance on an issue.

The discussion thus far informs our first preregistered hypothesis, which is consistent with the arguments of #EndGenderApartheid campaign:

H<sub>1</sub> (The Effect of Apartheid Language): Support for government action to help foreign women and girls being repressed will be stronger when their treatment is framed as gender apartheid rather than gender persecution.

In terms of mechanisms that might explain support for H<sub>1</sub>, we preregistered that the framing of gender apartheid would increase perceptions that there is a moral obligation to intervene, that failing to intervene will harm a country’s reputation, and that the actor carrying out apartheid is more threatening. Nevertheless, given the null findings related to the use of a genocide frame and

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<sup>42</sup> Bennoune, ‘The international obligation’, pp. 58–59.

the above logic, we explicitly noted in our preanalysis plan that “we recognize a null effect is also very likely.”

We also preregistered several factors that might strengthen or weaken the public opinion impact of gender apartheid framing. A lack of preexisting knowledge about a frame can make it less meaningful rationally or emotionally. For example, if many members of the public do not know what apartheid means or its historical context in South Africa, then simply using the language of “apartheid” may not have a significant effect. We thus theorized that providing background about the term would increase the strength of the frame:

H<sub>2</sub> (The Effect of Apartheid Background Information): Support for government action to help foreign women being repressed will be stronger when respondents are given context about what apartheid is compared to when they are not.

There is also the possibility of spillover effects—that other human rights campaigns may impact the efficacy of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign. Whether frames can influence public opinion beyond the specific issues they feature is debated. Some studies find little to no evidence they can.<sup>43</sup> Others conclude spillover is possible when there is sufficient structural similarity between the issues and frames, such that individuals can reasonably make a logical or emotional connection between them. One study, for example, finds evidence that frames invoking government distrust over handling healthcare also impacted American citizens’ views about the efficacy of government spending to stimulate the economy in times of recession.<sup>44</sup> Spillover effects have also been found for issues related to race and vaccines.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Coppock and Green, ‘Do belief systems exhibit dynamic constraint’.

<sup>44</sup> Hopkins and Mummolo, ‘Assessing the breadth of framing effects’.

<sup>45</sup> Trujillo et al., ‘COVID-19 spillover effects’; Nicholas A. Valentino, Vincent L. Hutchings and Ismail K. White, ‘Cues that matter: how political ads prime racial attitudes during campaigns’, *American Political Science Review* 96: 1, 2002, pp. 75–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402004240>.

We preregistered an expectation that there would be spillover between framing in human rights campaigns regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the #EndGenderApartheid human rights campaign. In particular, we hypothesized that the apartheid frame would have a smaller impact on supporters of Israel than supporters of Palestine. A frequent charge against the Israeli government is that they are constructing a system of apartheid vis-à-vis Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. Supporters of Israel often vigorously refute this claim and believe the concept of apartheid is being improperly applied. Therefore, pro-Israeli respondents might view the charge of gender apartheid as not particularly believable or even respond with anger. By contrast, the language of gender apartheid may be more emotionally resonant with Americans that express greater pro-Palestinian sentiment. Since the two issue-areas are proximate in that they both involve human rights campaigns and the rhetorical charge of “apartheid,” we believed spillover could reasonably occur, but in a more nuanced way than studies searching for this kind of effect among the population in the aggregate:

H<sub>3</sub> (The Effect of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Views): The effect of the gender apartheid frame will be diminished among respondents that indicate greater sympathy towards Israel than Palestine.

Support for this argument would demonstrate that human rights campaigns can have unexpected consequences. They can increase support for related, but distinct, campaigns among some (e.g., pro-Palestinian individuals) and decrease it among others (e.g., pro-Israeli individuals). As such, this hypothesis also contributes to debates about when and how backlash to human rights campaigns can occur, as well as the interdependence between different campaigns.

### **The Impact of International Law on Public Opinion**

Another key argument of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign is that codifying gender apartheid as illegal under international law will further mobilize individuals and states to take action to

combat it. This argument ties into broader debates about the efficacy of international law. Skeptics contend that international law has no independent effect on state behavior or individual opinion, and, instead, simply reflects the balance of power and thus the preferences of the strong.<sup>46</sup> Although much research focuses on the effect of international law at the state-level, a growing body of work recognizes the significance of individual-level dynamics. In part, this is a reflection of greater consensus that public opinion directly impacts the views of policymakers, even in the realm of foreign policy.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to more skeptical views, much empirical research has found that international law does indeed influence public attitudes, either through reputational concerns about violations<sup>48</sup> or beliefs in the morality of its rules.<sup>49</sup> While international law creates a formal obligation that states are technically required to follow, laws perceived as legitimate will likely generate the greatest impact on individual and state behavior. As Finnemore and Toope write, “legitimate law generates obligation, not just in a formal sense but also in a felt sense.”<sup>50</sup> To the extent that international laws protecting women and girls from harm are viewed as rational and necessary, and thus legitimate, they may have a relatively strong impact on public opinion.

Prior research finds that information about international law significantly impacts public opinion in the context of interstate conflict, such as the use of nuclear weapons<sup>51</sup> or drones,<sup>52</sup> as

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<sup>46</sup> John Mearsheimer, ‘The false promise of international institutions’, *International Security* 19: 3, 1994, pp. 5–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Tomz, Jessica L.P. Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, ‘Public opinion and decisions about military force in democracies’, *International Organization* 74: 1, 2020, pp. 119–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818319000341>.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Dale Kim, ‘Reputation and compliance with international human rights law’, *Journal of East Asian Studies* 19: 2, 2019, pp. 215–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2019.20>.

<sup>49</sup> Kreps and Wallace, ‘International law, military effectiveness, and public support for drone strikes’.

<sup>50</sup> Martha Finnemore and Stephen J. Toope, ‘Alternatives to legalization: richer views of law and politics’, *International Organization* 55: 3, 2001, pp. 743–58 at p. 749, <https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180152507614>.

<sup>51</sup> Carpenter and Montgomery, ‘The stopping power’.

<sup>52</sup> Kreps and Wallace, ‘International law, military effectiveness, and public support for drone strikes’.

well as in the realm of domestic human rights behavior, such as the use of torture.<sup>53</sup> Research on refugee admissions even finds that the effect of international law cues on public opinion is robust to countervailing elite cues.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, extant work demonstrates the effect weakens or even disappears in certain national contexts, such as in Israel,<sup>55</sup> or if respondents have a strong preexisting policy preference.<sup>56</sup> Still, given the generally strong findings on the impact of international law on public opinion, especially in the US context, we preregistered the following hypothesis:

H4 (The Effect of International Law): Support for government action to help foreign women being repressed will be weaker when respondents are informed that their treatment is not technically illegal under international law compared to when they are informed their treatment is illegal or when illegality is not explicitly stated.

Theoretically, we expect there is a greater likelihood of H4 holding than H1. Whereas the distinction between gender apartheid and gender persecution is relatively subtle because both terms hold a negative valence, the contrast between legality and illegality is stronger because it involves a difference in valence (positive vs. negative).

## Research Design

### *Study 1: The US Public*

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment on the American public. We chose to focus on the US given its outsized impact on foreign affairs. Although the strength of experiments is internal validity, and external validity across time and space is a legitimate question, prior research demonstrates that international relations experiments tend to generalize beyond the

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<sup>53</sup> Wallace, 'International law and public attitudes toward torture'.

<sup>54</sup> Anton Strezhnev, Beth A. Simmons, and Matthew D. Kim, 'Rulers or rules? International law, elite cues, and public opinion', *European Journal of International Law* 30: 4, 2019, pp. 1281–1302, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chaa002>.

<sup>55</sup> Yonatan Lupu and Geoffrey P.R. Wallace, 'Violence, nonviolence, and the effects of international human rights law', *American Journal of Political Science* 63: 2, 2019, pp. 411–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12416>.

<sup>56</sup> Chaudoin, 'Promises or policies?'

United States.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, explicitly replicating this study in other countries would be a fruitful avenue for future work.

Study 1 deployed a fully crossed 2x3 experimental design. Before presenting respondents with the treatments, we asked a series of demographic and attitudinal questions, including political identification, views towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, self-reported and objectively measured foreign policy knowledge, hawkishness, and hostile and benevolent sexism. The first factor we randomized was whether respondents read a vignette about the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan or Iran. Both countries are the subject of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign and have been highlighted by real-world activists and international organizations as mistreating women and girls, making their use in our survey realistic. Given important differences between the two countries (e.g., America's over 20 years of war in Afghanistan, widespread media coverage of the Taliban's severe oppression of women, and Iran's superior material capabilities relative to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan) we randomized the country presented to respondents, enabling us to probe the external validity of the impact of language across different contexts.

The second core factor we randomized was the language used to describe the mistreatment of women and girls in Afghanistan or Iran. All respondents were told that they would “read about a situation going on in the world that is based on real events. While we created the mock news article you will read for this study, it is directly inspired by real-world headlines.” The article we presented to the respondents described the oppression of women and girls in Afghanistan or Iran using language drawn from NGO and United Nations reports. The key element we experimentally

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<sup>57</sup> Lotem Bassan-Nygate et al., ‘The generalizability of IR experiments beyond the United States’, *American Political Science Review* 119: 4, 2025, pp. 1649–664, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001199>; Joshua A. Schwartz, Paul Lendway and Abolfazl Nuri, ‘Fossil fuel divestment and public climate change policy preferences: an experimental test in three countries’, *Environmental Politics* 33: 1, 2024, pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2023.2178351>.

manipulated in the vignette was whether the mistreatment of women and girls was described as “gender apartheid” or “gender persecution.” We included this language in multiple places throughout the mock news article to increase its salience, including in the article’s title (in bold), its first sentence, and its last sentence. Importantly, we held constant the description of how women are substantively being oppressed, as well as the source of this information (UN experts), so that the only factor that varied between the treatments was *language*. This was necessary since the #EndGenderApartheid campaign argues that—by itself—using the language of “apartheid” can make a difference. This design choice was also in accordance with the broader literature on framing, much of which finds subtle variations in wording can affect public opinion even when factual content does not vary.

Our discussion of the mistreatment of women and girls combines some elements of thematic framing (a more abstract and general discussion of the evidence) with episodic framing (a more specific discussion of particular cases and people’s experiences), though it is closer to the former because it does not highlight any one individual’s personal story.<sup>58</sup> Since prior research demonstrates that episodic frames can have a greater impact on the public’s policy preferences when they engage emotions,<sup>59</sup> as the mistreatment of women and girls is likely to do for many respondents, our design may underestimate *aggregate* support for policy action relative to a stronger and more explicitly episodic frame. However, since the description of mistreatment is held constant for all respondents, irrespective of whether they were randomly assigned to receive the language of gender apartheid or gender persecution, this design choice should not bias *relative* support for policy action across treatment conditions, which is our core quantity of interest.

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<sup>58</sup> Shanto Iyengar, *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Lene Aarøe, ‘Investigating frame strength: the case of episodic and thematic frames’, *Political Communication* 28: 2, 2011, pp. 207–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2011.568041>.

To evaluate H<sub>2</sub>, and as an easier test of the arguments made by the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, we randomly presented some respondents with background information on apartheid. This included the historical origins of the term in South Africa and an explanation of what makes apartheid unique relative to other forms of mistreatment. Randomizing whether respondents received this background information treatment also enhanced the realism of our vignette, as activists making public appeals using the term “apartheid” will often reference the South African case.

After reading the mock news article, respondents were then asked a series of outcome questions. Our core dependent variables were whether respondents supported a series of policies that could plausibly help relieve the suffering of Afghan or Iranian women and girls. We asked about eight different policies—which entailed varying levels of escalation by and costs to the United States—to probe the different ways language might impact public opinion. These policies included UN Security Council condemnation, International Criminal Court referral, pressuring international organizations to push for the inclusion of women in political negotiations, severe economic sanctions, increased foreign aid, allowing more women to immigrate to the US, conducting air strikes, and regime change. Second, we asked about potential mechanisms that could explain greater support for these policies, such as whether the US has a moral obligation to intervene in Afghanistan or Iran to help women. Third, we included a behavioral measure asking whether respondents would be willing to write a letter to the president urging him to take action to help women in these contexts. Fourth, we bluntly asked respondents to rank four related concepts in terms of their severity: gender apartheid, gender persecution, gender-based violence, and gender discrimination.

Finally, to test H<sub>4</sub>, we included a secondary experiment, where after answering the above outcome questions we randomly assigned respondents that received the gender apartheid treatment to read an additional sentence, either:

(a) racial apartheid is illegal under international law whereas gender apartheid is not technically illegal (a true statement), or

(b) “the crime of apartheid is illegal under international law” (technically a true statement, but somewhat misleading given that *gender* apartheid is outside of its current scope).<sup>60</sup>

Since gender persecution is explicitly illegal under international law, to avoid deception all respondents that received this treatment subsequently received information highlighting this fact. After this second treatment, we re-asked our primary dependent variable questions regarding US policy responses to assess whether information about international law moves public opinion.

We fielded Study 1 in February 2025 on a sample of approximately 1,200 American citizens. The study was carried out via Lucid, which uses quota sampling to match census benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and region to create a more representative sample. Research shows Lucid samples replicate the findings of previous studies.<sup>61</sup> We included a pretreatment screener question to weed out inattentive respondents. Prior work demonstrates that this does not introduce bias as long as it is conducted pre-treatment, and it also makes this an easier test for finding a significant effect of language by reducing the likelihood that inattention will lead to a false negative.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Our study was approved by the authors’ IRBs and we included a debrief at the end of the survey clarifying the legal status of gender apartheid.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Coppock and Oliver A. McClellan, ‘Validating the demographic, political, psychological, and experimental results obtain from a new source of online survey respondents’, *Research & Politics* 6: 1, 2019, pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018822174>.

<sup>62</sup> Peter M. Aronow, Jonathon Baron and Lauren Pinson, ‘A note on dropping experimental subjects who fail a manipulation check’, *Political Analysis* 27: 4, 2019, pp. 572–89, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2019.5>.

## *Study 2: US Elites*

Besides whether US-based experiments on the general public have external validity to other countries, another question is whether they have external validity to elites. Given that left-wing elite language on gender and racial issues (e.g., “birthing people” and “Latinx”) often differs from public discourse, it is plausible using the language of gender apartheid may only have an effect on elites, especially left-leaning educated elites.

To test this possibility and the external validity of our public experiment, we conducted a follow-on study of just over 100 elites between March and May 2025. Respondents were recruited directly by the authors via social media posts on LinkedIn, Facebook, Bluesky, and X, as well as through the listservs of relevant sections of the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association. As outlined in appendix Table A.14, this sample is far from representative, as it is highly skewed towards left-leaning individuals, many with PhDs, who have worked in academia or in NGOs. However, given that this is the exact demographic one might expect the language of gender apartheid to hold strong resonance with, Study 2 may be an even easier test of the impact of this kind of language than Study 1.

Given the small sample size, we utilized a within-subject design in Study 2—where each survey subject serves as their own control—to maximize statistical power. Despite theoretical concerns about consistency pressures and demand effects, prior empirical work demonstrates that within-subject designs yield substantively similar results compared to between-subject designs, but can yield “dramatic” gains in statistical power.<sup>63</sup> As such, this approach is commonly deployed in elite experiments.

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<sup>63</sup> Scott Clifford, Geoffrey Sheagley and Spencer Piston, ‘Increasing precision without altering treatment effects: repeated measure designs in survey experiments’, *American Political Science Review* 115: 3, 2021, pp. 1048–65, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000241>.

The mock news article and outcome variable questions were identical in Studies 1 and 2. The key difference is that in Study 2 all respondents were first presented with a mock news article about *gender persecution* in Afghanistan or Iran, asked the outcome variable questions, and then informed that experts have also concluded the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan or Iran qualifies as *gender apartheid*, and finally re-asked the outcome variable questions again.<sup>64</sup> The difference in respondents' policy preferences after receiving the gender persecution vignette and then receiving the information about gender apartheid is the key quantity of interest. Though order and demand effects, as well as social desirability bias, could theoretically impact the results despite the findings of prior literature, we contend that—if anything—our highly educated left-skewed sample may feel more pressure to support bold US action after receiving the gender apartheid frame. Consequently, our design in Study 2 may make this an easier test of finding an impact of language.

## Results

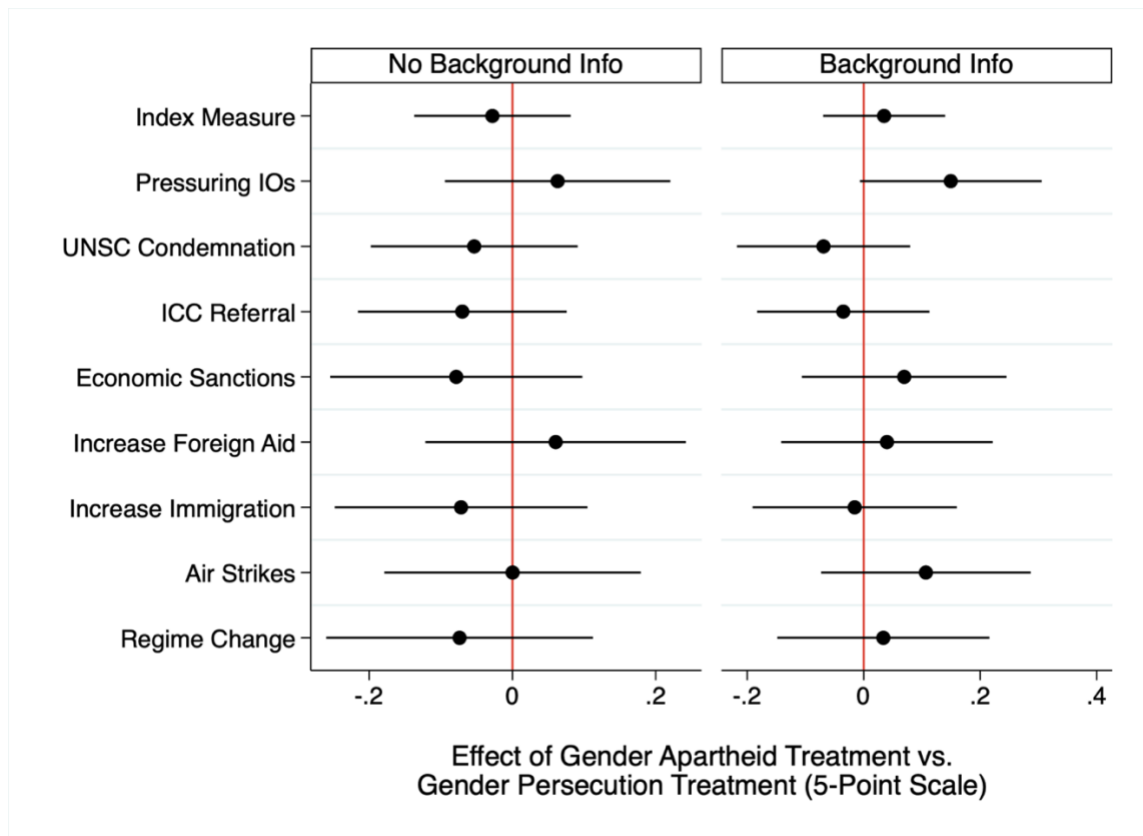
In contrast to the arguments of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, some significant findings in the framing literature, and our preregistered expectations, we found no evidence in either Study 1 or Study 2 that using the language of gender apartheid rather than gender persecution impacts respondents' views ( $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ). Figure 1 outlines the null results for our public sample (see figure A.1 in the appendix for the elite results). Across each of the eight core policies we ask about, we found no statistically significant impact of language. This null effect even held for respondents that received the background information about apartheid, which was an easier test for finding an

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<sup>64</sup> We did not randomize the order respondents received the gender persecution and apartheid frames because we expected receiving information about the (theoretically weaker) accusation of gender persecution *after* receiving information about the (theoretically stronger) accusation of gender apartheid would have no effect on respondents' views. While we believe this design choice was logical, we acknowledge it could cause order effects.

effect. In the appendix, we also demonstrate that the language of gender apartheid does not have the expected impact when controlling for other factors in a regression (Table A.1) or analyzing other dependent variables, such as whether the US has a moral obligation to intervene, threat perceptions towards Afghanistan/Iran, and willingness to write a letter to the president (Table A.2). Respondents simply did not distinguish between gender persecution and gender apartheid in ways that altered policy preferences. The difference in severity and scope between gender apartheid and gender persecution was too subtle to significantly move respondents' views.

**Figure 1: The Null Impact of Language—Gender Apartheid vs. Gender Persecution**



Note: This figure shows that respondents are not more likely to support various policies to combat the mistreatment of women and girls when this conduct is described as gender apartheid rather than gender persecution, even when background information about the definition of apartheid is provided.

The ranking exercise we had respondents complete at the end of Study 1 also belies the expectations of the #EndGenderApartheid campaign and helps explain our null result. A plurality

of respondents (46%) ranked “gender-based violence” as more severe than “gender apartheid” (only 24%). This even held for respondents that received the background information about apartheid (although, as expected, this information made respondents rank apartheid as relatively more severe, indicating respondents were indeed paying attention to the treatment language). More importantly, respondents, on average, ranked gender persecution as slightly more severe than gender apartheid (appendix Table A.6).<sup>65</sup> For these respondents, it is unsurprising that the framing of gender apartheid did not increase support for human rights action. However, we also found null effects even for respondents that did rank gender apartheid as more severe than gender persecution, indicating that the framing of gender apartheid versus gender persecution is likely too subtle to make a difference, even for those that view the former as, at least, marginally worse than the latter. The reason is most likely that no matter the relative ranking, respondents generally viewed the mistreatment of women and girls by Afghanistan or Iran as malign. For example, whether they received the apartheid or the persecution treatment, or viewed the former as more severe than the latter or vice-versa, about 75% of respondents agreed that the treatment of women and girls in this case is “as unacceptable as the discriminatory treatment of African Americans under Jim Crow in the American South after the end of slavery.”

In the appendix, we also test for heterogeneous effects. That is, whether using the language of gender apartheid rather than gender persecution has a stronger effect among particular subgroups (Tables A.3 and A.12). Again, we generally found null effects. This included for factors we preregistered as potential moderators, such as respondent gender, political identification, hostile or benevolent sexism, knowledge about international relations, cosmopolitanism, and

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<sup>65</sup> By contrast, a plurality (49.5%) of elite respondents in Study 2 ranked gender apartheid as the most severe (appendix Table A.13). While this supports our intuition that Study 2 was an easier test than Study 1, it also makes the null result in Study 2 for our policy outcome variables even more informative.

whether respondents were presented with an article about Afghanistan or Iran.<sup>66</sup> However, per our expectations related to spillover effects (H<sub>3</sub>), we did find statistically significant evidence that respondent support for policy action when using the language of gender apartheid rather than gender persecution was lower for more pro-Israeli respondents and higher for more pro-Palestinian respondents, even when controlling for other factors like political identification and hawkishness (appendix Table A.4). For example, respondents that scored above the median in pro-Israeli sentiment were almost nine percentage points less supportive of sanctions and about eight percentage points less supportive of allowing a significant number of women to immigrate to the US than respondents that scored below the median in pro-Israeli sentiment. This demonstrates that backlash to one human rights campaign may not be isolated to that issue-area, but can also impact other, related, issue-areas.

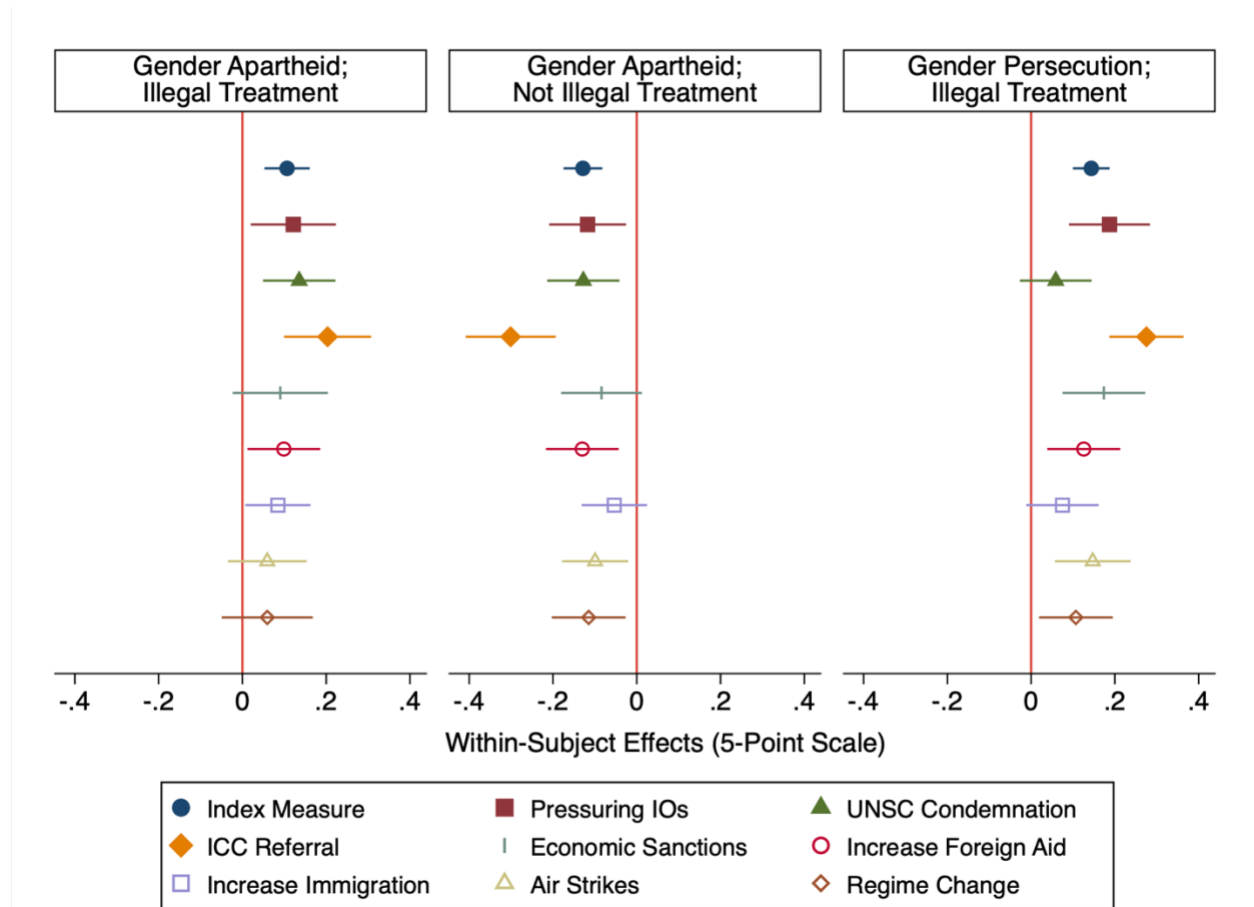
While we found null effects for language in Study 1 and Study 2, in Study 1 we did find a significant impact for the international law treatments on our index measure of policy support (H<sub>4</sub>). As outlined in Figure 2, informing respondents that gender apartheid is illegal under international law generally increased their support for policies to help women (left-most panel), whereas informing them it is not technically illegal actually decreased their support for these policies (middle panel). This finding accords with prior research on the significant impact of international law on public opinion. It also suggests that real-world efforts to codify gender apartheid as illegal under international law could, all else equal, strengthen the impact that the accusation of gender apartheid has on public opinion. However, we also found evidence that informing respondents that gender persecution is illegal under international law increased US public support for policies to

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<sup>66</sup> Though we do find that hostile sexists are generally less likely—no matter whether the language of gender apartheid or gender persecution is used—to support policies to combat the oppression of foreign women while the opposite holds for benevolent sexists (appendix Table A.1).

help women. Therefore, it is not the case that appeals to international law have a greater impact when the charge is gender apartheid rather than gender persecution. As such, efforts to codify the illegality of gender apartheid under international law will not necessarily have a unique impact on public opinion relative to existing international legal prohibitions against gender persecution.

**Figure 2:** The Significant Effect of Information about International Law



Note: This figure shows that respondents are more likely to support various policies to combat the mistreatment of women and girls when this conduct is described as illegal and are less likely to do so when it is described as not illegal.

## Conclusion

The prevalence of debates over language reflects a belief that how issues are framed matters. This assumption underpins the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, and prior research shows that framing—including subtle variations in whether a phenomenon is presented in a positive or negative light—can have substantial effects on public opinion. By contrast, our findings indicate

that framing the oppression of women and girls as gender apartheid rather than gender persecution does not significantly affect the views and policy preferences of the US public or elites in our studies. Building on prior research on the null effects of using a mass killing versus a genocide frame,<sup>67</sup> our study indicates that there are limits to language and certain types of framing. Specifically, separate frames that maintain a constant valence—whether negative (e.g., gender apartheid versus gender persecution) or positive—are less likely to be perceived as distinct, and as a result, are less likely to shift public opinion at the margins. A key implication for activist movements like the #EndGenderApartheid campaign is that emphasizing other dimensions of framing—such as thematic versus episodic framing or prognostic framing that recommends a particular course of action—may be more effective than attempting to highlight subtle distinctions between concepts like gender apartheid and gender persecution.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, our findings related to providing information about international law extend and reinforce academic work that comes to similar conclusions. The comparison between legality and illegality (frames with different valence) is more pronounced than between gender apartheid and gender persecution (same valence), which helps explain the disparity in effects. For activists, this suggests that efforts to codify gender apartheid—and other human rights abuses—as illegal under international law hold promise, and perhaps greater promise than relatively subtle rhetorical framing strategies. The ICC’s October 2025 conviction of Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, a senior leader of the Janjaweed militia in Darfur, Sudan, for crimes against humanity and war

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<sup>67</sup> Valentino and Weinberg, ‘More than words?’

<sup>68</sup> Aarøe, ‘Investigating frame strength’; Benford and Snow, ‘Framing processes and social movements’.

crimes—including *gender-based persecution*, the first such conviction at the Court—reinforces the potential of these efforts.<sup>69</sup>

Our project also highlights several promising avenues for future work. First, despite some findings that international relations experiments tend to be externally valid cross-nationally, future studies could test whether our results strengthen or even weaken in other contexts. Gender apartheid may be a more effective frame in countries intimately familiar with the horrors of apartheid (e.g., South Africa) and less effective for countries that believe they have been wrongly accused of the practice (e.g., Israel).<sup>70</sup> Second, future work could test whether the language of gender apartheid has a stronger effect relative to weaker conceptual baselines than the language of gender persecution. Our null results may be driven by the fact that both terms are perceived as indicating a relatively high degree of severity—similar to the distinction between genocide and mass killing—leading to no marginal effects on public opinion. Third, analyzing how similar one human rights campaign must be to another for spillover effects to hold can further elucidate the interrelationship between distinct campaigns. Given the common rhetorical language of “apartheid” in the Israeli-Palestinian case and the #EndGenderApartheid campaign, this may have been a relatively most-likely case for spillover effects to occur. Fourth, while this study focused on the efficacy of public relations framing efforts by opponents of human rights abuses, future research could analyze the relevance of framing by the perpetrators themselves. For instance, do they justify their actions by referencing religious tenets or the supposed need for security, and how does this impact global public opinion? This is just one of the many factors that impact public opinion on human rights abuses that this study does not test. Finally, scholars could assess how

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<sup>69</sup> International Criminal Court, ‘Statement of the ICC office of the prosecutor on the conviction of Mr Abd-Al-Rahman’, 6 August 2025, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-office-prosecutor-conviction-mr-abd-al-rahman>.

<sup>70</sup> Lupu and Wallace, ‘Violence, nonviolence, and the effects of international human rights law’.

varying information about the specific mistreatment women and girls are enduring (which we held constant), or the international legal obligations third party states have or do not have to act, impacts policy preferences. Because public opinion on human rights abuses matters, identifying effective messaging strategies remains a critically important area of research.