When Erik Melander first encountered a series of papers linking gender inequality and war, the premise struck him as fishy. Melander had trained as a conflict scholar in the 1990s, when the forces underlying war were relatively well established: a lack of democracy, a low level of economic development, and the presence of nationalism. The status of women wasn’t even on the list.

So he was not convinced when, in 2000, he read the first in a group of studies by political scientist Mary Caprioli of the University of Minnesota, Duluth, that challenged some closely held views about violence and war by connecting the low position of women to conflicts from international aggression to civil war. The idea that the status of women helped predict a state’s volatility sounded “like wishful thinking,” recalls Melander, deputy director of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program at Uppsala University in Sweden. Part of the problem was what he assumed was a simplistic approach to sex differences underlying the connection. The notion that women are biologically so hard-wired for peace that simply giving them more say in international affairs yielded tranquility seemed suspect. “I expected that when controlling for other factors,” he says, “any relationship would go away, or the effects of gender equality would be very small.”

Then he tested the hypothesis himself. Melander checked the claim that gender inequality correlated with escalated levels of conflict within states. Measuring the status of women by looking at the sex of a country’s highest leader, the proportion of women in the legislature, and the ratio of women to men who receive higher education, he controlled for factors like democracy, economic development, and the time since a country’s last civil war. To his surprise, the results, published in International Studies Quarterly in 2005, confirmed the finding that had aroused his suspicion. In a second study published that same year, he broadened the picture: States where women were oppressed also had higher rates of political imprisonments, killings, and disappearances.

Melander’s research is among a nascent body of work in international relations showing gender inequality to be an important security barometer. By focusing on gender inequality rather than biological sex differences, these researchers say they have identified a previously overlooked trigger of conflict. Causality is far from proven, however, and some critics say that gender inequality could be a proxy for other underlying causes.

Caprioli, whose work first piqued Melander’s interest, is in some ways the ringleader of the new group. From 2000 to 2006, she published a series of widely cited statistical analyses linking the low status of women to a host of negative phenomena. After controlling for other factors, she found states where women are treated poorly are more likely to become embroiled in disputes with other states, more likely to turn to violence in those disputes, and more likely to erupt into civil war.

Still, she recalls a reviewer writing on one of her first published papers: “I don’t recognize this as research.” She says: “It was very hard in the beginning because I was pioneering a new field of study.”

Born warriors?

Throughout human history, males have been the more violent sex. Skeletons unearthed from early human societies show more head injuries among males, and men are believed to have been the aggressors as well as the victims. Gender clearly matters in conflict. But sorting out just how and why it matters—and how significant a role biology and culture each play—has proven a thorny task.

One of the first works to tackle that challenge was the 2001 book War and Gender, by political scientist and American University professor emeritus Joshua S. Goldstein. “That was a seminal piece of work,” says Ismene Gizelis, a political scientist at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. “It brought the issue of gender into international relations and conflict studies.”

The book grew out of a puzzle. If both

Dovish females?

Many scholars contend that women are not inherently more peaceful. Margaret Thatcher led the United Kingdom into war.

Risk factor. A high proportion of teen mothers can suggest low status for women, which correlates with violence and war.
gender roles and war practices vary widely from one culture to the next, Goldstein wondered, why was there not more variation when it came to gender roles in war? When he dug into research from biology, ethology, and anthropology, the obvious explanation—that biology turns women into doves and men into hawks—didn’t completely explain the conundrum. To be sure, Goldstein determined that there are some core biological differences that affect war behavior. Childbirth and motherhood, for example, keep women away from the battlefield. But he contends that inborn traits are not as influential as commonly portrayed—and that biological factors interact with cultural ones.

Testosterone levels, for example, can spike following shifts in a man’s social status, such as getting married or winning a game. “Cultures are responsible for the exaggerated gender roles we see in societies,” Goldstein says. Melander agrees that although “there are evolutionary roots to the male warrior role,” a strictly biological view fails to “take into account the differences between, say, Sweden and Pakistan.”

If a propensity toward fighting were inborn, men might disproportionately report more enthusiasm for war. But even as Goldstein was researching War and Gender, studies were showing that men and women are often remarkably similar in their views on war. In the 1990s, for example, political scientist Mark Tessler and demographer Ina Warriner, then at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, looked at attitudes toward conflict in the Middle East. They relied on surveys from Israel, Egypt, Palestine, and Kuwait in which participants had been asked questions such as, “Do you believe that the Arab-Israeli conflict can be solved by diplomacy or is a military solution required?” They found that men and women barely differed in their answers.

But when Tessler and Warriner shifted their focus away from an individual’s gender toward his or her perspective on gender equality, the picture changed. Along with questions about international aggression, the Middle Eastern survey participants answered questions such as, “Do you think it is more important for a boy to go to school than a girl?” Comparing the responses, the scholars found a strong association between sexism and bellicosity. “You can predict how a person stands toward his or her perspective on gender equality,” Tessler says.

Conflict scholars who focus on gender inequality believe values governing how states behave abroad reflect values within a society. “If you respect women, you also respect the rights of others,” Gizelis says. “As a result, you also deal with conflict in a different way.” Political scientist and University of Maryland, College Park, professor emeritus Ted Robert Gurr has found the same to be true of ethnic discrimination: Societies in which minorities suffer widespread discrimination are also more volatile.

When war does break out, moreover, equal societies tend to be better at restoring peace. In 2009, Gizelis examined 124 civil wars from 1945 to 2000. Evaluating the status of women using indicators such as female-to-male life expectancy ratio and secondary school enrollment ratio, she found that U.N. peacekeeping operations were far more likely to succeed in states where men and women were relatively equal before the war.

Some now hold up this body of work as evidence that raising the status of women is essential to peace. War-torn societies where girls leave school prematurely are less likely to restore peace.

In the meantime, conflict scholars who are focused on gender inequality say the largest issue is being taken seriously. Some investigations of war looking at dozens of variables disregard gender inequality entirely. “Gender-related approaches still are not well integrated into the mainstream of conflict studies,” Goldstein says. “It’s more like two camps living under the same roof but barely talking.” Melander contends that if those ignoring the research were to instead test the hypothesis, as he did, they might change their minds.

—MARA HVISTENDAHL