

In political science research ethics is women's work

*Reporting on research ethics in political science and international publications has in recent years taken on greater importance as a means of modelling best practice and building trust in these fields. Examining these reports across two decades of publications, **Eleanor Knott** and **Denisa Kostovicova** show how ethics work remains a marginal and highly gendered activity.*

Conducting ethical research is vital, as is reporting how we conduct ethical research. Practising good research ethics implies showing respect and care for all those who participate in research. This extends from communities involved, to research collaborators, such as fixers, translators and to researchers themselves.

When research ethics are reported in publications, such as academic journals, we, as readers, can learn about a broader range of ethical dilemmas and best ethical practices. Future researchers can learn and apply these practices and peers can evaluate research better by understanding how researchers discussed and navigated possible ethical challenges.

Reporting research ethics also underpins the legitimacy of social science research and facilitates its social acceptance. It makes future investigations feasible by ensuring that unethical research practices do not alienate potential research participants and wider society.

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Recent discussions about research ethics in political science and international relations (IR) have drawn attention to various ethical dilemmas. These can emerge from research in [conflict-affected communities](#) and work on [sensitive topics](#), alongside challenges related to technological advances and new forms of data, such as [social media data](#). These ethical questions affect qualitative and quantitative scholars equally.

Given the importance of research ethics and its reporting, several questions arise: do scholars report research ethics in their publications? If they do, who reports research ethics and how? And if differences exist, do they [replicate gender-based differences and inequalities](#), just like many other aspects of the profession?

Reporting research ethics

To answer these questions we used two original datasets that provide a comprehensive overview of reporting of research ethics in major political science and IR journals from 2000-2018.

First, we investigated whether an article reports research ethics or not. Second, we looked at *who* is reporting ethics by gender. Third, we analysed if and how men and women report different ethical concerns, such as consent protocols, confidentiality and anonymity, and the risks and benefits of research.

Looking at the percentage of articles that report ethics over time, we observe an 'ethics turn' in the profession (Fig.1). This finding reflects the increasing attention given to research ethics in the profession. Yet, only a minority of articles report ethics.

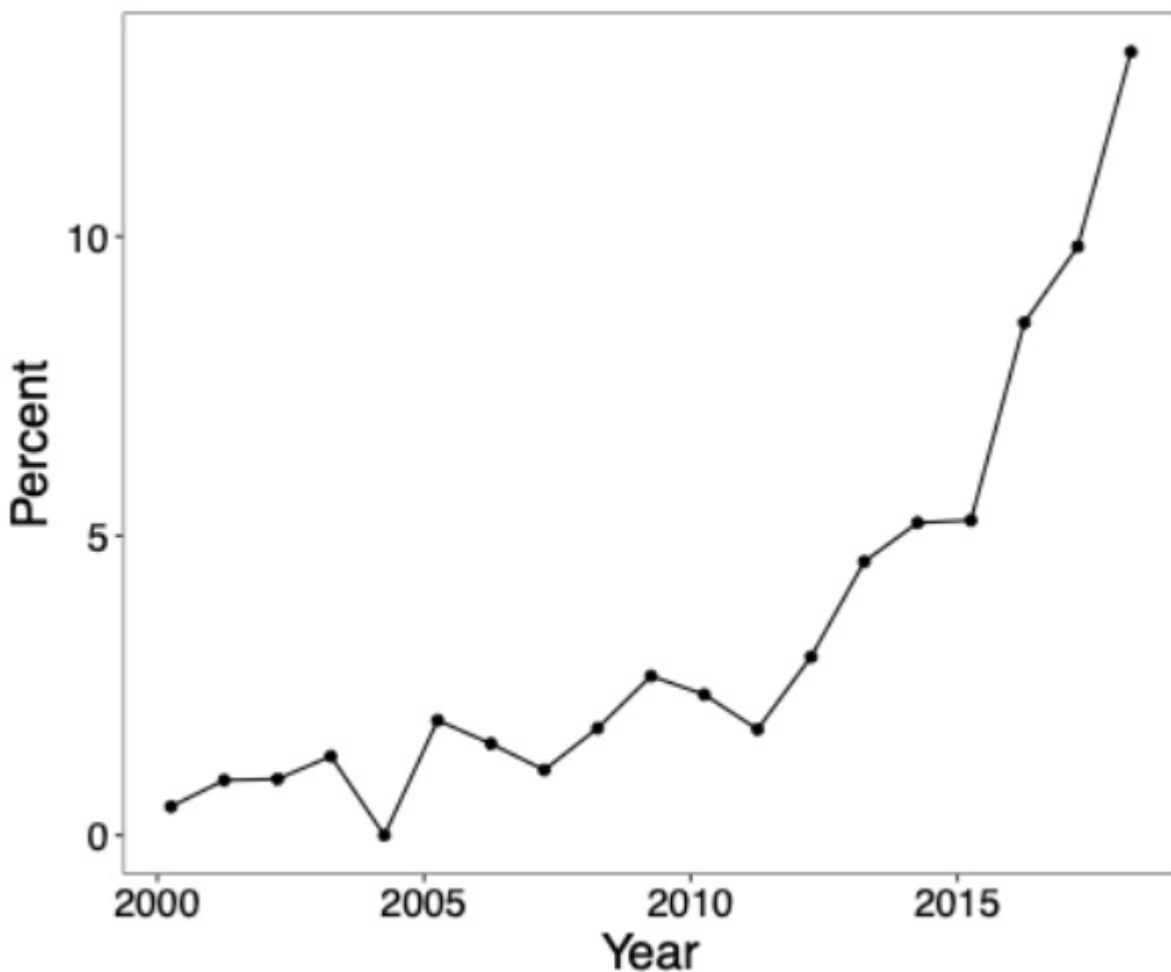


Fig. 1: Percentage of Articles Reporting Ethics over Time.

Of course, there are articles where we would not expect ethics reports, such as those simulating data. However, many articles are conducting research where we might expect ethical issues to arise, such as research with human participants, archival research, or social media data. We estimate that only about 10% of those articles that should be reporting ethics actually do so.

We do not question scholars' ethical conduct of research. Instead, we draw attention to the lack of routine reporting of ethical practices.

Who is making ethics reports?

Of those scholars who report on research ethics, we provide compelling evidence that

women report ethics more than men. For example, the odds of women-only authors reporting ethics are 71.8% higher than men-only (odds ratio = 1.718, $p < .01$). Similarly, the odds of mixed-gender co-authors (1-99% women) reporting ethics are 50.4% higher than men-only (odds ratio = 1.504, $p < .05$). This finding stands regardless of the methods they use.

However, where ethics is reported, it is often reported minimally. Researchers may include a single sentence documenting that a university ethics committee approved the research. Researchers rarely report on consent protocols, let alone what consent means in the context of their research project.

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We find gendered differences again in *how* research ethics is reported. For example, we find more women (65.2%) than men (54%) report confidentiality and anonymity procedures, as well as the risks of research (28.8 vs 19%).

In sum, women disproportionately do the work of ethics reporting in political science and IR. Women take on the burden of demonstrating research integrity, shaping ethics discussions, and creating knowledge about research ethics.

Why a gender inequality in ethics reporting matters for all researchers

We approach these findings through the lens of a feminist ethics of care which emphasises that care and responsibility are everyone's responsibility, regardless of gender, and not only the responsibility of women. This lens shifts attention to inequalities in practising care as political scientists and the way in which this work may subsequently be seen and devalued as 'women's work'.

The implications of men's underrepresentation in research ethics reporting are significant. It may lead to overlooking some ethical challenges, as experienced or addressed by men. Furthermore, we know that the [knowledge created by women is undervalued compared to men](#). Hence, insights from research ethics may be taken less seriously because they are created (mostly) by women.

There remains no international norm or obligation to report on research ethics in political

science and international relations journals. The approach varies significantly across the profession and academic publications. Exceptionally, the [American Political Science Association](#) (APSA) mandates ethics reporting in its journals. Some other academic journals ask for ethics information, but many don't.

The practice of reporting research ethics therefore remains largely voluntary, at least in terms of the *what*, *how*, and *how much* of reporting. This existing voluntarism globally creates inequalities, such as gender-based inequality observed in our study.

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To prevent further entrenchment of these inequalities, and for better insight into ethical questions in the conduct of research, requires an internationally agreed norm of research ethics reporting in political science and IR journals. Such a norm should specify the extent of information reported and a location in a publication for this information.

If researchers do not involve themselves in creating such a norm, publishers already are and will likely continue to create their own. While publishers and researchers may overlap in how they value research ethics, there are also likely to be differences. Hence, researchers also need to take ownership of establishing such norms for their disciplines.

At the same time, we note the potential risks of doing so where addressing gender-based inequality in research ethics reporting may amplify other inequalities. Considering the geographic dimension of research ethics reporting and the predominance of reporting in the US, the risk of further entrenching disparities between scholars in the global north and global south looms large. Any action needs to be attuned to the unintended effects of norm adoption and inclusive to prevent supplanting old disparities with new.

In other words, if we want to respect the value of ethics reporting and learn from the work of others in political science and international relations, we should establish norms that ensure equitable practices for doing this now.

This post draws on the authors' OA article, [To report or not to report on research ethics in political science and international relations: A new dimension of gender-based inequality](#), published in American Political Science Review.

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