



The Gender Gap in English Language Proficiency?

Insights from a Test of Academic English

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Is there a gender gap in attainment of English language proficiency?

Gender bias in Cambridge English tests removed by design

Gender gap in performance in spite of an unbiased test?

Test of Academic English Sample

- Candidates from Jan 2014 – Jan 2015
- Aged 16-19
- “Home country” learners
- “Entry to higher education” as a reason for taking the test
- 35 countries



Two perspectives to investigate patterns in male / female performance

Global aggregate-level pattern

Overall test

4 skills (R,L,W,S)

By age

Country-level pattern

Overall test

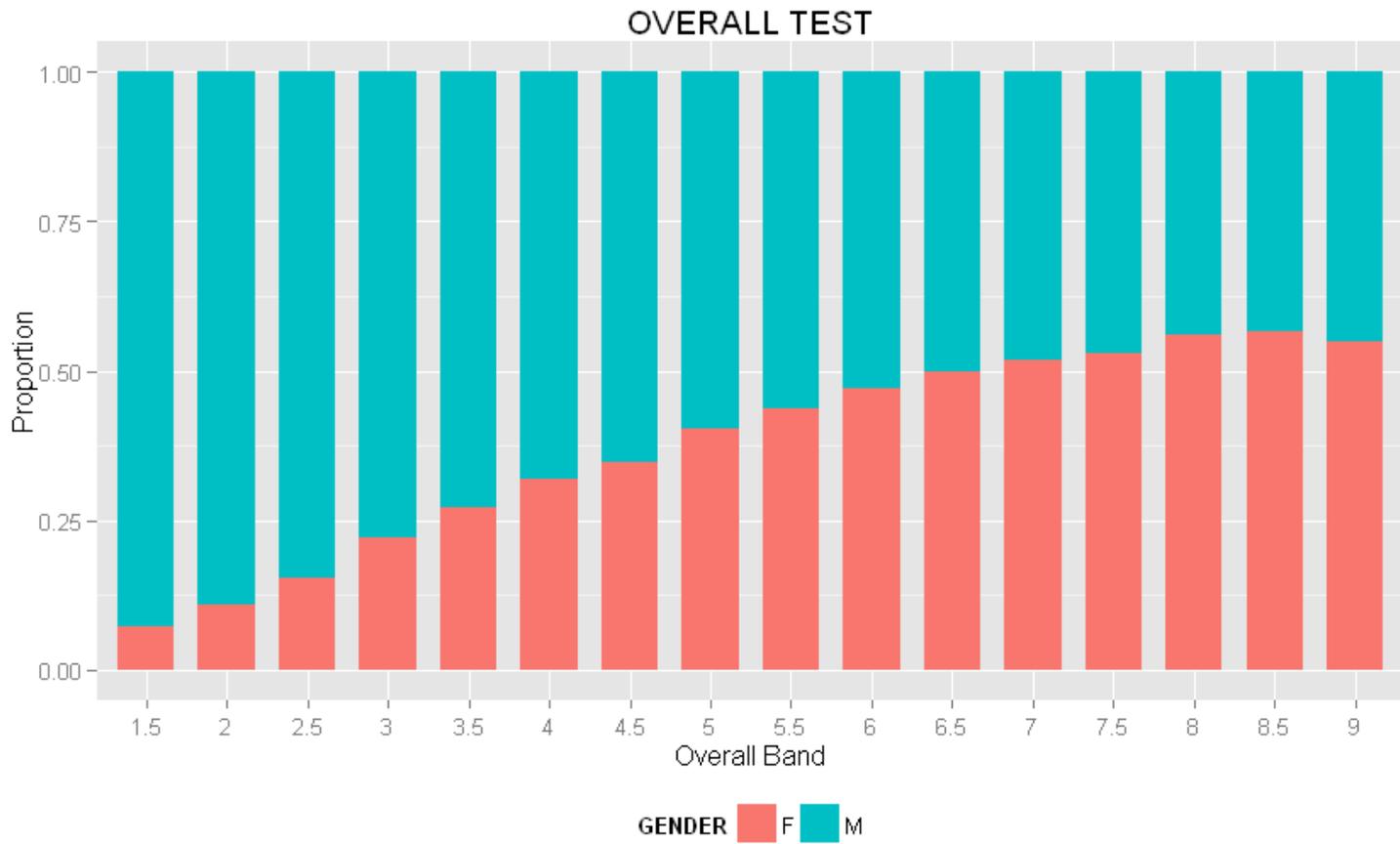
4 skills (R,L,W,S)



Aggregate Level

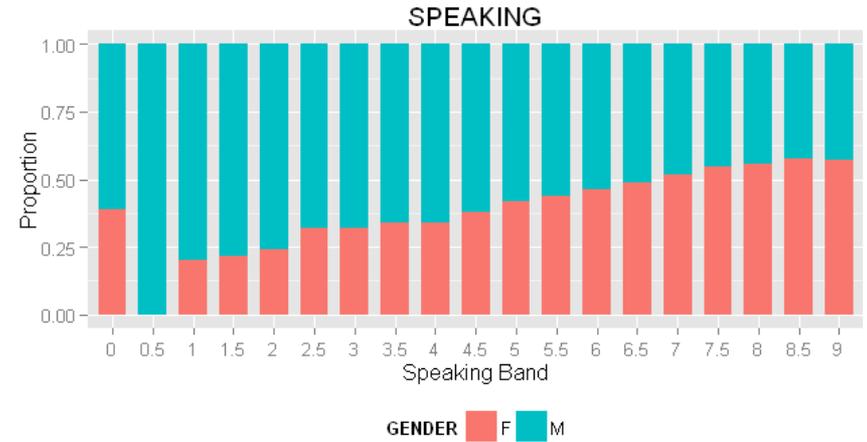
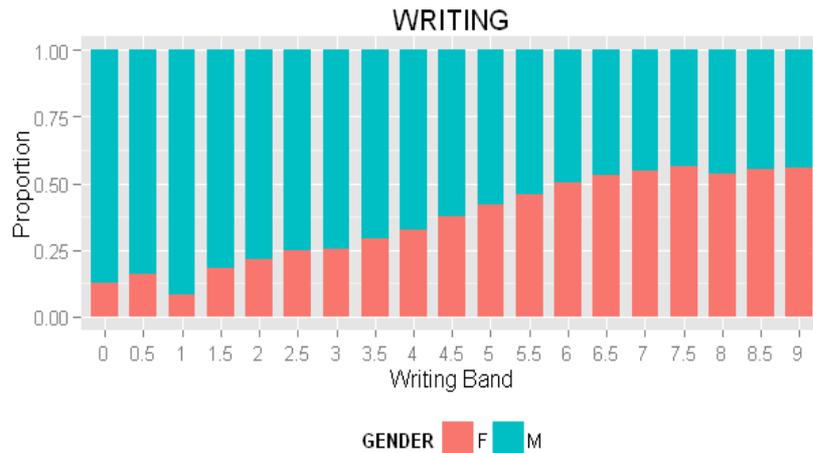
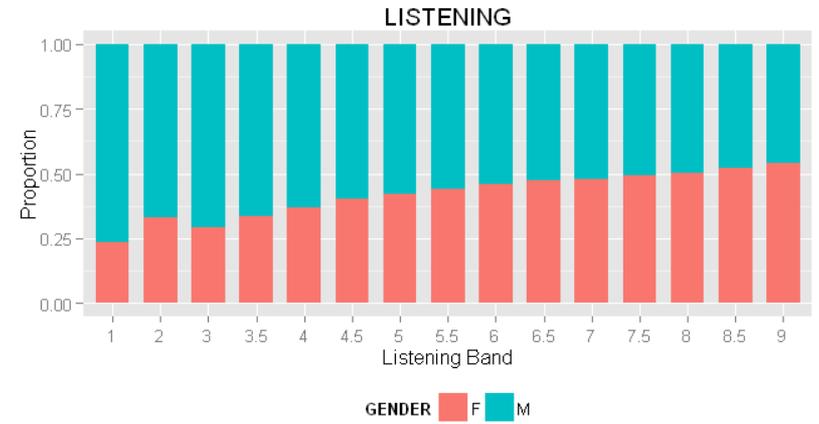


At the aggregate level, female learners display stronger English skills than their male counterparts in the overall test ...



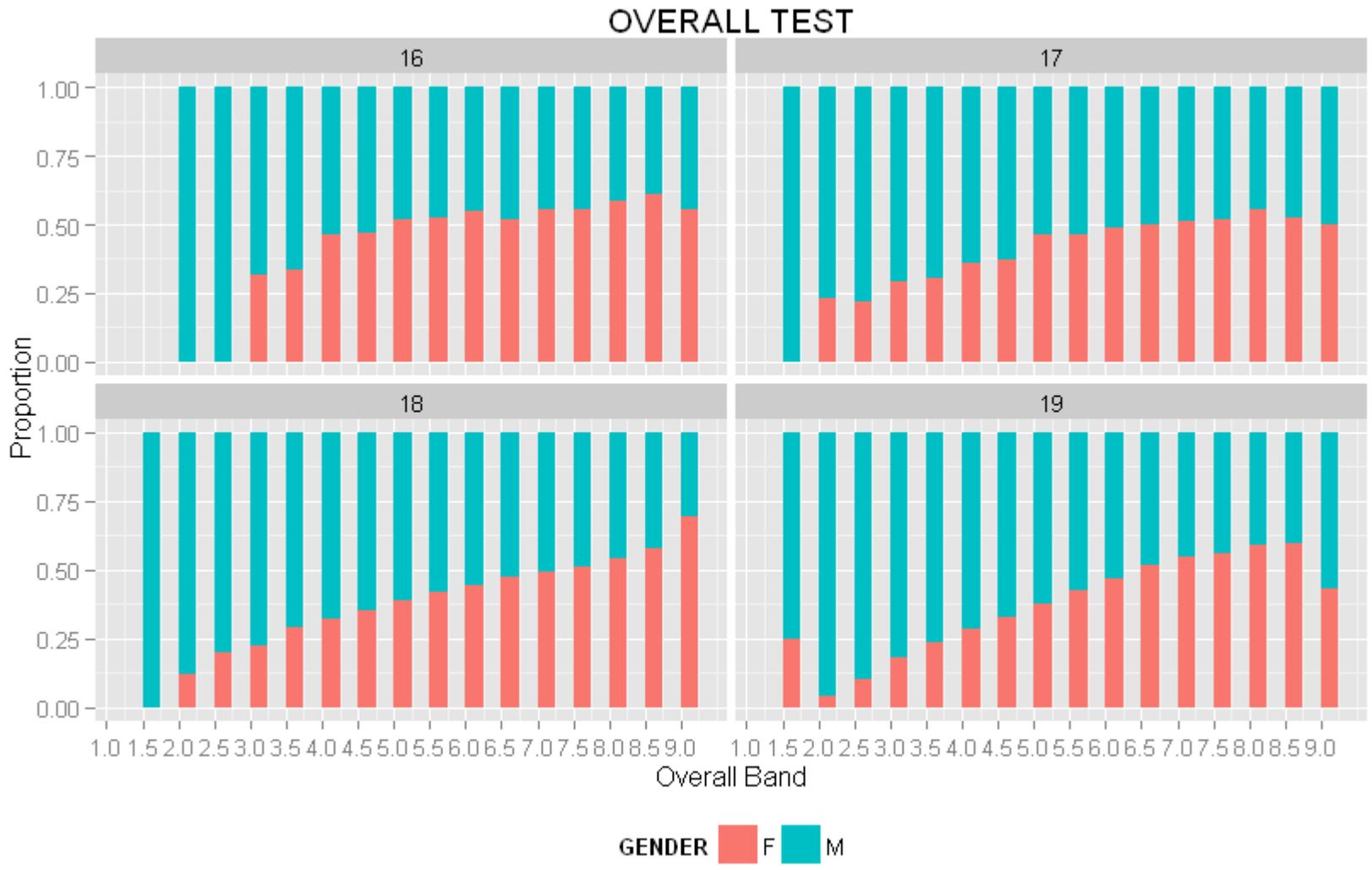


... and in the individual skills



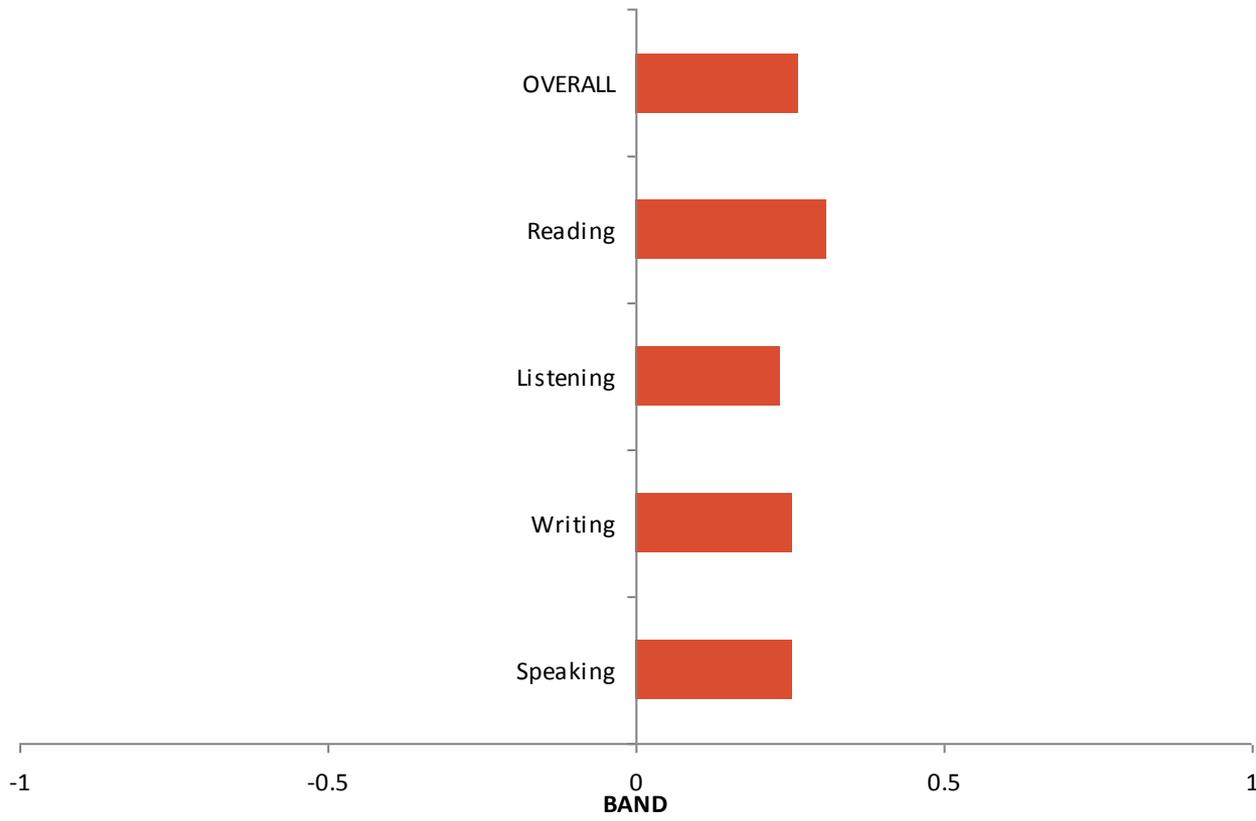


Female learners in all age categories perform stronger than male learners





Although female learners perform better, the difference in performance is less than half of a band for the overall test and the individual skills



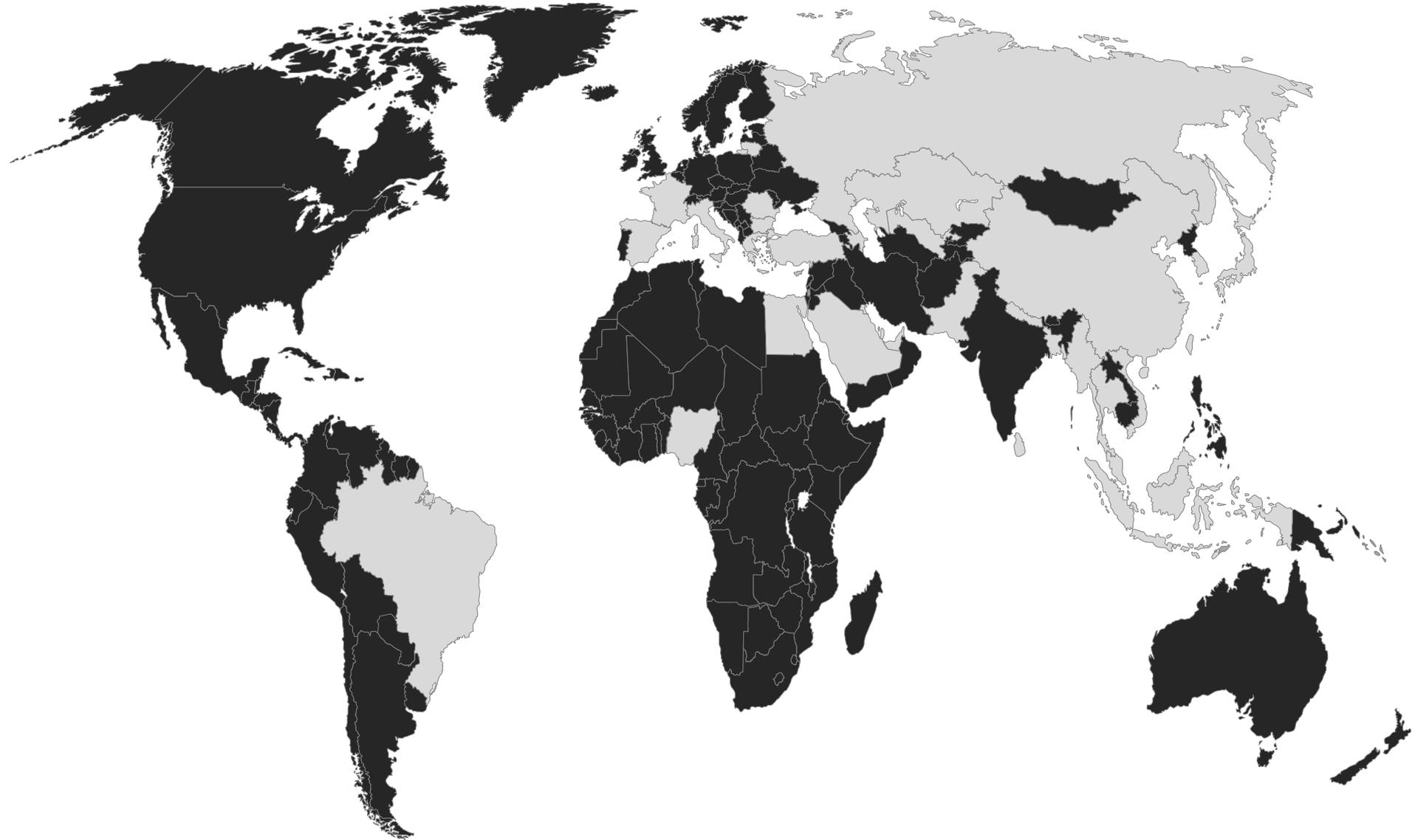


Country Level

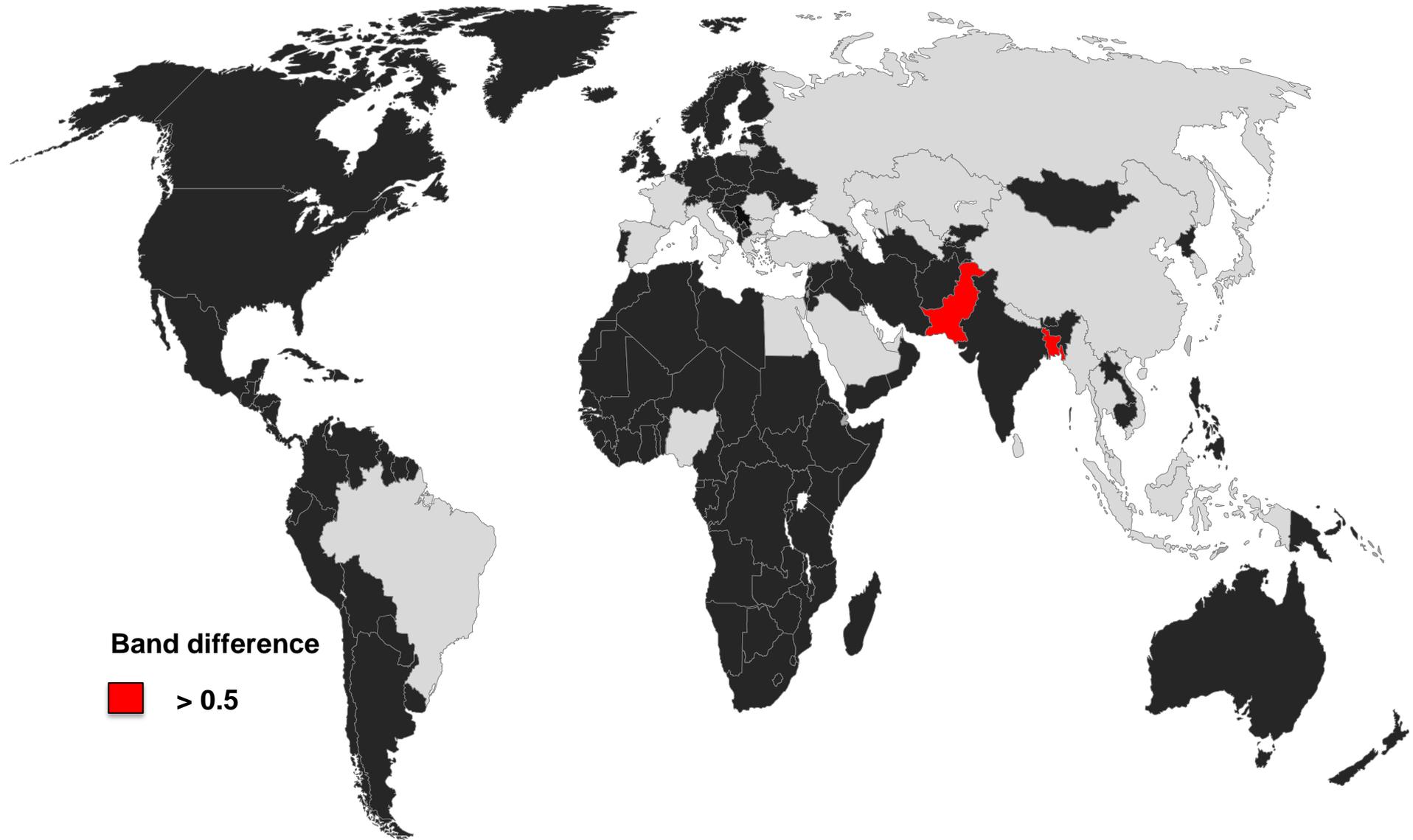
Country-level analysis (overall score)



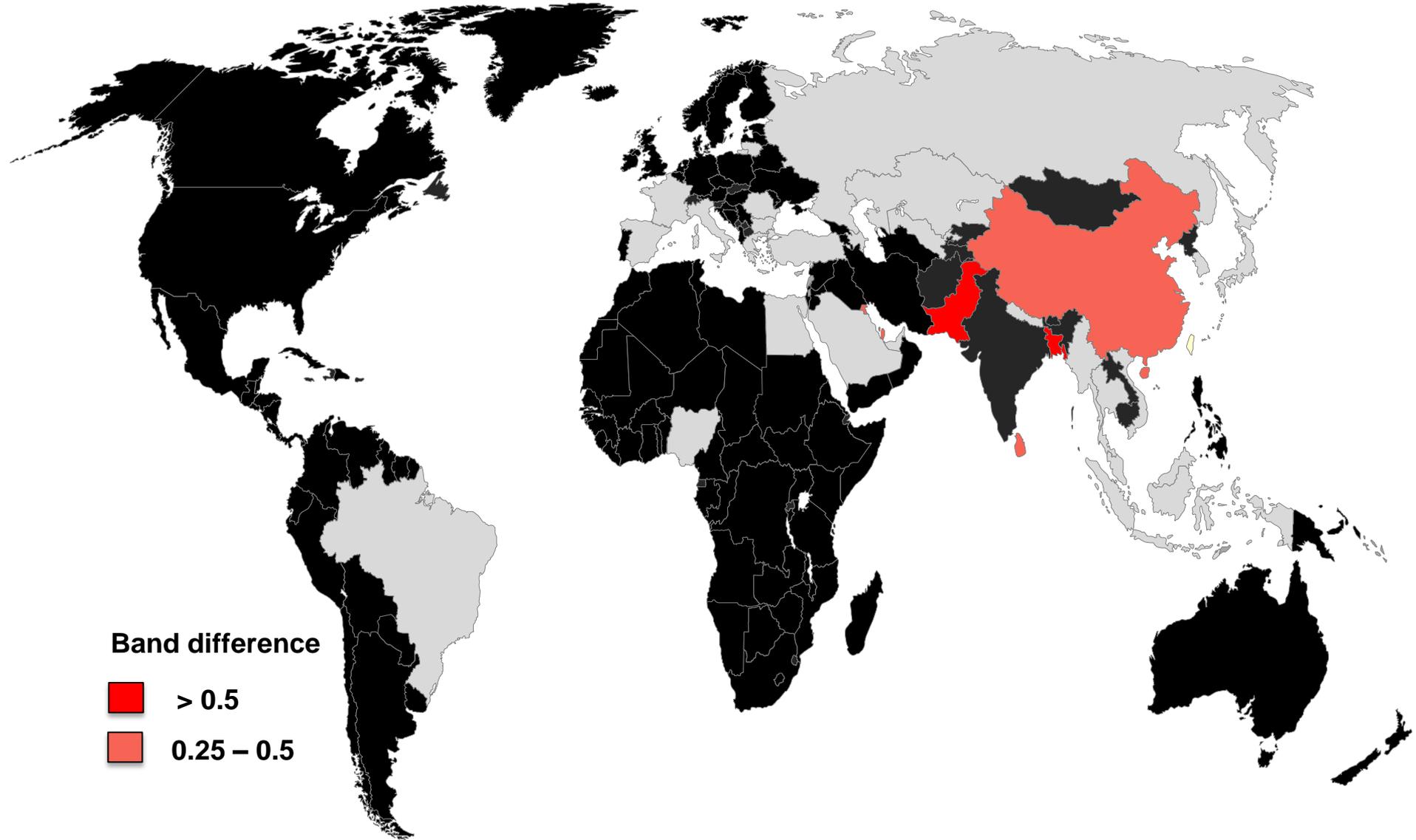
Country-level analysis (overall score)



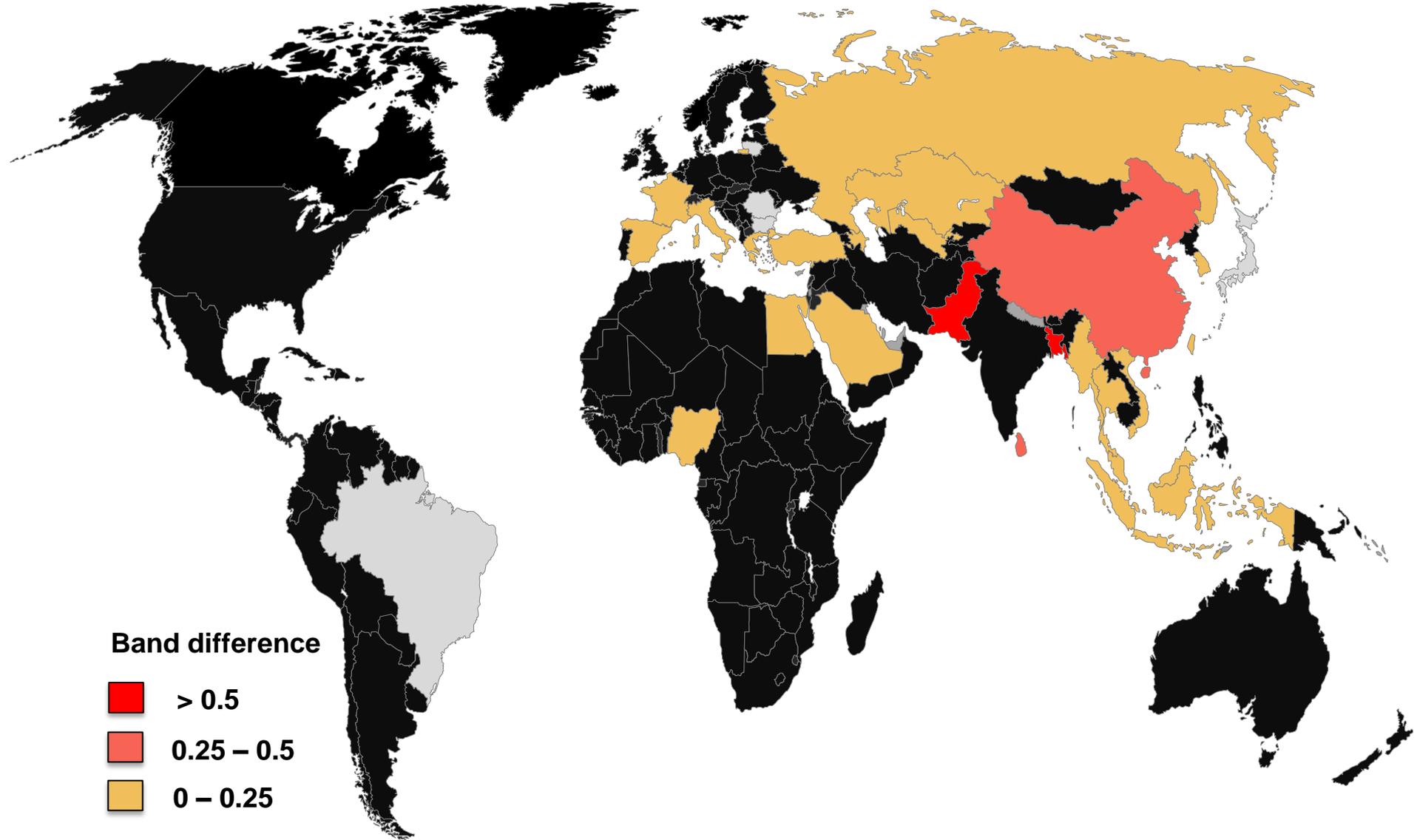
Country-level analysis (IELTS overall score)



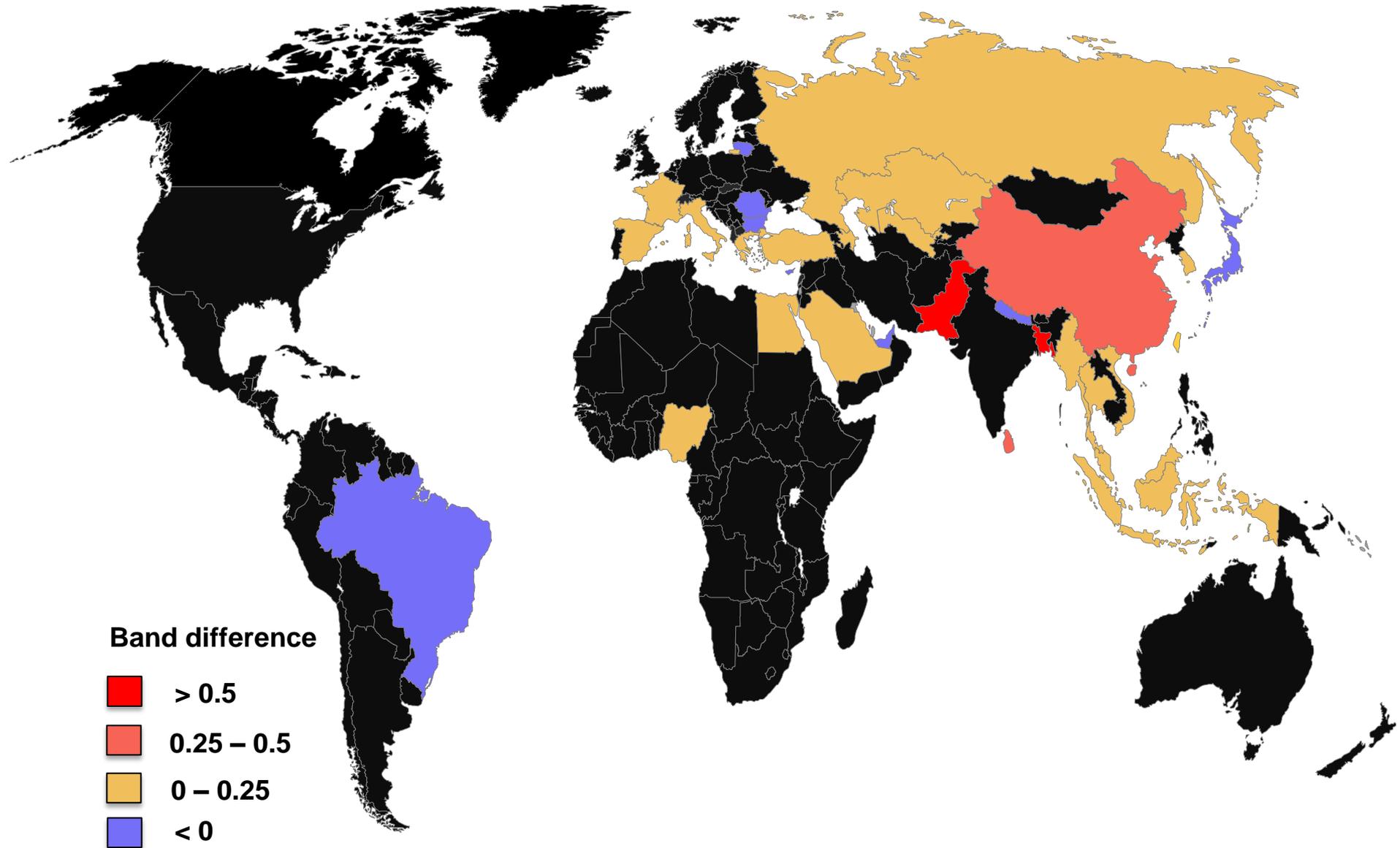
Country-level analysis (overall score)



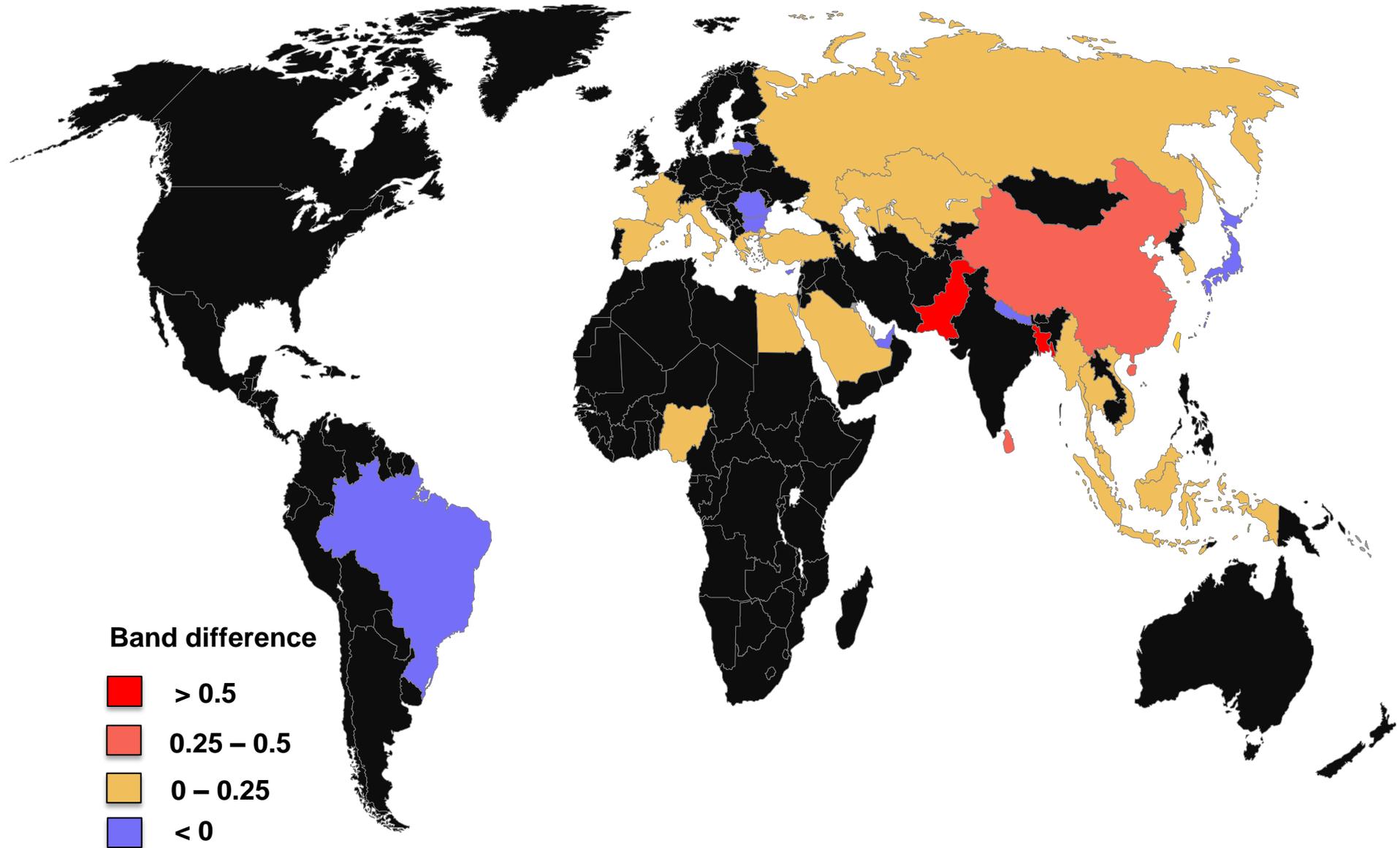
Country-level analysis (overall score)



Country-level analysis (overall score)



Country-level analysis (overall score) shows no consistent pattern in performance across gender



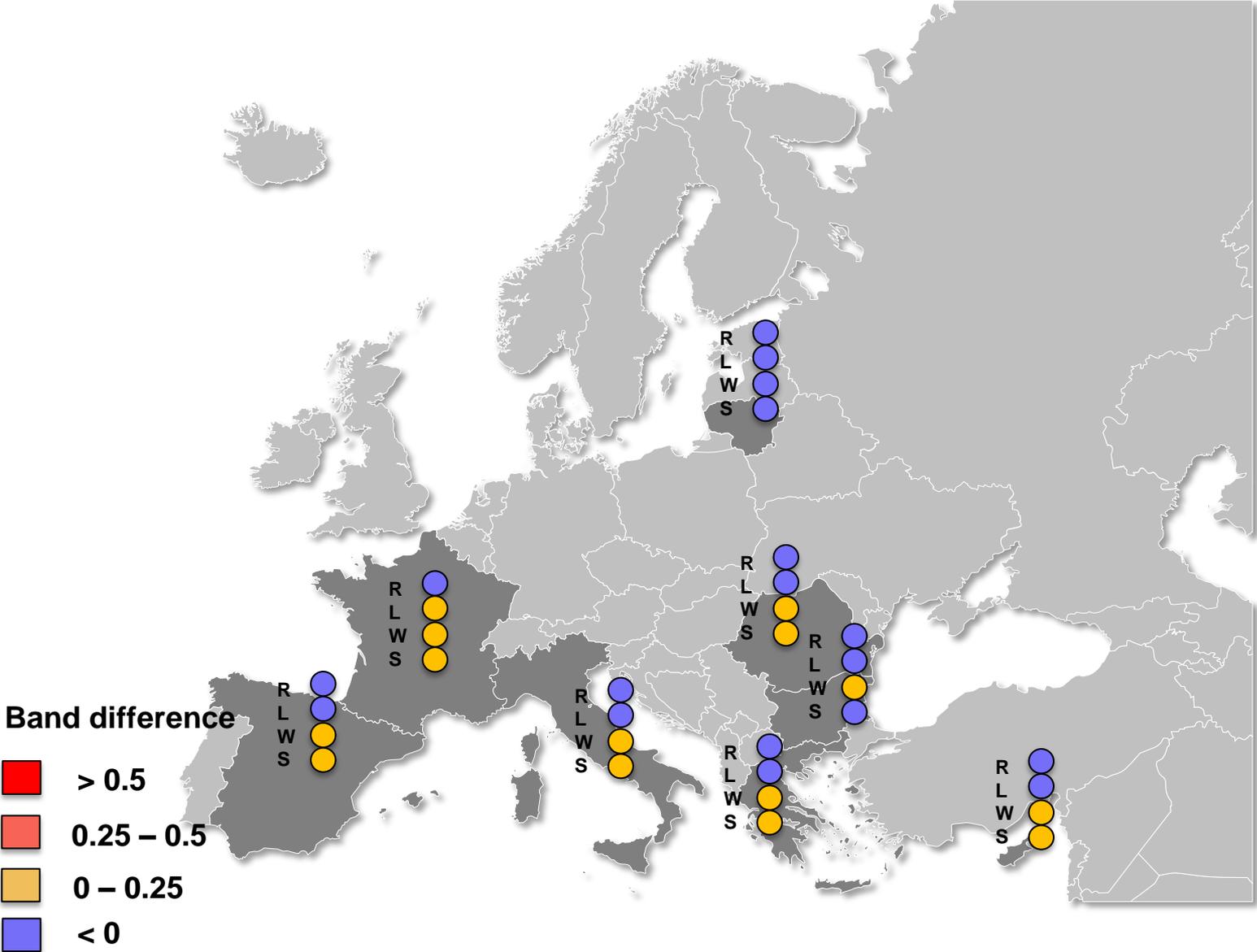
Country-level analysis for individual skills



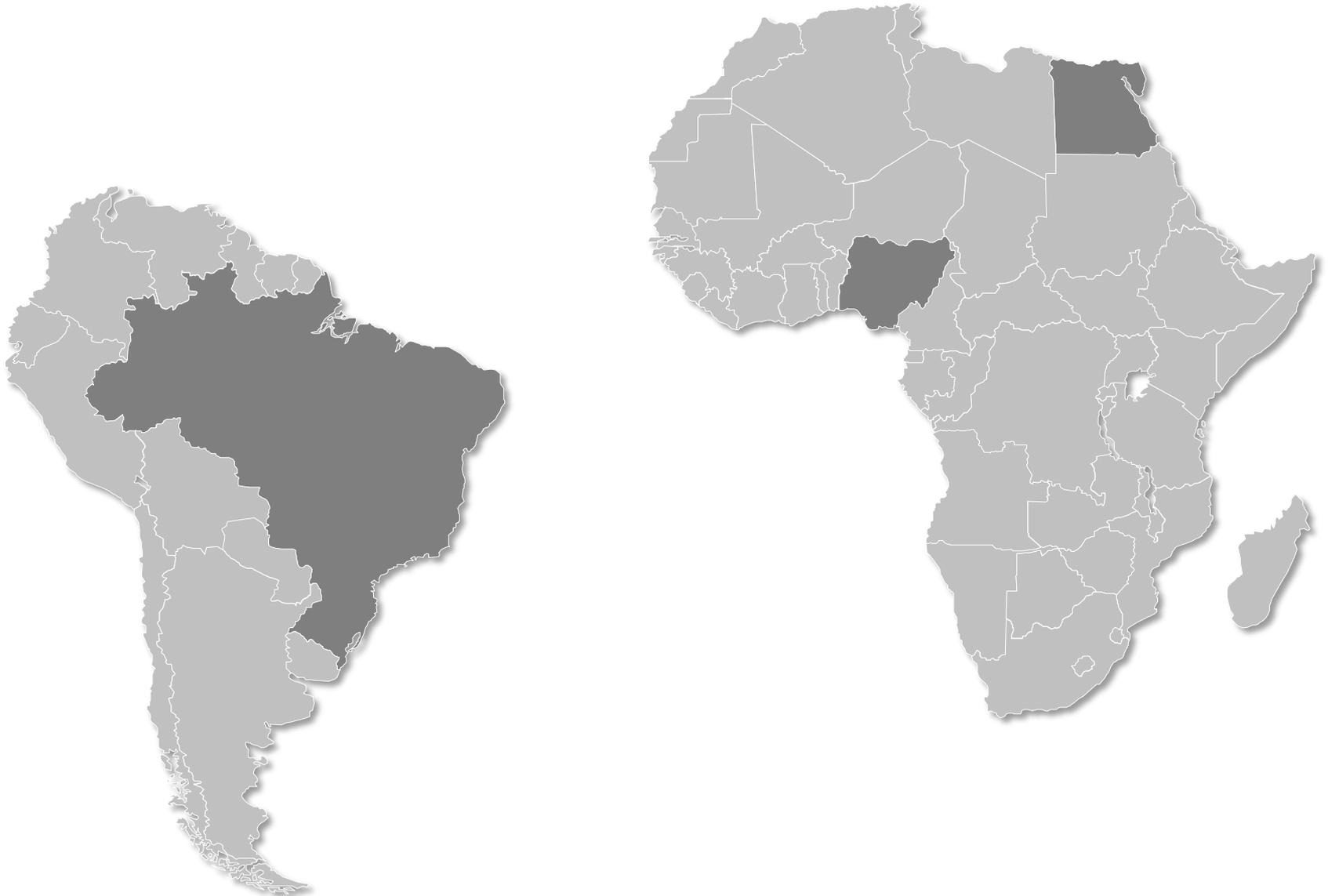
Country-level analysis for individual skills



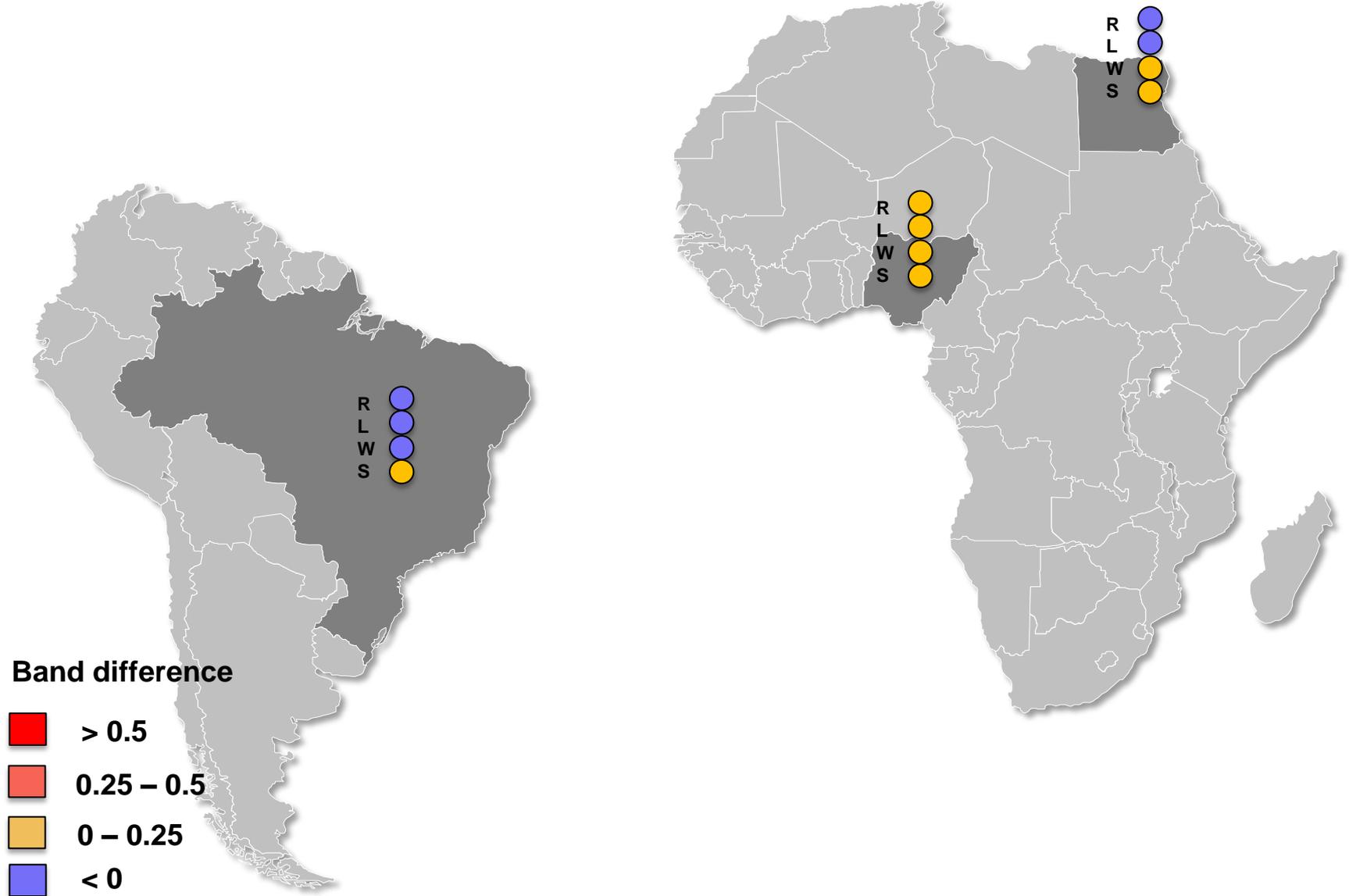
Country-level analysis for individual skills



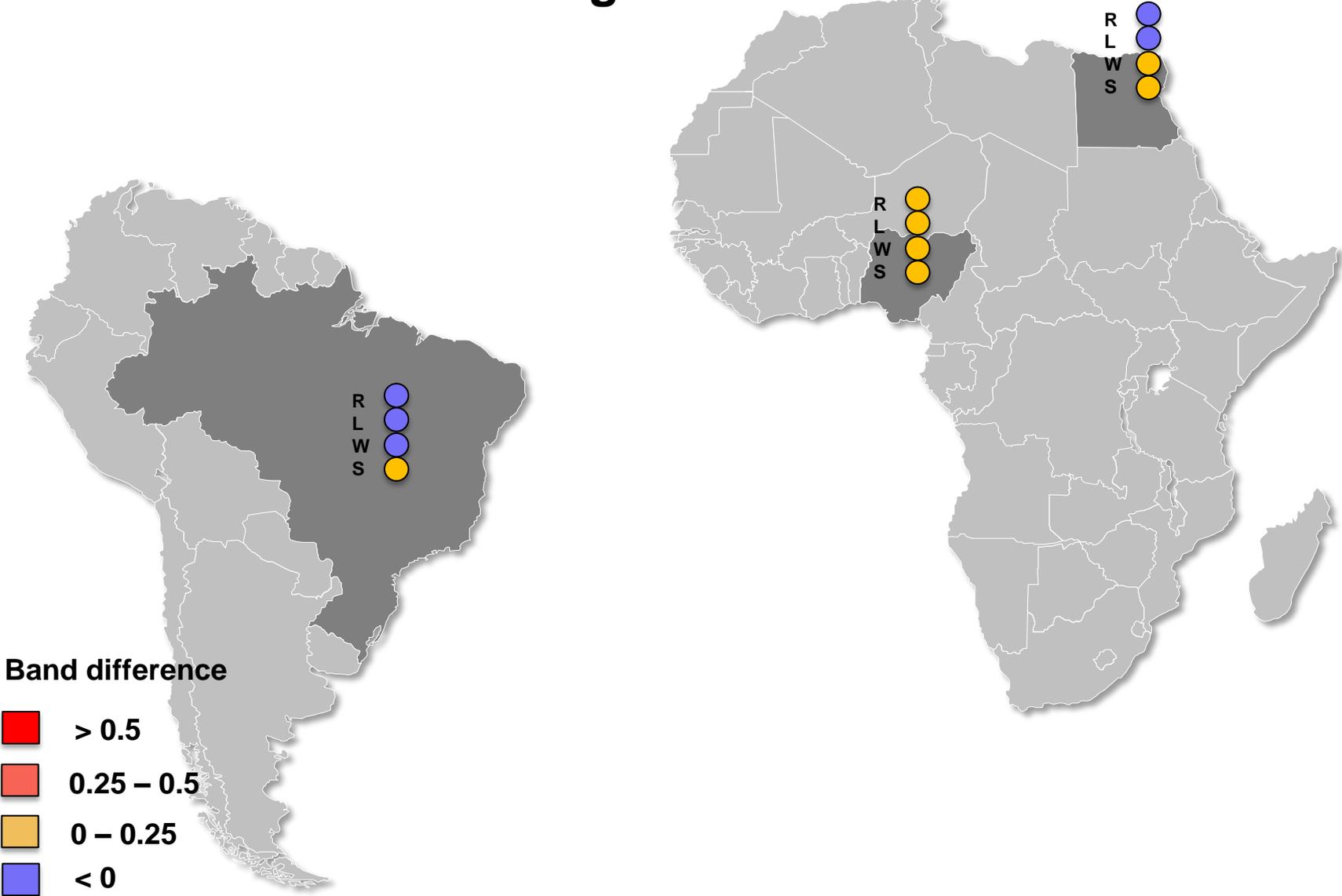
Country-level analysis for individual skills



Country-level analysis for individual skills



Country-level analysis for individual skills also shows no consistent pattern in performance across gender





Summary

Limited evidence for the gender gap hypothesis in English language proficiency

At the aggregate level, female learners perform slightly better than male learners (overall & across skills and by age, order of magnitude < 0.5 band)

This is driven by stronger performance of female learners in a few countries (China, Pakistan, Bangladesh)

A more differentiated picture emerges at the country level

Little consistency in male / female performance

- Female learners perform better in some countries but not in others
- Female learners perform better in some skills (mostly productive) but not in others



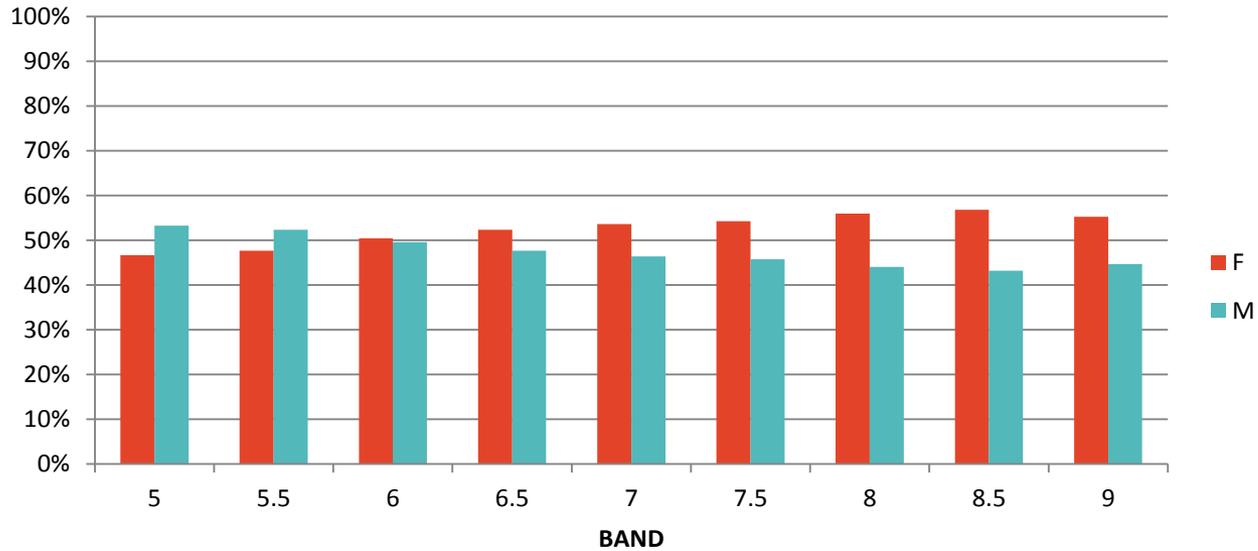
Discussion

- Why would girls appear to perform better in language tests?



Female learners display stronger English skills than their male counterparts

% of female and male learners in overall bands 5 and above





Discussion

- Language learning theories:
 - First Language Acquisition: the role of exposure
 - Second Language Learning: practice
- Language is a social phenomenon
 - More than a means of communication
 - Influences our culture & thought processes
 - Language only exists in society
 - Establishes human relations



Discussion

- Second language learning typical context
 - Embedded in school systems
 - Limited time allocation in the curriculum
 - Lack of resources for effective teaching/learning
- Successful second language learning
 - Requires practice beyond classroom
 - Embodies task-based communicative exercises
 - Involves social interaction among language learners



Discussion

- Girls tend to engage better in communication and social interaction, hence progress more quickly in language learning
- This is reflected in their performance in language tests which provide a snapshot of their language ability



Final Remarks

- There is a global picture of stronger female English language ability in all language skills, more saliently in performance skills
- This difference, though, is within the standard error of the test, so practically not significant
- Numerous socio-cultural and economic factors contribute to account for differences in our observation



Final Remarks

- Selection Effect
 - Countries, where the difference is greatest are also societies with known gender equity issues
 - Possibly only women who have shown greater aptitude are put forward for taking the test/studying overseas
 - Possibly men of whatever ability are put forward because they are men