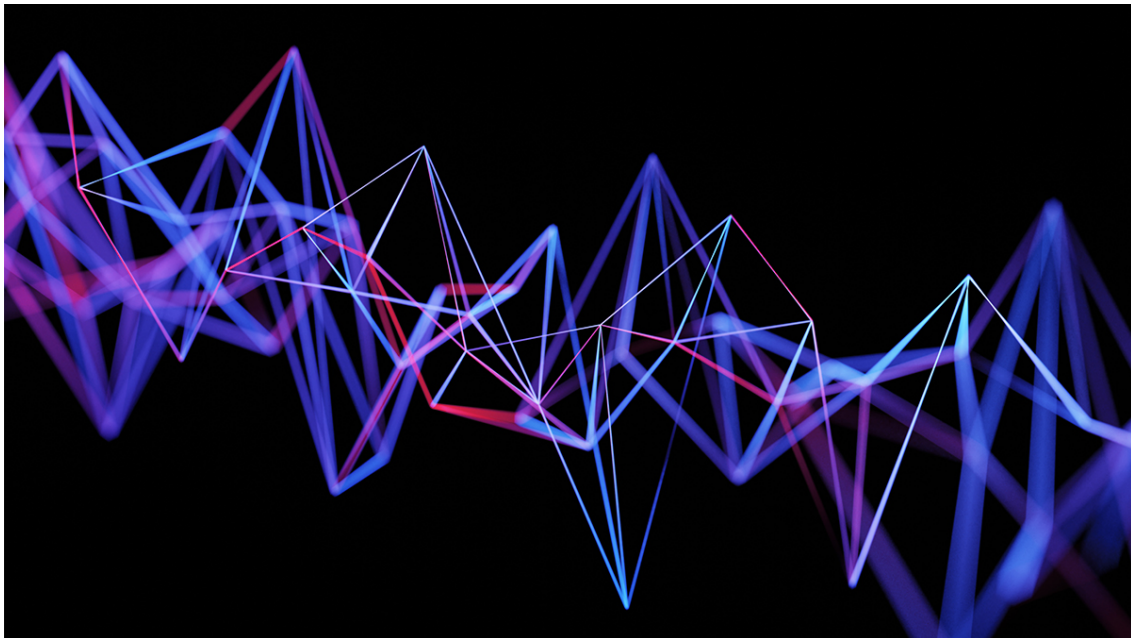


Will the Pandemic Reshape Notions of Female Leadership?

by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Avivah Wittenberg-Cox

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Summary. Though many people have (very) strong opinions about whether women are managing the pandemic better, it is still too soon to capture data that makes this narrative foolproof. But regardless of how robust the evidence might be, this moment, unlike any... [more](#)

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Countries with women in leadership have suffered six times fewer confirmed deaths from Covid-19 than countries with governments led by men. Unsurprisingly, the media has swelled with stories of their pragmatism, prowess — and humanity. Will these positive outcomes influence our collective readiness to elect and promote more women into power?

In both business and politics, leaders of the world have spent the past few months facing a real-time leadership test, played out in the full view of an impatient global audience. A huge crisis, unlike anything seen in our lifetimes, renders experience and expertise irrelevant. Leaders today must learn to lockdown and reopen countries while walking the tightrope between balancing the health of their populations with that of their economies. Their evaluations will be as public as their performances. Instantaneous, global, social-media-documented scrutiny puts their every action and every communication in full view. Whatever the future brings, one thing is certain: those in charge will be judged on how they manage this crisis — and nowhere are the stakes higher than in government.

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Heads of states are reluctant participants in this leadership contest, subjected to daily reviews of virus statistics, with journalists as judges. The best way to evaluate leaders' performance has always been to look at how their teams and followers are performing, especially compared to others. But the pandemic and its grim count of death tolls introduces entirely

new pressures: standardized, data-driven global metrics invite people everywhere to easily compare, at the click of a mouse, the relative effectiveness of their elected officials.

In this competition, few comments have received more attention than the stellar performance of female leaders. An avalanche of articles have highlighted the female-led countries managing the crisis better. It is claimed their superior performance reflects well-established gender differences in leadership potential. Numerous pieces have dug into individual strengths, celebrating Angela Merkel's data-driven trustworthiness, Jacinda Ardern's empathetic rationality, and Tsai Ing-wen's quiet resilience.

We are aware of the (many) nuances and limitations of the data under debate. Generalizations stoking the "gender wars" are an easy way to attract popular debate and discussion. Many people have (very) strong opinions about whether women are managing the pandemic better, and everyone is entitled to their own opinions — but not to their own data.

For those who wish to poke holes at the "women are better leaders" arguments, here's a menu of legitimate qualifiers.

Too Few to Tell (sample size): There are not (yet) enough women running countries to legitimately examine gender effects. Women only govern 18 countries or 545 million people globally. That's 7% of the world's population — an achievement, nonetheless statistically insignificant.

It Wasn't Her (conflating factors): Scientific studies show leaders typically account for around 30% of the variability in a group's (including a nation's) performance. This is not trivial but suggests a range of things determine outcomes *unrelated* to the leader. Every nation confronted this crisis with its own mix of advantages and disadvantages (e.g., educational level, income, income inequality, weather conditions, density, general demographic profile, etc.). Incumbents inherited existing contexts with consequences. They

were dealt a hand and have limited credit and blame for how it turned out. This is less true when a leader has been in charge for a long time and has influenced the starting conditions.

It's the Culture (or, correlation isn't causality): Correlations can be caused by other factors. Even if you agree that women-led countries are handling the crisis better, there are (at least) two other elements to consider. First, countries do better *because* they have women in charge. Second, countries have women in charge *because* they were already doing better (less sexism, more inclusivity, removal of glass ceilings blocking competent women from reaching the top in the first place). You don't have to be a math whiz to see that if a country (consciously or unconsciously) rejects 50% of its talent for leadership roles, it ends up with less — and lesser — talent.

Only the Best (selection bias): One of the paradoxical consequences of sexism is that it elevates the quality of female leaders. Because women need to work harder to persuade others that they have the leadership talent it takes, they end up being more qualified and more talented when they are selected for leadership roles. As a consequence, our high-performing covid-response countries may simply be enjoying the fruits of their higher standards for women, rather than that women are, in themselves, superior. One could then argue, from a fairness standpoint, we should make it easier for less competent women to get to the top. That's what a Frenchwoman, Françoise Giroud argued 30 years ago. A better solution for the challenges facing us in 2020 would be to make it harder for incompetent men to become leaders.

Regardless of how robust the evidence might be, or how logical and data-driven the arguments, add to the mix a change in receptivity of the zeitgeist. A small number of female leaders have emerged as a benchmark for what competent leadership looks like — and been applauded for it.

Could this be the moment, then, to replace our old, obsolete leadership archetypes with more pragmatic and meritocratic models?

A crisis is often defined as the time between the old being not-ready-to-die, and the new not-quite-ready-to-move-in. Will our post-covid world say goodbye to our persistent preference for tough, bold, and reckless leaders, primarily male and obsessed with themselves? Will we be mature enough to adopt a more balanced perception of leadership talent, one based more on increasing group welfare than on individual showmanship?

The roller-coaster ride of gender equality over the past few decades may be depressing to some. But this moment, unlike any we've ever known, opens new options for the future — millions of them, in fact. This group of talented leaders may become the first visible wave of role models for the generations to come, redefining the way we pick leaders in politics and business. In short, tales of strong female leaders succeeding through this crisis could lead to a change in the overarching narrative of what a strong leader looks like. Society at large may become less surprised and more accepting of leaders (s)elected on their expertise, intelligence, curiosity, humility, empathy, and integrity. Though only time will tell if this new narrative survives the crisis, we hope it will. It would not just elevate the overall quality of our leaders — it would likely increase our trust in the result of our choices.

The world didn't need a pandemic to realize that people are generally better off when their leaders are smart, honest, and modest. But we are glad to see the public, and especially the media, fall in love with the leaders who display these qualities — daily and publicly — while keeping their nations safe at the same time. It's a lesson we think will bear fruit, and multiply.

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