

# Women as Presidents, Prime Ministers and Government Ministers<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In 1995, national leaders from more than 100 countries gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. This group of national leaders was overwhelmingly male, including only 6 women. At the UN World Summit 10 years later, women were again only 8 of the more than 170 national leaders in attendance. Today, of the over 190 countries in the world, a woman is the national leader of only 7.

A female in the top leadership position of a country, such as Michelle Bachelet of Chile or Angela Merkel of Germany, is thus an extremely rare creature. From the beginning of the contemporary era until 1980, only 5 out of 1000 political leaders were women (Blondel 1980:116). Today, we can count a few more female leaders who have appeared on the world stage, but numbers are still small. Since 1960, when Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the first female to lead a modern country, only 31 women have become the top political executive of their country.

Why should we care? For one, national leaders are often incredibly powerful. Although the exact functions of a national leader differ from one country to the next, national leaders often set foreign and domestic political agendas, appoint ministers and other prominent public officials, and wield the power of the military. Women may carry out these tasks in ways much different than men do. Yet, even if male and female leaders were to behave in exactly the same way, national leaders play important symbolic

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<sup>1</sup> The authors contributed equally to this article. Portions of this article are taken from chapter 3 of Pamela Paxton and Melanie Hughes, 2007, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, Pine Forge Press.

functions. They serve as the “face of a nation” both to their own citizenry, and in the international arena. If these faces are overwhelmingly male, it perpetuates the idea that, even though women increasingly participate in politics as activists or legislators, they are unable or somehow unready to lead.

Although women as national leaders remain a rarity, they are entering these positions at an increasing rate over time. Only three women became a national leader during the 1960s, and three women became national leaders in the 1970s. This number increased to four in the 1980s and then to fourteen in the 1990s. In the first half of the current decade, already seven women have achieved the highest political office in their country. Thus, the story of women in top leadership positions is one of low, but ever increasing, numbers.

In this chapter we discuss women who have appeared as national leaders over the last fifty years and the paths they took to power. We then distinguish women who hold national leadership positions from those who hold dual leadership positions or largely symbolic positions. Next we turn to women as cabinet ministers around the world, focusing on the numbers of women holding cabinet positions and the types of positions they hold. Finally we turn to a discussion of the difficulties faced by female leaders and whether female leaders make a difference.

### **Women as national leaders**

Table 1 lists the 31 female political executives over the last fifty years. It is not an easy matter to determine who is a political leader of a country and who is not. National leaders may be called a head of state, a head of government, or both – and a title in one

country means something very different in another. For example, in some countries the “head of state” is a very powerful position. Barack Obama is the head of state of the United States of America. In other countries the head of state is a purely ceremonial position, for example Elizabeth II, Queen of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In Table 1, some of the leaders hold the title “prime minister,” while others hold the title “president.” All are the leaders of their respective countries, what differs is the form of government of their country. In a parliamentary system the top political leader is often called a prime minister. That person is usually known as a president in a presidential system. Understanding the distinction is important because it can help us to distinguish women who truly hold positions of power from those who hold largely ceremonial roles. A person holding the title of president in a parliamentary system is *not* the leader of the country, but holds a position that is typically ceremonial and with little power. A person holding the title prime minister in a presidential system at best shares power with the president.

To understand the distinctions, consider three different female prime ministers:

Gro Harlem Brundtland was prime minister in a parliamentary democracy. In the Norwegian government, the prime minister acts as both the executive and legislative head of the government. He or she holds the most powerful political position in the country. While in office Brundtland pursued strong economic and foreign policy agendas and will be remembered for bringing environmental issues to the top of the nation’s political agenda.

Edith Cresson was the prime minister of France from 1990 to 1992. France has a mixed political system with a strong president and a potentially powerful prime minister. The prime minister is chosen by the president from the dominant party in the parliament. If the dominant party in the parliament is different from the party of the president, then the prime minister can be a very strong political figure (this is called cohabitation.) However, if the dominant party is the *same* as the president’s party, then the prime minister is generally viewed as subservient to the

president and holds little independent power. Edith Cresson was of the same party as Francois Mitterrand, a strong President. Indeed, as Cresson herself explains: "... you are not entirely free to choose [your] ministers (far from it). As far as I [was] concerned, my freedom was certainly limited" (Liswood 1995:122). In a list of leaders of France in the twentieth century, Francois Mitterrand would appear from 1990 to 1992, but not Edith Cresson.

Elisabeth Domitien held the position of prime minister of the Central African Republic from 1975 to 1976. She was appointed to the position by the dictator Jean-Bédél Bokassa when he formed a new government and decided to include a prime minister. But when Bokassa began discussing making the country a monarchy and crowning himself emperor (which he ultimately did), Domitien publicly spoke out against his plans and was promptly fired. Domitien cannot be considered to have had any substantial political power.

### **How women attain top leadership positions**

What "paths to power" do women take to gain top political office? Some women gain power through a connection to a politically powerful male. That is, women run as a 'surrogate' for a husband or visible continuation of the legacy of a father. This is not a rare occurrence. Fifty percent of the women listed in Table 1 have famous husbands or fathers who preceded them in political life. To name just a few: Indira Gandhi's father was India's founding prime minister, Corozon Aquino's husband was viewed as a national martyr; and in Bangladesh, the widow of a former president replaced the daughter of a former prime minister. The phenomenon of daughters or wives standing as 'surrogates' for their fathers or husbands is particularly apparent in regions of the world where women in leadership positions would be *least* expected (Jalalazai 2004). For example, Asia has generally low levels of female participation in other areas of politics but it accounts for 30% of female national leaders and 75% of countries with more than

one female leader over time. However, every woman who has held high political office in Asia is part of a political dynasty.

This “widow’s walk to power” may be most common where attitudes toward women are especially traditional. In places where women are seen as helpmates to their spouse it is easy to visualize them as stand-ins for their husbands. The husband or father may have been assassinated, hanged, or have spent a great deal of time in prison, thereby making him a martyr in the eyes of the public and the surrogate wife or daughter a symbol of the continuing struggle. Recent examples also include wives succeeding husbands who are still living, including Cristina Kirchner of Argentina and the attempted U.S. Presidential bid by Hillary Clinton.

As an example, consider Sirimavo Bandaranaike, of Sri Lanka, who in 1960 became the world’s first female prime minister. At 24, Sirimavo entered into an arranged marriage to Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, a rising politician. In the early years of their marriage, she raised children and was active in the Ceylon women’s association. Meanwhile her husband was elected to the House of Representatives. In 1956, her husband became prime minister when a coalition led by his party, the Sri Lanka freedom party (SLFP), won the majority of seats in the national legislature. On September 25th, 1959, tragedy struck. Solomon was assassinated in their villa, practically before Sirimavo’s eyes. New elections were set and the widow, known as “Mrs. Banda,” was asked to campaign on behalf of her husband's party.

Sirimavo campaigned tirelessly and in May became the head of the party. She had little political experience before this point and only reluctantly agreed to accept the party’s nomination. “I had no intention to take up politics during his life. Except after he

died, people wanted me. I was more or less forced to take it up competitively...to lead the party after his death. I did not want to. But after much consideration, I agreed to take up the leadership of the party.” (quoted in Liswood 1995:47) In July, the SLFP won 75 of 151 seats and Sirimavo Bandaranaike was appointed prime minister. In 1965 her party lost power but she regained the position in 1970.

Indira Gandhi, the second woman to achieve the highest political office of a country, was also related to a famous political father, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru had worked with Mahatma Gandhi to achieve independence from Britain and, in 1947, was the newly-independent India’s first prime minister. But Gandhi exemplifies an important clause in the “surrogate” path to power: female widows of politically powerful husbands often have little political experience before standing in as a surrogate for their husband. In contrast, *daughters* of political figures may have substantial political experience before taking power themselves (see Genovese 1995:212-3). Indira Gandhi had a great deal of political experience of her own. She had been a member of the Congress party, headed by her father since 1952. She was elected to the Congress Parliamentary Board in 1958 and become the president of the Congress party in 1959. In 1966, two years after the death of her father, she became prime minister herself. During her time in office she faced economic crises, war, and political intrigue. She also declared emergency rule when her leadership was challenged, imposed authoritarian rule, and censored newspapers. She was assassinated in 1984.

There is nothing subtle about women’s surrogacy. During campaigns, references to the husband or father are repeated time and again, with the spoken or unspoken implication that the female candidate would simply continue his legacy. Benazir Bhutto

referred often to her father in speeches and made sure his picture was in the background of her official portraits. During her campaign, Violeta Chamorro repeatedly invoked her assassinated husband, who was viewed as a national martyr. On hearing of Indira Gandhi's election in 1966, the crowds cried out not only "long live Indira" but also "long live Jawaharalal" [her father].

Of course, family dynasties are not restricted to women following their husbands or fathers into politics. The history of politics in most countries is rife with male political leaders who have followed their fathers or other male relatives into politics. In the United States alone we can think of male family legacies such as the Adams, Tafts, Kennedys, or Bushes. Like for men, relationship to a former politician is definitely one way that women have been able to reach the highest echelons of political life.

Asia, in particular, has a strong legacy of family politics, so much that some men have benefited politically from connections to powerful women. For example, in India, Indira Gandhi's son followed her into politics, cementing a Gandhi-Nehru dynasty lasting for most of the last half of the twentieth century. And in Pakistan, after Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, was able to use his connection to his martyred wife to ascend to the presidency of Pakistan. At the same time, Bhutto's son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, became leader of her former party, the Pakistan Peoples Party.

Together, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi introduce another theme in women's path to power – that women have done better gaining high-level positions of power in developing nations than in more developed nations. Until 1979, when Margaret Thatcher ascended to the top political position in Britain as prime minister of the House of Commons, the only women to have achieved leadership positions were in developing

nations. Looking at all of the women who have ever held the highest political positions of a country, over 74% of them are from the developing world. As we already pointed out, it is also in these developing nations that women leaders are more likely to be surrogates. But even among the women who do not have any powerful male relation, 53% are from the developing world. The west does not lead the world in elevating women to highest political office.

Another way that women achieve rarified positions of power is by rising through the political ranks. Golda Meir, the third woman to hold a national leadership position, exemplifies this strategy. By the time she was twenty, Golda had married and was increasingly active in the Zionist movement in the United States, which advocated for a Jewish state in Palestine. At 23 she left America for Palestine with some members of her family, lived briefly on a Kibbutz, and settled in Tel Aviv. She became increasingly involved in Zionist politics but simultaneously estranged from her husband who had difficulty with her political work. From 1928 to 1968 Golda moved up the ranks into the political elite, acting as fundraiser, signer of the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948, ambassador, and ultimately both minister of labor and foreign minister. In 1968, at age 70, she officially retired from politics – a retirement that was to last only a little over a year. In 1970, Israel's prime minister suffered a fatal heart attack and Golda was asked to return to politics, first as interim prime minister and then as the nationally-elected prime minister. She served until 1975 and during her term contended with economic problems, terrorism, and the Yom Kippur war with Egypt and Syria.

Other women have followed a similar path through the ranks to achieve political power at the highest levels. Margaret Thatcher worked her way through Britain's



Conservative Party ranks, was elected to the House of Commons in 1959, elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and finally prime minister in 1979. Kim Campbell of Canada also took this route, as did Eugenia Charles of Dominica, Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, and Michelle Bachelet in Chile.

Finally, women have occasionally risen to power in situations of extreme social or political instability. In such cases, their time in office may be very short. Lydia Gueiler Tejada of Bolivia exemplifies this path to power. The years between 1978 and 1980 were very unstable in Bolivia, with multiple elections, coups, counter-coups, and caretaker governments. In 1979, Wálter Guevara Arze was elected President, but almost immediately overthrown in a military coup. However, the leader of the coup also stepped down because he was not accepted by the military, civilians, or the United States. Thus, Lydia Gueiler was appointed interim president to arrange fresh elections. Before these elections were finalized, however, Bolivia's first female president herself was overthrown by General Luis García Meza. She had not been president for even a year.

Other female leaders who took power under situations of extreme social or political unrest include Ruth Perry of Liberia and Silvie Kinigi of Burundi. Both of these women led their countries briefly during civil wars. In fact, Ruth Perry was appointed to her position by an outside body of neighboring African states because Liberia was under a state of anarchy at the time. When women are placed into leadership positions during times of substantial social upheaval, it may be because they are viewed as symbols of reconciliation. Kinigi, for example, was an ethnic Tutsi originally appointed by an ethnic Hutu to build unity between Burundi's two ethnic groups.

Although there are some common themes to women's ascendancy to national leadership positions, there is great diversity among female national leaders as well. For example, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi were from wealthy and privileged backgrounds, while Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher were not. Female leaders also vary in age and level of education. Benazir Bhutto entered office at 35 years old, while Janet Jagen of Guyana first entered office at 77 (Jalalzai 2004). Some of the women who have held the highest political office of a country had less than a high school education, while others held Ph.Ds. Some were in office less than a year, while Margaret Thatcher was Britain's longest serving prime minister of the 20th century.

### **Women as dual leaders and symbolic leaders**

Some female leaders are not the top executive in their country, but can be viewed as holding a type of dual leadership role. As discussed in the case of Edith Cresson, in some political systems, a president holds much of the power but the prime minister is an important leader in government, especially if she is from the opposition party. Table 2 lists all female prime ministers who have served in such systems.

#### **TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

Table 1 lists women who held truly top political positions, either as prime minister in a parliamentary system or president in a presidential system. Table 2 lists women who have shared power in a dual leadership system. Some famous female leaders do not appear on either list. For example, Ireland is often highlighted as exemplary in having had two female presidents in a row. But neither Mary Robinson, president of the Ireland from 1990 to 1997, or Mary McAleese, current president of

Ireland, are allowed to suggest legislation or even make partisan statements. Similarly, Vigdis Finnbogadottir of Iceland held a largely ceremonial position as president from 1980 to 1996. Table 3 contains female leaders who only held ceremonial, or symbolic power. As noted earlier, the tables also do not include hereditary heads of state, such as Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. In most countries today, such positions are entirely ceremonial.<sup>2</sup>

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

This is not to say that symbolic leaders do not play a very important role for women in politics. When men dominate formal politics, it perpetuates ideas that politics is the domain of men. Especially in countries where women's representation is particularly low, a female in a ceremonial leadership position can provide a boost of confidence for women. As Mary Robinson, the largely symbolic former president of Ireland, said: "I feel I can change perceptions about equality..." (Orth 1992:122).

Research does suggest that women in positions of power influence the ambitions of young girls. In the United States, when female politicians receive press coverage, adolescent girls say they are more interested in politics. The pattern is the same around the world – high profile female candidates act as role models to young girls and women, inspiring both to greater interest and involvement in politics (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> The tables of female leaders do not include leaders of states that are not recognized as independent. For example, Pamela Gordon, Premier of Bermuda (a British territory) in 1997-1998 is not included. Neither is Kazimiera Prunskiene, prime minister of Lithuania during the transition to independence. We also do not include women whose tenures as leaders were exceptionally ephemeral. For example, Carmen Pereira was acting president of Guinea-Bissau for three days. Another example is Rosalia Arteaga Serrano of Ecuador who, involved in a succession battle, was sworn in as president for two days and then forced to resign.

## **Women in cabinet positions**

Women can also be appointed to key positions that advise government leaders. Typically called the “cabinet,” members of these executive positions are generally responsible for running a country. In some countries, cabinets even set the direction of public policy. Examples of cabinet officials in 2009 include Robert Gates, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, and Jacqui Smith, the U.K. Secretary of State for the Home Department. Cabinet positions have a long history—descending from the groups that advised kings and emperors—and can be seats of great power (Davis 1997).

As in other areas of politics, women hold only a small share of cabinet positions. Reynolds (1999) surveyed cabinet ministers in over 180 countries in 1998 and found that only 9 percent were female (302 out of 3,486). But, this number has increased over time. In a study of 15 countries in Western Europe, Rebecca Davis found that the percent of female cabinet officials increased from only 3% in 1968 to 13% in 1992 (Davis 1997). And worldwide, women’s share of cabinet positions increased from 8.7 to 15.2 percent between 1999 and 2007 (WEDO 2007).

Not all parts of the world appoint the same numbers of women to cabinets. In Western Europe, 28 percent of cabinet officials in 2007 were women, compared to only 4 percent in North Africa. Table 1 displays the percent of cabinet officials who are women across the major regions of the world. Women are also better represented as cabinet officials in countries that are predominantly Christian (Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox) compared to countries with other religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism (Reynolds 1999). Some countries also stand out as global leaders in the appointment of women to cabinets. In 2007, Finland became the first country to appoint a female majority cabinet

(55% women). Ten other countries have at least 40% women in their cabinets: Chile, Norway, Spain, France, Switzerland, Nicaragua, Sweden, South Africa, Burundi, and Germany (WEDO 2007).

#### TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Not all cabinet appointments are equal. In most countries each cabinet official is given responsibility for a specific government department, such as labor or education, and some are considered more important than others. The prime minister or the president, at the center of the circle of advisors, may have a core group of trusted advisers around him or her. This core usually includes cabinet officials covering finance and foreign affairs (Davis 1997). Other cabinet officials, farther out in the circle of advisors, may play less of a role in creating and implementing policy.

Women are overrepresented in some cabinet positions and underrepresented in others. Female cabinet ministers tend to be given positions in ‘softer’ areas – health, family, education – that are less prestigious and less likely to be in the core of advisors (Blondel 1988). Table 5 lists the percent of female cabinet officials holding select types of cabinet positions in 1998. Of the varied types of departments women could tackle, they are most often in Health (14% of the time) or Women’s Affairs (13% of the time). Education, Culture/Arts, and Family and Children are the next three most common. In contrast, women are substantially less likely to appear in the more prestigious cabinet positions such as Defense, Finance, or Home Affairs. In each of these cases, only 1% of female cabinet officials hold these positions. Unfortunately, it is these more prestigious cabinet positions that can be viewed as stepping-stones to greater power. These patterns

are generally consistent across world regions except in the Caribbean, where women are distributed more equally across ministries (WEDO 2007).

#### TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Women rarely achieve prestigious cabinet positions. Between 1968 and 1992 in Western Europe, roughly 50 percent of female cabinet appointments were in the areas of health, social welfare, education, family, culture, or consumer affairs. And women never held positions associated with economic affairs, defense, relations with Parliament, employment, equipment, and budget (Davis 1997). In recent years a growing number of women have been appointed to prestigious cabinet posts in some countries. In the U.S., for example, the past three presidents have appointed female Secretaries of State—Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton. Notably, Michelle Bachelet was Defense Minister before rising to the Presidency in Chile. But, women serving in these positions are the exception rather than the norm. As of 2007, 45% female ministers still served in Socio-Cultural positions (WEDO 2007). And even in the female majority cabinet of Finland, men still occupy the senior cabinet posts in finance, defense, and foreign affairs.

Why do we see low numbers of women in cabinet positions? One important explanation is the lack of women in legislative positions. In parliamentary systems, cabinet ministers are almost always drawn from among parliamentarians. Loyal party members come to the attention of prime ministers and get choice cabinet appointments as a reward. This means that when there are few women in a country's parliament, there are few women available for potential appointment to the cabinet.

Rebecca Davis created a hierarchy of Western European regions based on their percent female cabinet ministers. Scandinavia does the best in women's representation in cabinets, followed by the Continental countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, and Austria). The UK and Ireland and countries in Southern Europe do worse, rarely achieving more than 10 percent women. This hierarchy mirrors almost perfectly the percent of women in parliaments in those regions (see Davis 1997 pages 16 and 35). The same pattern appears if we consider countries around the world – higher percentages of females in parliament are related to higher percentages of females in cabinet positions (Reynolds 1999; WEDO 2007).

One route to achieving a gender balanced cabinet may be the election of a female national leader. Michelle Bachelet was the first national leader to nominate women to 50% of cabinet positions. Finnish President Tarja Halonen was responsible for appointing the first female majority cabinet. And, other recently elected female leaders such as Angela Merkel and Cristina Kirchner have appointed cabinets with around 40 percent female ministers (CIA 2008).

Why are women overrepresented in the 'softer' cabinet positions? The explanation may again start with their experience as legislators. National legislatures often divide their work into legislative committees to prepare or review legislation in a particular area. Subsets of legislators belong to legislative committees of different types - Defense, Finance, etc. Female legislators are more likely to be assigned to "women's issue" committees and social issues committees. Women are seldom assigned to the so-called 'power' committees like Treasury, Budget, or Foreign Relations (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005). It is by serving on these 'power' committees that

legislators get the important experience that helps channel them to top cabinet posts. Since women serve on power committees at much lower rates than men, they get channeled to power cabinet posts at lower rates too.

And why are women getting assigned to social issues committees instead of power committees? As relative newcomers to politics, these women pose a serious threat to traditional male power on these committees. In most legislative bodies it is a small number of people who make committee assignments (for example, the party leaders). If male party leaders can, therefore, they will sideline women into unimportant committees to preserve their own power (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005). Overall, the current underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, both at the national level and in political parties, affects women's appointment to cabinet positions around the world.

### **Difficulties faced by female leaders**

Leaders of any gender are expected to behave in certain ways. Traditionally, effective leadership is associated with aggression, competitiveness, dominance, and decisiveness. People also have expectations of women and men. Male stereotypes suggest that men are assertive, aggressive, dominant, independent, and competitive. Women, on the other hand, are stereotyped as nurturing, helpful, likeable, gentle, and polite.

The 'match' between stereotypes of men and leaders is much better than the match between women and leaders. For this reason, women face prejudice as leaders because people tend to assume that leadership is a masculine trait (Eagly and Karau 2002). Further, because women have traditionally been in a subordinate position to men,



cultural beliefs lead people to assume that men are more competent and legitimate as leaders than women (Ridgeway 2001). This prejudice is even *more* likely to emerge when the leadership position in question is typically male, as in the case of military leaders or political leaders.

Female leaders in highly visible leadership positions therefore must live with assumptions that they are less competent than their male counterparts. They may be held to higher standards than men to obtain and retain their leadership position. Iceland's president Vigdis Finnbogadóttir explains, "We all know that women have to do everything a little better than man. Women cannot afford to make a faux pas, as they say in French, that is quite clear. We are also very, very tolerant when men make mistakes, but I don't know of any society that is tolerant when women make mistakes...there's a tendency to say...well, she's a woman. You'd never say, 'well he's a man, it's natural that he makes a mistake.' You do not say a thing. You only accept it." (quoted in Liswood 1995:69)

Female leaders face an additional problem because they must serve two roles: their role as a leader and their role as a woman. The two sets of expectations can be very different, and in fact, conflict with each other. This puts a female leader in a difficult position. Should she act the way people expect her to act as a woman? Should she be nurturing, supportive, and gentle? Or should she act the way people expect a leader to act? This may require exhibiting "masculine" behavior such as aggressiveness and dominance. If female leaders choose aggression, research demonstrates that they will be negatively evaluated. In a review of research, Eagly, Makhijani and Klonsky (1992) found that people evaluate autocratic behavior by women more negatively than the same

behavior by men. Women who act assertively violate the expectations of those around them and subsequently get penalized for this behavior (Ridgeway 2001). For example, Margaret Thatcher, a very assertive and aggressive politician, was called “Attila the Hen.” This puts female leaders in a real Catch-22: “Conforming to their gender role can produce a failure to meet the requirements of their leader role, and conforming to the leader role can produce a failure to meet the requirements of their gender role.” (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001:786).

At times women can use cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity to their advantage. Margaret Thatcher is an example of a female leader who was very aware of the impact of her femininity on the men around her. She dressed attractively and would coax, cajol, and flatter to get her way (Genovese 1993:207). But she also adopted traditionally masculine behavior in a way that men found difficult to counter. Thatcher was aggressive, tough, ruthless, and rude, behavior that men did not expect from a woman. Harris (1995:62) relates an interview with a member of her first cabinet: “if any male Prime Minister had said things to me in cabinet in the terms and tone that she often adopted, I would have gone to him privately afterwards, given him a blasting, and told him that if he did that again I’d resign. But you can’t treat a woman like that.” Similarly, because of unwritten but rigorous codes of chivalry, Poland’s male-led parties were hesitant to intrigue against Hanna Suchocka, their female prime minister (Liswood 1995:67). And a recently-elected female leader, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, ran on a gendered platform, claiming that she was free of corruption and would “bring a motherly sensitivity and emotion to the presidency” as a way of healing the wounds of war.” (BBC 2005)

### **Gender and leadership: are female leaders different from men?**

Does having women in positions of power change anything? Does the fact that a national leader is female make a difference to how they act? People expect female leaders to be concerned about the welfare of other people (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001).

Research on female legislators shows that women do have different policy priorities than men (CITES). Women also tend to be more democratic and participatory in their leadership style than men, for example, allowing subordinates to participate in decision-making.

Biographies of women at the highest levels of political leadership suggest that some, such as Corozon Aquino and Violetta de Charmorro, did work for participation and consensus. Others, however, were famously autocratic. Margaret Thatcher was a self-described ‘conviction politician’ rather than a ‘consensus politician’. She surrounded herself with ‘yes men’ and limited debate and discussion during cabinet meetings.

Thatcher would enter a cabinet meeting, tell her cabinet members what she wanted, and then try to bully them using fear, intimidation, control of the agenda, and “sheer force of personality and conviction.” (Genovese 1993:199). Indira Gandhi seriously endangered India’s 28 year old democracy by declaring emergency rule when her leadership was challenged. Declaration of emergency rule essentially transformed India into a dictatorship, and Gandhi, as the head of the central government, was able to arrest opposition leaders, censor the press, ban political organizations, and jail over 100,000 people without trial.

Are women more peaceful as leaders than men? Stereotypes suggest that men are the aggressive perpetrators of war while women are the peacemakers who try to stop wars. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that women in the general population are less likely to advocate violence and aggression in international affairs. For example, in the United States over the last century, women were less supportive than men of U.S. involvement in wars by approximately 8 percentage points (Conover and Sapiro 1993).

But female *leaders* may not be different from men in their attitudes about aggression. McGlen and Sarkees (1993) found that women working in the U.S. State Department and Defense Department advocated aggression and violence at the same rate as men. And female leaders may not be *able* to be more peaceful as they act on the world stage. If male leaders perceive female leaders as weak, countries led by female leaders may be more likely to be attacked by nearby neighbors. Caprioli and Boyer (2001) argue that, of the 10 international crises involving female leaders between 1960 and 1990, the female leaders never initiated the crisis.

But female leaders have been involved in wars. Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher were all involved in wars, while Benazir Bhutto and Tansu Ciller were involved in crises that that did not lead to full-scale war. While women may be seen as symbols of peace and reconciliation when they come to power (as has occurred in Africa), once in power they are willing to use force if necessary. For example, Margaret Thatcher did not hesitate to respond to Argentina's invasion of the British-controlled Falkland Islands. And, like a male leader, Margaret Thatcher experienced a huge rise in popularity after Britain's successful defense of the islands.

Still, although we cannot know their inmost thoughts, it may be that female leaders do feel differently about war than their male counterparts. As Golda Meir explained, “I have given instructions that I be informed every time one of our soldiers is killed, even if it is in the middle of the night. When President Nasser leaves instructions that he is to be awakened in the middle of the night if an Egyptian soldier is killed, there will be peace.”

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of potential differences between female and male leaders, the fact remains that there have been very few female leaders in history. Simone de Beauvoir put it well: “Perseus, Hercules, David, Achilles, Lancelot, the French warriors Du Geslin and Bayard, Napoleon – so many men for one Joan of Arc.” Young men growing up today have plenty of heroes to emulate. But who can women look up to? Luckily for today’s young woman, there are more and more examples of powerful female leaders for them to follow. Female national leaders act as prominent exceptions to the rule that “men govern.” Today’s young women can look to today’s leaders as examples when they make their own bids for the highest office of the land.

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Table 1: Female National Leaders

	Country	Title	Dates of Rule
Sirimavo Bandaranaike	Sri Lanka	prime minister	1960-65, 1970-77
Indira Gandhi	India	prime minister	1966-77, 1980-84
Golda Meir	Israel	prime minister	1969-74
Isabel Peron	Argentina	president	1974-76
Margaret Thatcher	UK	prime minister	1979-90
Lydia Gueiler Tejada	Bolivia	president <sup>t</sup>	1979-1980
Eugenia Charles	Dominica	prime minister	1980-1995
Gro Harlem Brundtland	Norway	prime minister	1981, 1986-89, 1990-1996
Corazon Aquino	Philippines	president	1986-92
Benazir Bhutto	Pakistan	prime minister	1988-1990, 1993-1996
Violeta Chamorro	Nicaragua	president	1990-1996
Ertha Pascal-Trouillot	Haiti	president <sup>t</sup>	1990-91
Khaleda Zia	Bangladesh	prime minister	1991-6 2001-present
Kim Campbell	Canada	prime minister	1993
Silvie Kinigi	Burundi	president <sup>t</sup>	1993-1994
Tansu Ciller	Turkey	prime minister	1993-1996
Reneta Indzhova	Bulgaria	prime minister <sup>t</sup>	1994-1995
Chandrika Kumaratunga	Sri Lanka	president	1994-2005
Ruth Perry	Liberia	president <sup>t</sup>	1996-1997
Sheikh Hasina Wajed	Bangladesh	prime minister	1996-2001
Jenny Shipley	New Zealand	prime minister	1997-1999
Janet Jagan	Guyana	president	1997-1999
Mireya Moscoso de Arias	Panama	president	1999-2004
Helen Clark	New Zealand	prime minister	1999-present
Megawati Sukarnoputri	Indonesia	president	2001-2004
Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo	Philippines	president	2001-present
Angela Merkel	Germany	chancellor	2005-present
Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf	Liberia	president	2005-present
Michelle Bachelet	Chile	president	2006-present
Portia Simpson-Miller	Jamaica	prime minister	2006-2007
Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner	Argentina	president	2007-present

t = interim or acting

Note: Ruth Dreifuss served as president of Switzerland in 1999 as part of a seven-member chief executive with a rotating chair. Micheline Calmy-Rey held this position in 2007.



Table 2: Female Prime Ministers in Presidential Systems

	Country	Dates in Office
Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo	Portugal	1979
Milka Planinc	Yugoslavia	1982-86
Edith Cresson	France	1991-2
Hanna Suchocka	Poland	1992-3
Sirimavo Bandaranaike	Sri Lanka	1994-2000
Claudette Werleigh	Haiti	1995-6
Tarja Halonen <sup>t</sup>	Finland	2000-present
Madoir Boye	Senegal	2001-2
Maria das Neves Ceita Batista de Sousa	Sao Tome and Principe	2002-2004
Beatriz Merino	Peru	2003
Luisa Dias Diogo	Mozambique	2004-
Yuliya Tymoshenko	Ukraine	2005, 2007-present
Han Myung-Sook	South Korea	2006-present
Michele Pierre-Louis	Haiti	2008-present
Zinaida Greceanii	Moldova	2008-present

t = Halonen is the President of Finland but shares power with the Prime Minister

Table 3: Female National Leaders Holding Mainly Symbolic Power

	Title	Country	Dates in Office
Elisabeth Domitien	prime minister	Central African Republic	1975-76
Vigdís Finnbogadóttir	president	Iceland	1980-1996
Agatha Barbara	president	Malta	1982-87
Sabine Bergmann-Pohl	president	Germany (Dem Rep)	1990
Mary Robinson	president	Ireland	1990-97
Agathe Uwilingiyimana	prime minister	Rwanda	1993
Mary McAleese	president	Ireland	1997-present
Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga	president	Latvia	1999-2007
Pratibha Patil	president	India	2007-present

Table 4. Women's Average Share of Cabinet Seats by Region

Western Europe	27.8%
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.9%
North America	22.0%
Latin America and the Caribbean	20.5%
Eastern Europe	10.5%
Asia and the Pacific	6.9%
North Africa	4.0%

*Source: WEDO (2007)*

Table 5. Women's Cabinet Positions for Selected Types

Type of Cabinet Position	%
Health and Social Welfare	14
Women's Affairs	13
Education	9
Culture-Arts-Heritage	9
Family and Children	8
...	
Finance-Treasury	1
Home Affairs	1
Defense	1
Oil	1
Civil Service	1

*source of data: Reynolds (1999)*

## **Author Biographies**

Pamela Paxton is Associate Professor of Sociology and Political Science (by courtesy) at the Ohio State University. Some of her previous research on politics and gender appears in the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces*. With Melanie Hughes, she is the co-author of the 2007 book, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*. Her current research considers women's political participation over time and connections between social capital and social networks.

Melanie M. Hughes is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. She has published numerous articles on the topic of gender and politics in journals such as *American Sociological Review*, *Politics & Gender*, *Social Problems*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, and the *International Journal of Sociology*. Recently, she coauthored a textbook with Pamela Paxton titled *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* (Pine Forge 2007). Much of her current scholarship focuses on the intersection of gender and minority status in national legislatures around the world. She is also researching growth and change over time in women's international organizations.