

Women and Political Leadership

Written by Michael A. Genovese

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MICHAEL A. GENOVESE, APR 13 2013

“Her wings are clipped,” wrote Simone de Beauvoir, “and it is found deplorable she does not fly” (de Beauvoir 2007). For centuries, women’s political wings were clipped as the public sphere was deemed appropriate only for men. The occasional queen or woman warrior did emerge, but this was the exception. The rule was that men were to rule.

In the late 20th century this slowly began to change. In both the developed and developing worlds, women began to head governments. From Gro Harlem Brundtland in Norway (who served three terms as prime minister, in 1981, 1986, and 1990), to Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, from Golda Meir in Israel, to Angel Merkel in Germany, from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, to Margaret Thatcher in the UK, the sight of a woman as head of government became more common and less surprising.

One of the most contentious questions in gender and leadership studies is: do men and women lead differently? Is the dominant, assertive, top-down, competitive approach a male style and a relationship-oriented, consensus-building, approach to leading a feminine style? Early research into gender differences (most of which was done by examining the style of corporate leaders) suggested that men and women were different in their styles of leadership (Moss Kanter 1993), but more recent research, especially from neuroscience, paints a more complex and nuanced picture (Doidge 2007). True, there are biological differences between men and women that lead to some differences in how boys and girls behave (Blum 1998). These differences – nature – may lead to an exaggerated sense of gender distinctness and may elicit responses from adults that reinforce and increase these differences – nurture (Kane 2012). What began as biological instincts and biases in brain function are amplified over time by stereotyping and gender role expectations, making differences more pronounced.

In recent years, several key gaps between men and women are closing. Women participate in sports at an increasing rate, more women go to college and graduate than men, more women are going into “the professions” than men. And today more women hold visible public positions than in the past (presidential candidates, Supreme Court Justices, CEOs, etc.) (Lawless and Fox 2005).

Do women leaders pursue policy agendas that are different from those of their male counterparts? Are women in power more likely to bring other women into power or promote a feminist political agenda? To promote family issues? To promote a leftist agenda? In short, in policy terms, does it make a difference that a ruler is a woman? The research on women who hold political office reveals a tendency for women in the US Congress to be slightly more liberal than men (see Welch 1985). Is this also true of women who lead nations? In examining the policy preferences of the women who have served as national leaders, no clear pattern emerges. None of these women has been a “revolutionary” leader (in a feminist sense), and overall they have tended to be spread across the ideological spectrum. The promotion of “women’s issues” likewise has varied from leader to leader, with Margaret Thatcher promoting what many referred to as policies that were hostile to women’s interests, and other leaders pursuing a more pro-feminist agenda.

All leaders, male and female, face enormous constraints that must be overcome if they are to achieve policy and political success. It is not unreasonable to presume that one of the reasons women leaders have not been more demonstratively pro-feminist in policy promotion is because such an agenda might be considered radically anti-status quo, and pushing these issues might be too politically risky or, certain female leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher,

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might not be interested in pursuing a feminist agenda.

Students of international relations are divided on the question: do leaders matter? Some argue that leaders matter very little (Morgenthau 1967); that other factors (balance of power, role expectations, etc.) are what *really* matter, and that individuals – and individual variations – are relatively insignificant. Others see leadership mattering greatly (Cronin and Genovese 2012), with individual variations in temperament, ideology, skill, character, etc. shaping decision-making. To the former, the fact of a woman as head of government matters little. But to the latter group, gender *may* be of major consequence in decision-making. And to those in the “leadership matters” group, there is little to suggest that the gender of a leader significantly alters decision-making. Female heads of government engage in war (e.g. Thatcher and the Falklands/Malvinas War), they can be excellent managers (e.g. Merkel). They can be vain and self-centered (e.g. Peron) or bullies (Thatcher) and softies (Aquino) (Genovese and Steckenrider 2013). Female leaders come in many shapes and sizes, have performed well and poorly.

There is no question that opportunities for women have opened up in the past 50 years. The Women’s movement, the spread of democracy, and other factors have coalesced to open doors that have historically been closed to women. But the basic structure and legacy of male domination remains largely intact. The women who have headed national governments, while a varied lot, do have one thing in common: none of them has challenged in any fundamental way, the patriarchal power structure of her society. To do so would have been political suicide.

If doors have opened for women – and they have – enormous barriers still exist. Women often remain outsiders and second-class citizens. The hurdles that inhibit the emergence of women in the public sphere are formidable.

At some point, the fact that it is a female leading a government will be utterly banal. We will look past gender and notice other qualities of leadership: vision, managerial skill, judgment, empathy, character, etc. Only after a series of “firsts” have been passed (e.g. first female U.S. President) and we get a series of “seconds” will we begin to move past gender bias in the electoral arena.

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