

Would More Female Leadership Lead to Less Global Conflict?

Written by Mia Lombardi

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MIA LOMBARDI, MAR 28 2013

Would a World In Which Women Dominated Key Leadership Positions Contain Less Violent Conflict?

The impact of gender on international security has come under much scrutiny in recent years, with divergences between the influence of socially-constructed gender or biologically-led 'sex' taking a key focus. This essay will examine whether one can evaluate the traditional view of the characteristics of women and conclude that a world in which women dominated leadership positions would be more peaceful, or whether, in fact, it remains that "war is a political relationship between states and has nothing to do with the psychology of the individuals involved." (Sparrow cited by Nye: 2012, 2) Women are conspicuous by their absence in key political areas, and it is this lack of representation that allows male concerns to take precedence. The vital question here is if violent conflict could be considered a male concern, or is purely a result of a competitive state system. (Pettman cited in Beckman and D'amico: 1994)

One could argue that the current system of masculine dominance is institutionalised by the very nature of state sovereignty. The state is unique in its definition of holding the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, and, by this fact alone, defines the nature of leadership as violent and expressed through hierarchical structure-characteristics traditionally attributed to men. (Weber 2006) The assertion of the power over the majority by a minority group concentrates supremacy in the hands of few, and through this system, it is those who display the celebrated masculine characteristics of aggression and dominance that thrive; as Youngs supports, "empirically, states are run by men, defined by men, and advance the interests of men." (Hoffman 2001: 6) It therefore seems naive to assume that the placement of women in power roles would significantly impact the nature of the state system; of course, the competitive international state system would still remain and assert a significant level of influence over the actions of those who operate within it, whether male or female. What's more, the discourse of security studies is defined by impersonal language and patriarchal imagery- features which perpetuate the masculine bias and enforce existing masculine hierarchical structures, and therefore lessen the chance of a fundamental change in the nature of the power structure. (Okin 1990)

The hypothesis that the world would be more peaceful if women held key power roles depends largely on the traditional view of females as the less aggressive and, conversely, more peaceful and conciliatory sex. Of course, one could question whether these values are biologically ingrained, or whether society has constructed these values as the expected manner in which we are supposed to behave. (Cook 1991) By examining the behaviour of women who have held important leadership roles, it may be possible to assert that those who succeed in leadership display traditionally masculine characteristics, and therefore would allow us to dismiss the hypothesis. In fact, the militaristic actions of Thatcher, Meir and Indira Ghandi in recent years would suggest that the hypothesis of peaceful female rulers is not true at all. (Nye 2012) It must be remembered that even if men ceased to hold power positions, and therefore the opportunity for perceived masculine action of warmongering was removed, the key catalysts of conflict would remain. Racial tension, resource shortages and religious clashes are leading causes of violent conflict in recent years, and the removal of men from power would not solve these issues. It remains that within society there will be social groups that are more economically endowed than others, and this, alongside with the varieties in culture and value systems, means that there will always be cause for conflict from a 'bottom-up' angle, even if a more

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conciliatory leadership system was in place.

Although some would say that the nature of women means these issues would be approached from a more co-operative angle, and therefore the possibility of violence is minimised, it remains that the international system is ultimately based on competition and the survival of states, and it is for this reason that the assertions of Pearce (1995: 86) seem unrealistic when he states:

“Enacting legislation that allowed only women to stand for national public office would probably save hundreds of millions of lives this century—possibly more.”

Illustrating this flawed stereotype of ‘feminine’ characteristics are the actions of female Tamil Tigers; the presence of females operating on the front line of the liberation movement opposes the culturally-enforced, pacifistic stereotype, and instead demands a reconsideration of the gendered adjectives of aggression and submission. Although true that this presence of women in front line positions is not commonly observed, it must be remembered that women are excluded from operating on the front line within the US and British military systems, further supporting the idea that it is the constructed placement of women within society and historical reinforcement of this that perpetuate the presence of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ characteristics. D’Amico’s suggestion that women are “barred from a primary institution which helps codify and constitute citizenship” (D’Amico cited in Weber 2006: 4) would support the assertion that the nature of women is falsely represented in the international system, and therefore the idea of female pacifistic nature creating a less conflicted system cannot be proven.

Furthermore, one can address a different social stereotype in which women have been portrayed as devious and manipulative (Nye 2012.) Whilst it would seem naive to assume that this stereotype would remain constant when projected onto an international scale, it does contribute to the idea that a women-only leadership would be just as conflicted as the current patriarchal systems, perhaps just in a different way to direct aggression.

When we consider case studies, there is evidence that details the pacifistic nature of women. The establishment of a grassroots movement by Libyan woman in an attempt to end the Libyan civil war was largely successful, and one could argue is a significant example of the more co-operative, as opposed to hierarchical, approach that women take to political action. This also exemplifies what is seen as the feminine model of rule- a focus on discourse and rejection of domination and the use of force or exploitation. (Cook and Wilcox 1991) There do remain difficulties in projecting these predictions onto an international scale when we consider how historically women have not held the same power positions of men. Arguably, if women had in fact dominated leadership, then the characteristics society considers vital to maintain power – and, in fact the very nature of the leadership system – would be vastly different, as corroborated by Pinker: “over the long sweep of history, women have been and will be a pacifying force.” (Pinker 2011: 86)

Pinker draws parallels between those countries which fail to empower women, and those which experience the highest levels of conflict and violence. This relationship is further supported through the observation of a strong correlation between the world’s most peaceful nations, and those which report the highest levels of sexual equality. Although arguably a tenuous link to make, and by no means directly causal, this does imply that the relationship between gender and war is very complex. (Pinker 2011) In the USA, it has been observed that higher levels of education reduces the disposition of women towards militarisation, whilst polls have revealed that women are generally no less opposed to war than men, provided there is a legitimate and justifiable reason for the conflict. This move away from abstract to concrete observations would suggest that the differences in reaction to conflict cannot be entirely attributed to gender, but instead is largely contextually driven. Observations by Shapiro and Mahajan that women are far less likely than men to support increases in military spending would also suggest that women are less inclined to conflict than men, or at the very least more willing to employ alternative methods of dispute resolution. (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986) Although not necessarily pacifistic, this does imply a different leadership style would become evident if women dominated power positions. An increased focus on communication and reconciliation over individualism, alongside the suggestion that women hold a high moral superiority (Okin 1990), could have the potential to bring a more peaceful orientation to foreign policy issues. (Ruddick 1989.)

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Although one may not be able to say for certain that a higher presence of women in power roles would lead to less war, it may be possible to identify other positive effects that may emerge as a result. Reardon asserts that peace is not defined solely by the absence of war, but equally by the presence of social equality, an area which is largely considered to be given more precedence by a female leaders. (Reardon 1985: 52)

One could also question how relevant military conflict is in the contemporary international system; the rise in impact of other geo-political factors such as economic crisis and environmental damage demonstrate the changing nature of conflict, and it is difficult to predict the extent to which developing gender roles will impact on this. (Reardon 1985)

The placement of women in traditional caregiver roles and ingrained sexual discrimination, especially in less developed countries, is typical of the de-politicisation of male dominance over female, and supports the notion that "patriarchy is the most pervasive of human constructions." (Pettman cited in Beckman and D'amico 1994: 137) Through this, one could assert that the historical reinforcement of male and female roles makes it vastly difficult to affirm whether male and female characteristics are biological or constructed, and therefore the hypothesis is not one to which we can fully observe beyond a theoretical position.

Ultimately, based on the evidence presented, one could draw the conclusion that a more peaceful society would be founded not through female domination of power roles, but instead by an equal concentration of men and women in these positions. Reardon's observation that the most militaristic societies often display inherently sexist beliefs advocates for the elimination of sexism, and therefore more equitable division of power, as a way to ensure peace. (Reardon, 1985)

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