

Setting the Example? A Gendered Approach on Fighting Covid-19

Written by Bárbara Lopes Campos

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/03/25/setting-the-example-a-gendered-approach-on-fighting-covid-19/>

BÁRBARA LOPES CAMPOS, MAR 25 2021

As J. Ann Tickner stated back in 1997: states are gendered. We ought to point out that our societies, cultures, and international relations are also gendered, since gender influences all of the agents and actors' behavior, impacting all dimensions of decision-making inside and outside political institutions. Therefore, a political decision on if, why and how to act, including during a global health pandemic can be influenced by gender. With this in mind, I would like to invite the reader to reflect with me on the impact of gender on the fight against COVID-19 – which insights, if any, do gender-sensitive lenses offer us? Over recent decades, feminists have been shining a light on the importance of taking gender into consideration in the analysis of international phenomena and state behavior. This theoretical and analytical wake-up call took first and foremost the path of studying men's roles in political leadership and its global consequences. Since 1995, however, thanks to the Beijing guidelines and conjunctures for increasing women's political representation – and also for creating institutional mechanisms for women, promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, and supporting their emergence into political leadership – new analytical frameworks have emerged, whilst new female leaders begun to appear in several democratic countries. Now, it has become possible – and necessary – for us to look at the other side of the gender spectrum and reflect on the consequences of having these women in positions of power.

My goal in this article is to offer some thoughts on this matter and make modest contributions to the debate. This will be in consonance with similar works which shed light on many aspects of gender and female administrative efficiency in private corporations and also political governance. The objective, then, will be to discuss the affirmative and efficient policy strategies played out by three female political leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the choice of Angela Merkel, Jacinda Ardern, and Mette Frederiksen in the analysis refers to a very specific profile of women leading strong social democracies with fairly strong economies – not to mention that they are all white and from the irregular global north – their success in fighting COVID-19 carries a certain inventiveness and has paved the way for many interesting discussions. I say this, and look at the issue, from the perspective of a young female researcher from the global south. Or, to be more specific, from a country whose first (and only) female president was impeached, and whose current president is consistently trying to sweep the pandemic under the rug by spreading misinformation, by neglecting the poorer population that rely on the public health service, and actively performing a necropolitics of abandonment, in an attitude that has cost the lives of more than 300 thousand human beings – and counting. It is with this stark contrast in the horizon that I wish to elaborate on positive examples of transparency, responsiveness and empathy provided by these women, and on how they can be powerful traits of character that contribute to political coordination and efficiency.

Women in Political Leadership Worldwide

According to the World Economic Forum's 2020 Gender Gap Report, 53% out of 153 countries haven't had a single woman taking the head of the state office in the last 50 years. In the political representation dimension, on average women occupy 25% of the lower house parliamentary seats and 21% of ministries around the world. Currently, 29 countries have women serving as heads of state or government, whereas more than 50% took office in European countries. Even if women's political under-representation has been declining throughout the years, the current numbers still remind us of the challenges posed by an international order intrinsically permeated by inequalities in the

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form of gender disparity. Internationalists confronted by the scarcity of observations available in our international system ought to weight case studies differently, and perhaps extract larger insights from the specific political pathways. I hope to impart to the reader that studying the existing experiences of women's political leadership can be part of a growing initiative for improving women's political empowerment worldwide. If women are promoting good political coordination, they can set the example for overcoming gender gaps in other countries.

With this in mind, let us look at how female political leaders have been dealing with the current global pandemic, and what the impact was of Angela Merkel's, Jacinda Ardern's, and Mette Frederiksen's governance on the fight against COVID-19.

Angela Merkel: transparency

This is part and parcel of an open democracy: But we also make political decisions transparent and explain them. We justify and communicate our actions as well as possible so that they are comprehensible.

Angela Merkel

On March 19th 2020 Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed Germany's population and called on the people to take the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. She openly stated that this could be the greatest challenge faced by modern Germany since the end of the second world war and that it would require unprecedented joint solidarity. She also exposed the government's national strategy to deal with the pandemic, which consisted of three tactics: scientific research-oriented guidelines, massive testing, and slowing the spread of the virus around the country by maintaining social distancing. In doing so, Merkel mobilized a sense of community and joint effort, based on logic, effective resource allocation, and cooperation. This was fundamental to ensure people would stick to the rules imposed by the government and helped Germany's population take into account the consequences of individual actions for the whole community, from a democratic perspective. This collective effort was made possible by a series of financial assistance measures and aid articulated between government and parliament to support the population and German companies. From the perspective of Fox Keller and Elshain, in which discourse and narratives about our reality matter a great deal, we should see that when the time to deal with a national health crisis came, Merkel responded affirmatively and established clear and transparent communication with its citizens to flatten the COVID-19 transmission curve.

Although Germany wasn't able to prevent the COVID-19 outbreak right at the beginning, which resulted in the deaths of at least 75,255 people, the government rapidly established a prevention protocol and high-level testing capacities to mitigate its impact, recovering more than one million people from the disease by the end of November. With assertive actions and national adherence, by April Germany began relaxing its social distancing measures, based on data monitoring and science. Later in 2020, Merkel reinforced once again the importance of taking the pandemic seriously and called for the maintenance of the social solidarity in the spirit of safeguarding lives amid the second wave of the disease. Recently, with the new COVID-19 strains and the risk of new infection waves, the German Chancellor had planned to extend its current restrictions and to impose a five-day nationwide lockdown in April. However, after been widely criticized by business leaders and scientists, Merkel admitted that although there were good reasons for imposing the lockdown it couldn't have been implemented well enough in short time. Nevertheless, the government asks for people to stay at home and to use single-use surgical or FFP2 masks.

Jacinda Ardern: responsiveness

Act now, or risk the virus taking hold as it has elsewhere.

Jacinda Ardern

On March 19th 2020 New Zealand's Prime Minister decided to act early and implemented with the aid of her Cabinet a nationwide Level 4 Alert, which resulted in the adoption of lockdown policies in the early days of the disease. With 102 confirmed cases of the virus, Ardern decided it was time to act to spare lives, constrain the spread of COVID-19,

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and to preserve the national health system. By enacting a proactive political leadership, the Prime Minister took responsibility for the outcome of the pandemic and stood up to the challenge of containing a health crisis. Ardern reassured the population that the availability of essential services would be guaranteed and that as the population moved into a condition of isolation, a vigorous contact trace of cases through efficient testing would monitor the potential easing of these measures. After three months of intense commitment and sustained effort, New Zealand declared the nation virus-free and lifted all COVID-19 restrictions, except for the reopening of borders to foreign travelers.

Its largest city, Auckland had to go under lockdown again after another Coronavirus outbreak but was able to ease the restrictions on August 30th. Then, Ardern reaffirmed her commitment to consistent testing in order to eliminate the virus in the country and commented on the importance of people following the guidelines for the system to continue working as it had been. By the end of November, New Zealand reported 2,032 recovered cases of COVID-19 and 25 deaths. In the meantime, Ardern was re-elected in the best showing for the Labour Party in the past 50 years. She won her second mandate with considerable support, and there's no doubt her decisive response to the disease helped pave the way for her electoral success. In the race against COVID-19, New Zealand has already secured vaccines for everyone in the country and has provided a vaccine rollout plan on March 17th 2021 to ensure early vaccination and safety.

Mette Frederiksen: empathy

Every death is a tragedy. The situation is serious.

Mette Frederiksen

Following Italy, Denmark was the second European country to enter lockdown on March 11th 2020 due to the spread of the Coronavirus. The country had isolated 1,303 people that could be contaminated by the virus but hadn't had any deaths reported at that point. In the face of the rising number of cases, the Prime Minister announced the implementation of strict social distancing measures to prevent a more dangerous spread of the virus. All public-sector employees, except for essential services providers, were immediately given two weeks' leave, and private employers were advised to take precautions and have their staff work remotely if possible. Moreover, Frederiksen announced that the country would close all kindergartens, schools, and universities.

Amidst the changes and challenges imposed by the pandemic, Frederiksen opted for an empathic discourse approach, holding frequent press conferences, including conferences held expressly for children to answer their questions directly. This political tactic not only helped reassure the nation but also encouraged people's compliance with the instructions and guidelines given by the government. The Prime Minister managed to highlight the importance of a solid collective effort to fight the virus. When the time came to gradually ease social distancing measures in April, the Prime Minister stated that she was concerned for the elderly and that she was asking for the weakest to be the strongest, to maintain quarantine, and reduce their exposure. Once again, empathic narratives about reality helped shape the way people react to political guidelines, and Frederiksen's resourcefulness contributed to a decisive response to COVID-19 in the country.

By bringing out a humanitarian dimension, and captivating the nation's attention towards care and precaution, Frederiksen managed to keep the numbers of the disease relatively low in Denmark, which by the end of November had more than 83,000 cases recovered and around 950 deaths. The Prime Minister has also shown her empathic side during the mink crisis in early November. After discovering a new version of the coronavirus in the small animals, that could even jeopardize vaccines' effectiveness, more than 15 million minks had to be put down in Denmark. Frederiksen expressed sorrow for this event and, in tears, extended her compassion to mink breeders. The Danish government also displays confidence in their vaccination program with the new "corona pass" initiative, which will be available on mobile phone for everyone over the age of 15 showing whether people have been vaccinated, previously infected or have had a negative test in the past three days.

Concluding: gender matters

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This article reflected on the impacts of gender in fighting COVID-19, through the analysis of the political leadership of Angela Merkel, Jacinda Ardern, and Mette Frederiksen. It was my intention to show how gender-sensitive lens could allow us to focus on the values that permeate these women's agency. By acting with transparency, responsiveness, and through empathic discourses, these women set the example for a positive political engagement that made the difference in dealing with the disease, not only by allocating resources and implementing early social distancing and lockdown policies, but for gathering, reinforcing, and mobilizing cooperation and compliance in society.

If gender matters and female political leaders are more averse to risk – by not being overly self-assured, knowing how to listen to others, caring, and putting expertise above their egotistical self-image – then their proactivity may have helped save countless lives. Also, the acute awareness of the fact that they are prone to face more scrutiny than men (and harsh criticism in case of failure) may work as a drive to more effective and ingenious behavior and decision-making in situations of crisis. Gendered approaches to political leadership are proving to be increasingly important to understand assertiveness and behavior coordination. Perhaps, with more women stepping into office in subnational and national elections, and with incumbent female politicians managing to remain in the political game for longer, the current global health crisis could be appeased sooner rather than later. In addition, future analysis can conjure more pieces of evidence for allowing hypothesis testing on the impact of female political leadership in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and other situations of crisis. Deepening our knowledge of these experiences, while also comparing and contrasting them, might be a strong contribution for the studies of gender and political governance in feminist theory.

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