

Countries led by women have fared better against coronavirus. Why?

By Austa Somvichian-Clausen

As coronavirus cases top 2 million and reported deaths stand at more than 166,000 globally, world leaders stand to be judged for their initial responses to the still-growing pandemic. These early stage decisions inarguably had tremendous consequences on the growth rate of the virus in each country, as well as lasting economic impacts.

China's economy is experiencing its worst three-month period in decades — ending a nearly half-century of growth. Here in the States a record 22 million people have filed for unemployment benefits in the last four weeks, retail sales suffered a record drop in March and economists now believe the economy has contracted at its steepest pace since World War II in the first quarter, according to [Reuters](#).

A different kind of leader

Just as accusatory fingers are being pointed at those who chose not to take quick, decisive action to limit social interaction and facilitate testing, people around the world are also standing up and taking notice of those who demonstrated exemplary leadership and were met with successful results.

Germany has now overseen the largest-scale coronavirus testing program in Europe thanks to their longstanding chancellor Angela Merkel, conducting 350,000 tests each week and detecting the virus early enough to isolate and treat patients effectively.

Small nordic countries like Iceland, Finland and Norway took early action as well, employing smart methods of combating the virus early on. Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir has been offering free coronavirus testing to all of Iceland's citizens, while most countries have limited testing to people with active symptoms. As a result, the tiny country with less than 400,000 residents has already screened five times as many people as South Korea has, without having to shut schools or institute widespread lockdowns.

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What commonality do all of these countries share? Well, they're led by women, for one.

"We do need to be careful about lumping men and women into homogenous categories and keep in mind that the percentage of female national and global leaders is much smaller," says Kathleen Gersen, a professor of sociology at New York University. "But with that being said, among the countries which have done a better job of handling this pandemic and the spillover effects that it has had, women are disproportionately represented to a rather startling degree."

Gersen tells Changing America that while she doesn't reject the argument that women employ a different style of leadership, there are two critical questions to be asked first.

“First, if it is true that women have a different leadership style, where does that come from?” she asks. “My answer to that question is that it's not an inherent quality, because among the majority of leaders who are men there's actually an enormous amount of variability.” She adds that women face additional sex-based hurdles on their path to leadership positions, and as a result narrows female leadership candidacy to what she calls “a fairly select group.”

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“[Female leaders] are also likely to be nourished and supported within societies that themselves have a certain culture,” she says, such as those same Nordic countries that enjoy record-topping levels of gender equality. “Even though we see that there may be a relationship between women's leadership and their handling of a crisis like this (with a greater degree of effectiveness and compassion), if we accept the fact that there's a relationship, the next question becomes why.”

That “why” isn't a simple question to answer. It's one that demonstrates how the success of a leader has nearly as much to do with their policy choices as it does with how well they're able to effectively communicate and gain trust from their people. “If you have a political culture in which there's a relative support and trust in the government, and it's a culture that doesn't make stark distinctions between women and men, you've already got a head start,” says Gersen.

Real leadership qualities traverse gender lines

One theory on the success of female leaders asserts that because women have historically been marginalized, especially in terms of leadership roles, those who rise to power feel less constrained by traditional methods.

“There are so many ways that men are expected to behave when they're leaders that I think it sometimes makes it difficult for them to step over those boundaries and act in a different way from the norm,” she says. “I think a counterexample to that would be how Andrew Cuomo is handling the situation in New York.”

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New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has in fact been having quite the moment, effectively shifting gears from the traditionally bullish methods of governing that many know him by into a more empathetic leader whose constituents are now better able to relate to. Since the pandemic hit New York with a concerning ferocity, Cuomo's compassionate handling of the pandemic has shot his approval up, with a whopping 87 percent of New Yorkers reportedly approving of his handling of the coronavirus. This stands in stark contrast with that of President Trump's, which lags far behind at 41 percent.

Gersen asserts that a fully developed leader should be both strong and capable of feeling, saying, "if women can lead the way in showing that these are not competing and conflicting attributes, but in fact complementary and necessary for good leadership — I think not only will society benefit, but so will men. Maybe then we can begin to open up the scripts for roles that leaders play, regardless of whether it's a woman or a man or anything else."

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