

# Gender and Political Leadership in a Time of COVID<sup>i</sup>

*Carol Johnson*

University of Adelaide

*Blair Williams*

The Australian National University

The COVID-19 pandemic has undermined the division between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of politics that has traditionally disadvantaged women political leaders. Whereas male political leaders historically drew on their traditional role as the male head of household to display forms of masculine protectionism toward citizens, women leaders are now able to draw on their traditional motherly role — for example, as the member of the household who traditionally cares for the sick — to display forms of feminine protectionism. As a result, international women leaders have managed to leverage women's role in the home to their advantage in the political sphere. Significantly, an appreciation of traditionally feminine attributes in women political leaders has been displayed in much media coverage, providing more favorable coverage of female political leaders than was previously the case.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, political leadership, gender, media, politics of emotion, coronavirus, masculinity, femininity, Donald Trump, Jacinda Ardern

The historical domination of politics and leadership positions by men has meant that the idea of what constitutes a politician or a political leader has traditionally been shaped by stereotypically masculine traits (Lovenduski 2005, 47–49), with a concomitant devaluation of the feminine (Childs 2004). Politicians who do not adhere to stereotypical gendered traits risk a backlash. Women are therefore ensnared in a

<sup>i</sup> We would like to acknowledge the useful comments made by the journal's editors and anonymous referees.

double bind between displaying appropriately masculine leadership traits such as aggression and toughness, on the one hand, and satisfying expectations of feminine traits such as empathy and caring, on the other (Schneider and Bos 2016, 275–76; see also Jamieson 1995). Voters generally prefer stereotypically male traits in political leaders, although when women leaders display these traits, they are often devalued in comparison with their male counterparts (Dolan and Lynch 2016). Schneider and Bos (2014, 248) note a distinction between the feminine stereotypes faced by women inside and outside of politics, arguing that women leaders are often seen to lack stereotypically feminine strengths as well as the masculine qualities deemed necessary for leadership. However, we argue that the pandemic has opened up particular opportunities for perceived everyday feminine traits in the private sphere to be valued in women leaders, including by the media.

### FEELING PROTECTED (AND CARED FOR)

Conforming to gendered stereotypes, male politicians commonly depict themselves as strong leaders who will protect their citizens from both internal and external threats while promising economic security. This depiction can be seen as a form of protective masculinity (C. Johnson 2020; C. Johnson 2015, 299–308), in which male leaders draw on traditional conceptions of the male head of household and breadwinner who protects and cares for their family to suggest that they have the necessary masculine characteristics to protect their nation. For example, Donald Trump depicts himself as the strong alpha male who will defend Americans from threats such as undesirable immigrants and the loss of jobs overseas to “make America great again.” By contrast, protective femininity (C. Johnson 2020, 24–27) draws on forms of protectiveness, often incorporating caring and empathy and associated with women’s role in the family, to suggest that women politicians have feminine characteristics that will facilitate their looking after citizens. However, the coronavirus has had an impact on political leaders’ attempts to evoke forms of protective masculinity — or, more rarely, protective femininity — to make citizens feel safe and secure.

In particular, Trump has faced a potential masculinity fail as his administration faces major criticism for neglecting to protect Americans from COVID-19. Consequently Trump has tried to portray the image of a strong leader fighting “a war against the invisible enemy” from

communist China while opening up an economy that weaker politicians want to unnecessarily close down (Trump and Pence 2020). Other male leaders, such as Boris Johnson (2020), have also resorted to masculine war metaphors, given that defense is normally seen as a stereotypical area of male leaders' strength (Schneider and Bos 2016, 275). Meanwhile, Joe Biden (2020) has attempted to counter Trump by mobilizing both war metaphors and compassion.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided unusual opportunities for women leaders to display forms of protective femininity. While male leaders have built on the role of male head of household and warrior defender in honing their gender performance, women leaders have been able to draw on traditional conceptions of women's roles. After all, it is traditionally mothers, not fathers, who look after sick members of the family. It is traditionally mothers who take charge of household hygiene and ensure that children and recalcitrant males wash their hands. It is also women who are traditionally caring and empathetic in times of trauma.

As a result, the pandemic has undermined the traditional divide between the (feminine) private sphere of the home and the (masculine) public sphere of politics (Celis et al. 2013) that has traditionally disadvantaged women leaders, allowing them to leverage women's role in the home to their advantage in the political sphere. Such an opportunity is not unprecedented. For example, there have been situations in which women leaders in postconflict and postdictatorship societies have argued that their experience as women and mothers has equipped them with much-needed additional attributes, such as empathy and conciliation skills, that their male opponents lacked (Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas 2017; Thomas and Adams 2010). Perceived feminine leadership attributes are also sometimes valued more in times of crisis (Ryan et al. 2016), though male political leaders are still generally favored to handle crisis situations (Dolan and Lynch 2016, 575). However, the health nature of the current crisis, combined with the focus that lockdown places on being confined to the (feminized) sphere of the home, has arguably facilitated the leveraging of women's role to an even greater extent.

Consequently, various women leaders have exhibited strength in confining citizens to the home while simultaneously displaying motherly feelings of caring, empathy, and compassion. After an emergency horn announcing a lockdown sounded on mobile phones, New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern appeared live on Facebook direct from her home to both comfort citizens and urge compliance. Ardern

(2020b) apologized for her “casual attire,” an old sweatshirt, because “it can be a messy business putting toddlers to bed.” She warmly and sympathetically answered livestream questions, giving useful practical advice, including avoiding touching playground equipment. She urged New Zealanders to be kind and caring (Ardern 2020a). The Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg (2020), held a press conference specifically for children, empathizing that “many children are finding this scary” but gently explaining the measures taken to protect their families.

German chancellor Angela Merkel, who has a PhD in quantum chemistry, won plaudits for her clear explanation of infection spread rates. However, Merkel (2020), nicknamed “Mutti” (Mommy), also expressed compassion for how painful social distancing and isolating the elderly would be, because in hard times: “We show affection by staying close, and by reaching out to each other. But at this time, we must do the exact opposite.”

In short, styles of leadership during the pandemic have often reflected particular performances of gender. Significantly, the opportunities opened up for performances of protective femininity, especially the valuing of perceived feminine traits in the private sphere of personal life, have also facilitated favorable media coverage.

## THE MEDIA AND WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP

Women politicians, particularly leaders, commonly experience far more gendered and personalized critical media coverage than their male counterparts (see Hall and Donaghue 2013; Trimble 2017; Williams 2017). Yet, for the reasons suggested earlier, what has often disadvantaged women leaders previously is now working to their advantage.

The media have largely portrayed women leaders positively in their effective responses to the pandemic, from the *Washington Post* headline declaring “female world leaders hailed as voices of reason” to the *Times* headline arguing that “women are the stronger sex in this crisis” (Hassan and O’Grady 2020; Phillips 2020). Leaders such as Ardern, Merkel, and Taiwan’s president Tsai Ing-wen have been praised for their “effective messaging and decisive action,” which has contrasted starkly with “the bombastic approaches of several of the world’s most prominent male leaders” (Hassan and O’Grady 2020).

Indeed, some “strongman” leaders such as Trump, Johnson, Xi Jinping, and Jair Bolsonaro have come under scrutiny for their inadequate

pandemic response. Media coverage has labeled them as “self-interested” (Hartcher 2020) and “weak” (Lewis 2020), displaying a “reckless insouciance” and a “lethal incompetence” (Tisdall 2020). This sentiment is even shared by the conservative press (see Leach 2020; Stewart 2020; Tominey 2020), which, prior to the pandemic, generally portrayed women leaders through a stereotypically traditional gendered lens (Williams 2020). In fact, analyzing English-language media articles published in April and May 2020 reveals little negative media coverage of women leaders’ responses to the crisis, other than broader conservative critiques of the impact of lockdowns on nations’ economies (e.g., Creighton 2020).

Nonetheless, the mainstream media continue to draw from gender stereotypes in the personal, private sphere. The same articles that praise women leaders describe their leadership style using stereotypically feminine adjectives, such as “kind,” “caring,” “sincere,” and “thoughtful.” Likewise, media coverage of women political leaders continues to focus on their appearance and personal lives (Ross 2017, 3). For example, articles noted that Ardern was “wearing a sweater” (Sparrow 2020) and “look[ed] tired” (Cave 2020). However, unlike previously, women’s difference from toxically masculine leaders is now celebrated, and their casual home attire is embraced as a sign that they are more relatable and sincere.

Pre-pandemic media coverage of women leaders regularly focused on their decisions to have or not have children. Now the media uses this gendered trope to depict a maternal form of protective femininity; they are mothers of the nation protecting their “children.” Merkel, for example, has older stepchildren but no biological children. One article argued that Merkel’s effective response had “return[ed her] to the role of the nation’s Mutti” (Chazan 2020), while another noted that she is not a “touchy-feely” mum but a “disciplinarian” (Lewis 2020).

Media coverage of Ardern repeatedly mentioned her maternal status. Articles noted that she was “only the second world leader to give birth in office” (Looms 2020), that she is a doting “mother and world leader” (Cave 2020), and that her baby, Neve, is often audible in her Facebook Live videos (Sparrow 2020). Like Merkel, Ardern has also been portrayed metaphorically as the maternal protector of New Zealand: she “held Kiwis’ hands through the lockdown” (Henley and Roy 2020), blended “epidemiology. . . with empathy, law leavened with mom jokes” (Cave 2020) and, after putting her toddler to bed, “empathized with citizens’ anxieties” (Taub 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Like so many other women political leaders, Ardern is depicted as providing the maternal comfort that we seek when we are ill — the one to comfort us and lessen our anxieties. Whether such an appreciation of the stereotypically feminine will continue remains to be seen. In particular, turning attention to reopening damaged economies may reemphasize traditional divisions between the feminized private (home) and the masculine public (economy). Women political leaders could be regarded as less appropriate for economic crises (Blanton, Blanton, and Peksen 2019, 947). More traditional gender relations have often been normalized again after crises are over (Kaufman and Williams 2017, 3).

There is a clear need for further analyses, including into the question of whether problematic gender stereotypes have been reinforced during the pandemic or whether conceptions of good leadership are now more inclusive of traditionally feminine traits. However, for the moment, women leaders seem to be experiencing a level of appreciation that has rarely been seen before.

*Carol Johnson is Emerita Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide, Australia: [carol.johnson@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:carol.johnson@adelaide.edu.au); Blair Williams is an Associate Lecturer at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia: [blair.williams@anu.edu.au](mailto:blair.williams@anu.edu.au)*

## REFERENCES

- Ardern, Jacinda. 2020a. "COVID-19 Alert Level Increased." March 23. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/prime-minister-covid-19-alert-level-increased> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- . 2020b. "Facebook Live." March 25. <https://www.facebook.com/jacindaardern/videos/147109069954329/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Biden, Joe. 2020. "Vice President Joe Biden Questions Trump's COVID Response." April 21. [https://youtu.be/PlkCzcFLH\\_s](https://youtu.be/PlkCzcFLH_s) (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Blanton, Robert, Shannon Blanton, and Dursun Peksen. 2019. "The Gendered Consequences of Financial Crises: A Cross-National Analysis." *Politics & Gender* 15 (4): 941–70.
- Cave, Damien. 2020. "Jacinda Ardern Sold a Drastic Lockdown with Straight Talk and Mom Jokes." *New York Times*, May 23. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/world/asia/jacinda-ardern-coronavirus-new-zealand.html> (accessed August 26, 2020).
- Celis, Karen, Johanna Kantola, Georgina Waylen, and S. Laurel Weldon. 2013. "Introduction: Gender and Politics: A Gendered World, a Gendered Discipline." In *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, eds. Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–26.

- Chazan, Guy. 2020. "Angela Merkel: Germany's Crisis Manager Is Back." *Financial Times*, March 28.
- Childs, Sarah. 2004. "A Feminised Style of Politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 6 (1): 3–19.
- Creighton, Adam. 2020. "Flightless Economy Will Land with a Thud." *The Australian*, May 27. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/coronavirus-flightless-kiwi-economy-will-land-with-a-painful-thud/news-story/416bdec73c4edb9a616a8c9e2f169031> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Dolan, Kathleen, and Timothy Lynch. 2016. "The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Voting for Women Candidates by Level and Type of Office." *Politics & Gender* 12 (3): 573–95.
- Franceschet, Susan, Jennifer M. Piscopo, and Gwynn Thomas. 2017. "Motherhood and Politics in Latin America: Continuity and Change." In *Mothers and Others: The Role of Parenthood in Politics*, eds. Melanee Thomas and Amanda Bittner. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 64–86.
- Hall, Lauren J., and Ngairé Donaghue. 2013. "Nice Girls Don't Carry Knives': Constructions of Ambition in Media Coverage of Australia's First Female Prime Minister." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 52 (4): 631–47.
- Hartcher, Peter. 2020. "Xi and Trump: Insecure 'Strongmen' Who Had Nothing to Offer in a Crisis but Vanity." *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 21. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/xi-and-trump-insecure-strongmen-who-had-nothing-to-offer-in-a-crisis-but-vanity-20200420-p54ldc.html> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Hassan, Siobhan, and Jennifer O'Grady. 2020. "Female World Leaders Hailed as Voices of Reason amid the Coronavirus Chaos." *Washington Post*, April 21. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/20/female-world-leaders-hailed-voices-reason-amid-coronavirus-chaos/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Henley, Jon, and Eleanor Ainge Roy. 2020. "Are Female Leaders More Successful at Managing the Coronavirus Crisis?" *The Guardian*, April 25. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 1995. *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Carol. 2015. "Playing the Gender Card: The Uses and Abuses of Gender in Australian Politics." *Politics & Gender* 11 (2): 291–319.
- Johnson, Boris. 2020. "PM Statement on Coronavirus." March 17. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-17-march-2020> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- . 2020. "Gender, Emotion and Political Discourse: Masculinity, Femininity and Populism." In *The Rhetoric of Political Leadership: Logic and Emotion in Public Discourse*, ed. Ofer Feldman. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 16–33.
- Kaufman, Joyce P., and Kristen P. Williams, eds. 2017. "Introduction." In *Women, Gender Equality and Post-Conflict Transformation*, eds. Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams. London: Routledge, 1–13.
- Leach, Jimmy. 2020. "Lead the Way: While strongmen Let Us Down, Women Show Us the Virtue of Competence." *The Sun*, May 22. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11688949/while-strongmen-let-us-down-women-show-us-the-virtue-of-competence/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Lewis, Helen. 2020. "The Pandemic Has Revealed the Weakness of Strongmen." *The Atlantic*, May 6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/new-zealand-gemany-women-leadership-strongmen-coronavirus/611161/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Looms, Phoebe. 2020. "Jacinda Ardern Praised for Wearing Coat with Nappy Cream on It." May 6. <https://www.news.com.au/world/coronavirus/global/jacinda-ardern-praised-for>

- wearing-coat-with-nappy-cream-on-it/news-story/330bec3fac4d179e5ca67ba761b05279 (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Lovenduski, Joni. 2005. *Feminizing Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Merkel, Angela. 2020. "An Address to the Nation by Federal Chancellor Merkel." May 27. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/statement-chancellor-1732296> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Phillips, Trevor. 2020. "Women Are the Stronger Sex in This Crisis." *The Times* (London), May 18.
- Ross, Karen. 2017. *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ryan, Michelle K., S. Alexander Haslam, Thekla Morgenroth, Floor Rink, Janka Stoker, and Kim Peters. 2016. "Getting on Top of the Glass Cliff: Reviewing a Decade of Evidence, Explanations, and Impact." *Leadership Quarterly* 27 (3): 446–55.
- Schneider, Monica C., and Angela L. Bos. 2014. "Measuring Stereotypes of Female Politicians." *Political Psychology* 35 (2): 245–66.
- . 2016. "The Interplay of Candidate Party and Gender in Evaluations of Political Candidates." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 37 (3): 274–94.
- Solberg, Erna. 2020. "Introduction at Press Conference for Children." March 23. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/norwegian-prime-minister-erna-solbergs-introduction-at-press-conference-for-children/id2693742/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Sparrow, Jeff. 2020. "What Makes Jacinda Ardern Such a Special Political Presence?" *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 8. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/what-makes-jacinda-ardern-such-a-special-political-presence-20200505-p54pzz.html> (accessed August 26, 2020).
- Stewart, Cameron. 2020. "Trump's Most Dangerous Test." *The Australian*, May 16. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/coronavirus-trump-faces-a-dangerous-test/news-story/9a34149baa0516b7817cda56eb10fc0f> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Taub, Amanda. 2020. "Why Are Nations Led by Women Doing Better?" *New York Times*, May 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Thomas, Gwynn, and Melinda Adams. 2010. "Breaking the Final Glass Ceiling: The Influence of Gender in the Elections of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Michelle Bachelet." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 31 (2): 105–31.
- Tisdall, Simon. 2020. "Trump, Putin and Bolsonaro Have Been Complacent. Now the Pandemic Has Made Them All Vulnerable." *The Guardian*, May 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/17/trump-putin-and-bolsonaro-have-been-complacent-now-the-pandemic-has-made-them-all-vulnerable> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Tominey, Camilla. 2020. "Leaders in Lockdown: Who Are the Winners and Losers?" *The Telegraph*, May 16. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/leaders-lockdown-winners-losers/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Trimble, Linda. 2017. *Ms. Prime Minister: Gender, Media and Leadership*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Trump, Donald and Mike Pence. 2020. "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence in Roundtable with Industry Executives on the Plan for Opening Up America Again." White House, April 29. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-roundtable-industry-executives-plan-opening-america/> (accessed August 24, 2020).
- Williams, Blair. 2017. "A Gendered Media Analysis of the Prime Ministerial Ascension of Gillard and Turnbull: He's 'Taken Back the Reins' and She's 'a Backstabbing' Murderer." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 52 (4): 550–64.
- . 2020. "A Tale of Two Women: A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May." *Parliamentary Affairs*. Published online April 16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa008>.