Politicians and governments tell us that women hold the key to development and to the good health of their children. They rightly tell us that gender equality is a desirable goal and that women are agents of change. States draw up, agree and undertake to uphold international standards on equality, including gender equality and non-discrimination. The international framework that lays out standards and objectives in gender equality includes the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, and Security Council Resolution 1325 (on Women and Peace) in 2000, but the fundamental principle of equality between men and women goes back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and further. The sector that espouses equality must surely expect to be assessed against the standards it espouses. In this, it is found wanting.

Women make up less than 10 per cent of world leaders. Globally, less than one in five Members of Parliament is a woman. In only 28 countries has women’s representation in parliament reached or passed 30 per cent (UN). No country pays women the same as men, has equal representation in managerial positions or has men undertaking household duties to the same extent as women. Such figures illustrate the stubborn resilience of gender inequality, not least of all in the realm of political leadership.

We have moved closer to, but not yet achieved, gender equality, so should we be surprised that it does not exist in politics?

We can make a useful start in considering women’s experience by looking at the history of women leaders per se. First of all, it is very limited. Ludvig’s review of 1,941 rulers of independent countries during the 20th century noted only 27 women (1.4 per cent) among them. Of these, only about half achieved their powerful positions without the advantages of political inheritance or dynastic networks – i.e. as widows or daughters of a male ruler –which brings the figure down to under 1 per cent of all 20th-century rulers. The Commonwealth has fielded several of these leaders, including prime ministers Gandhi (India), Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka), Bhutto (Pakistan), Campbell (Canada) and Shipley (New Zealand), and illustrates the existence of political dynasties. Latin American and Caribbean states have also had women at the helm, as have the Nordic states that lead the world in gender equality indicators.

Some such women enjoy (or suffer?) reputations of ruthlessness and steely determination. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was not afraid to take an unpopular stand and was adamant in the rightness of her position, including in opposition to sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Others, including some mentioned above, have led their people into wars. Indeed, women have been ranked highly by men and women in terms of certain attributes of leadership, such as honesty and intelligence. Nevertheless, only 6 per cent in that same research say women make better leaders than men, compared to 21 per cent who opt for men; 69 per cent say men and women make equally good leaders. Pew also provides interesting data on attitudes internationally to the sex of political leaders – the Commonwealth countries with high acceptance of women in leadership positions are the UK (83 per cent said both men and women make equally good leaders), Canada (80 per cent), Tanzania (74 per cent), Uganda (65 per cent), Kenya/India (both 62 per cent) and South Africa (61 per cent).

The stories that might help to explain the disjuncture between the women’s high scores in terms of characteristics and the reluctance to opt for women as preferred leaders revolve around issues of discrimination and women’s relative inexperience (Pew, 2008). Here, I briefly explore a few key factors.

**Biology as a straightjacket**

Biology is a popularly posed deterrent for women in public life in general, including the political domain, with women’s limited success in the public domain explained by their child-bearing and rearing roles. Any combination of the roles of raising children and keeping house alongside studying or undertaking paid work outside the home make a formidable balancing act. The demands of public life are heavy indeed, as the Danish TV drama *Borgen* very
sensitively explores in the case of a fictional woman prime minister. Yet this is a challenge of time management and expectation more than it is one of biology. After birth, a woman’s breasts are needed to feed her baby, but beyond that impediments to public life are social. The muddle between biology and social expectations shapes the perception, among both men and women, that the wonderful magic of creating and raising new life is something that intrinsically cuts the cord with the public domain. Indeed, it is the case that many men who engage in public life have very little time for their families, but we can debate the degree to which this is desirable or necessarily so.

Balancing expectations

Women in positions in a democracy must address the issues and questions faced by all politicians – such as jobs, housing, education and transport; and regional, religious and other identity issues. But there is often an expectation that by virtue of being women they will progress ‘women’s agendas’ and make real those promises and equalities mentioned at the start of this piece. These expectations of women can be unreasonably high and place intolerable burdens on them. Are women in positions of influence there to be politicians in the same way as men or to advance the cause of women? Or both? Some women may be disappointed if women leaders don’t advance causes close to the hearts of women as a sex, yet if they declare such agendas will they win the votes of men? Perhaps to succeed in securing popular support, it is wise for women to play down, if it exists, any feminist agendas. But is this honest?

The dilemmas that confront women are so different from those facing men, equally grave if not more so in many cases – and so their negotiation in political space is complex indeed.

Do women do politics differently to men?

There can be no assumption that women share a politics or a way of doing politics. Women leaders have come from a range of ideologies and politics; some have worked in the same ways as have many male politicians, while others have sought to carve out different ways of doing politics. Women have come from the right and left of politics, have gone to war and brought peace, have denied the commonality of women and promoted it. Yet there is a moment now, while much of the world is in financial chaos and others feel the adverse impacts of this, that a female version of politics is being proposed.

The new Icelandic Government is female-led, its Cabinet has several women, and women are in charge of the banks. A case was made to the Icelandic people that it was a macho political culture, with a reckless approach to risk-taking, that plunged the country into economic meltdown and that women will bring a new approach. It seems the electorate has chosen to give this logic a chance. For the last two years, Iceland enjoyed the position at the head of the World Economic Forum sex equality index and Newsweek named it the best place in the world for women (with Canada ranked the highest of Commonwealth countries, at number three).

A recent book by Pinker suggests that deaths through violence have gone down through history, and that the nature of leaders and leadership need to reflect new ways of doing international affairs and social relations. The old ‘big man, war leader’ who defended his nation against hostile others is becoming redundant, as conflicts change their nature, and deaths from such conflicts are reduced. In this new world, Pinker suggests that traditional ‘male’ forms of being are less useful than traditional ‘female’ ways of working. For women to become leaders by behaving like men will no longer serve people and communities well. Not only, therefore, are more women leaders needed, but women who do not ape men are those who will make the difference.

Which way now?

Are there inherent differences between female and male politics and politicians? The socio-biologist and the biological determinists tell us there are indeed. Women are peace-loving and co-operative; men are testosterone fuelled, war-mongering and competitive. The adjectives of good and bad can alternatively be attached to these characteristic depending on your point of view and values.

Exploring the (still small group of) women who have made it to the top of political hierarchies shows women are not averse to war and competition. For women to explore possibilities and achieve in the world of politics, they must be allowed to be free of the social constraints of the private domain – a challenge for both men and women, no doubt. The political world itself will also need to allow a plurality of ways of working and discover whether this creates the space for better, more just and sustainable outcomes for all.

In particular, men need to be able to conceive of politics as a rightful place for women’s minds and energies, and consider what they can do turn the shackles of biology into the field of experience that can bolster the public domain.

The right of women to enter on equal terms all social, political, economic and cultural domains as participants and as leaders may be a legal principle, but it is yet to become a lived reality. In running a new Programme for African Leadership at the London School of Economics, I will ensure that we give space to these discussions. I anticipate many lively debates on the desirability of and methods for such fundamental changes. It remains a challenge to forge the conditions in which that transformation becomes possible. Until the inherent misogyny that is manifest in raging as
well as quiet distrust of women in leadership is recognised and demolished, we can go no further than patchy, and sometimes superficial, numerical change. Substantive change will require the efforts of both men and women yet women seem to be moving at a faster rate than men. Are men up to the challenge?

Endnotes


2 Men or Women: Who’s the better leader? A Paradox in Public Attitudes, Pew research, 25 August 2008, http://pewresearch.org/pubs/932/men-or-women-whos-the-better-leader. Interesting cleavages appear in the study, including by race, which space here precludes discussing. Women are ranked more highly in terms of honesty, intelligence, compassion, being outgoing and creative; men are ranked more highly in terms of decisiveness, and equal to women in terms of ambition and being hardworking.


4 See endnote 2.


6 http://www.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2011/09/20/best-and-worst-countries-for-women-the-full-list.html

7 The Better Angels of Our nature, Steven Pinker; see review by Nye, When Women Lead at http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye103/English.

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