

Good women leaders

Angela Saini

The moment I was born was geographically bookended by two powerful women. In Britain, Margaret Thatcher had just been elected Prime Minister. In India, from where my parents had migrated, Indira Gandhi had just been re-elected. I was a child of this era, raised in an egalitarian family of sisters, one in which my parents split the housework down the middle and never made us feel there was anything we couldn't do. I ended up following my father by studying engineering at university.

Forty years later, in the midst of a pandemic, the world has more women in power. They have done so well in navigating the Covid-19 crisis that commentators have scrambled to understand why. This many people who happen to be women couldn't have landed on such success by chance, could they? A report in the *Guardian* compared Britain's and Germany's death rates, and observed how much lower they were under Angela Merkel. Comparing (a little more arbitrarily given their distance from one another) Ireland and New Zealand, they marvelled at Jacinda Ardern's skill in protecting her nation. Researchers suggested that female leaders must be 'more risk-averse than men', calling on neuroscience to suggest there might be biological empathy differences between the sexes. Their 'femaleness' was a factor.

It was in the moment of this fevered, gendered speculation that I began to remember the Iron Ladies of Britain and India. Neither Thatcher nor Gandhi were particularly risk-averse when it came to people's lives or livelihoods. They were notoriously tough prime ministers, as feared by many as they were admired by some. Yet in the lexicon of twenty-first-century female leadership, the message I was getting was that they weren't really women at all.

It's curious how quickly we dismiss the women who don't meet our stereotypes. They don't seem to count. They have compromised their

femaleness to meet the expectations of a 'masculine' world, we're told. We never ask the compromises that men make to meet those same gendered expectations. We forget that all leaders are exceptions, and more often than not, they're trying to be the people we want them to be.

If women heads of state have done better in this pandemic, could this be down to the fact that they as individuals just happened to be good at their jobs, irrespective of gender? Could it even be that we as voters in many countries tend to be so sexist that we would rather elect incompetent men than competent women? Could it be, then, that the women who are elected, wherever they are, might be better qualified than average because they wouldn't be elected otherwise?

Imagine what stories we would have told if women as a cohort had happened to do worse during this crisis. Would we then dismiss them as leaders, chalk them up as being unable to cope with the strains of leadership? The problem with defining gender in such restrictive ways is that we become hostage to our expectations. Our definition of womanhood narrows so much that we dismiss real people because they don't live up to our stereotypes. We forget that Thatcher and Gandhi were women, too.

Notes

'Women leaders are better at fighting the pandemic', Vox Eu, 21 June, 2020.

<https://voxeu.org/article/women-leaders-are-better-fighting-pandemic>

Angela Saini

Angela Saini is an independent British science journalist and the author of three books. She presents radio and television programmes on the BBC and her writing has appeared in *The Sunday Times*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *National Geographic* and *Wired*. She has won a number of national and international journalism awards. She has also been a judge for the Orwell Prize for non-fiction.

Her latest book, *Superior: The Return of Race Science*, was published in 2019 to widespread critical acclaim and named a book of the year by

the *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *Sunday Times*. Her previous book, *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong*, has been translated into thirteen languages. Both are on university reading lists across the world.

Angela has a Masters in Engineering from the University of Oxford and was a Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 2020 she was named one of the world's top 50 thinkers by *Prospect* magazine. She is currently working on her fourth book, on the origins of patriarchy, to be published in 2023.

As the founder of the 'Challenging Pseudoscience' group at the Royal Institution, Angela researches and campaigns around issues of misinformation and disinformation.

www.angelasaini.co.uk

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Angela Saini