

# What Do Women Leaders Have in Common?

Besides being women and leaders, that is



Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf addresses the International Forum on Women in Business.

Noor Khamis / Reuters

**SHARMILLA GANESAN**

**AUG 17, 2016 | BUSINESS**

On the surface, one would be hard-pressed to find many similarities between German chancellor Angela Merkel, Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina, and Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—except for the fact that they are all female leaders of nations. Merkel, for example, spent more than a decade as a chemist before going into politics, while Hasina, the daughter of Bangladesh’s first president, attended college at the same time that she served as her father’s political liaison, and Johnson Sirleaf was Liberia’s minister of finance and worked at

multiple financial institutions outside her country before running for vice president in 1985.

But despite the vastly different cultural and political contexts that these women arose in—and the roughly 20 other female heads-of-state around the world—is there something deeper that they share? Answering that question could reveal not the fundamental, essential nature of female leadership, but how women in leadership are perceived around the world, and perhaps more importantly, the obstacles women continue to face in their quest for equal representation.

The researcher Susan R. Madsen of Utah Valley University says that while many studies have been done on leadership in different cultures, very few have focused on female leadership specifically. From 2009 to 2010 Madsen interviewed women in China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) about their paths to leadership. She said she was surprised by the similarities among the women when they spoke about how they became leaders and advocates.

“Every single one of them talked about finding their voices and their confidence at dinner-table conversations with their families. Their parents talked about politics, about what was happening in the community, and when the women had something to say, their parents didn’t hush them,” Madsen said. In the UAE, where men and women were often separated, women that Madsen interviewed pointed to the role of their fathers in encouraging them to speak up. “Every woman I spoke to said her father would bring home books for her to read when he traveled, which most other people didn’t have.”

As part of a series of interviews on [women and leadership](#), I spoke to three women from different countries who have each become leaders in their respective fields: [Agnes Igoe](#) of Uganda, who works with her government to counter human trafficking; [Ikram Ben Said](#), the founder of Tunisian women’s-rights organization Aswat Nissa; and [Sairee Chahal](#) of India, who started SHEROES, a digital platform that helps women get back into the workforce. In these conversations I saw Madsen’s observation borne out.

All three of my interviewees pointed to the family environment they had been raised in—particularly a father figure who taught and empowered the women in the family to learn, ask questions, and form their own opinions—as a key factor in their own growth. This, coupled with mothers or other older women who broke convention by displaying leadership within the family, was common source of early lessons on leadership.

Igoe, for example, credited her father with having the foresight to send his daughters to school despite opposition from others in their village. Her mother went back to school as an adult to improve her career as a teacher, which Igoe described as being a big influence on her. Similarly, Ben Said talked about how her father encouraged political debate among the family when she was growing up, even when her opinions contradicted his. Meanwhile, Chahal said that even in her younger days, her parents went against the general convention of expecting their daughters to aspire only to a good matrimonial match.

Another conclusion from Madsen's work is that women's leadership development doesn't look like men's. "Men are more strategic and [tend to follow] a more linear path to becoming a leader. Women's paths are much more emergent. They tend to not necessarily look ahead and think, 'I want to be on top.' Women would point to a number of experiences—motherhood, or working with a non-profit, or sitting on a board, as shaping their path to becoming leaders," she said. Madsen likens this to a "patchwork quilt" of experiences—an aggregate that is more clear and cohesive together than as distinct parts.

---

**“Men are not faced with the suspicion that they can't be good leaders simply because they are men.”**

---

Which is why women are more likely to take a grassroots route to politics, says Farida Jalalzai of Oklahoma State University, and the author of *Shattered, Cracked and Firmly Intact: Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide* and *Women Presidents of Latin America: Beyond Family Ties?* “Women are more likely to first get

into public life through activism; sometimes it is through their identities as mothers to work on a particular problem,” she explained.

This was true for Ben Said. In her story, the 2011 Tunisian revolution was a turning point in terms of women’s participation in government and the political process. “I think being on the front line alongside our brothers and husbands demanding for change, being a part of the process as we drafted our constitution, these helped introduce a lot of women to the idea of being leaders and taking part in the political process,” she said. And it was true for Chahal as well: “As you manage everyone from your vegetable seller to your mother-in-law to your children to your bank manager, you collect a set of experiences that are a lot more diverse,” she said.

Another reason that women leaders may have some similarities is that they tend to be held to higher standards than their male counterparts, perhaps even more so in countries where there is dramatic gender inequality. Jalalzai has found this in her research. “We have to acknowledge that men are not faced with the suspicion that they can’t be good leaders simply because they are men,” she explained.

“Tomorrow someone might say President Barack Obama was a complete failure, but no one is going to conclude from that that all men are bad leaders. So there’s a certain type of privilege that your success or failure is not going to reflect on your entire sex.”

In Tunisia, for instance, Ben Said said the public is just beginning to accept and trust women in government. “The pressure is on them to perform, to deliver results, so that people will be more encouraged to have more women in positions of leadership,” she told me. And Igoye has felt this in Uganda as well. “Women who take up leadership positions in my country have to be tough, it’s not easy at all,” she said. “You are always aware that you are representing all women. You have to work extra hard to deliver, to perform, because if you do something wrong, they will say, ‘Ah you see, women!’ ”

It’s for this reason that merely having women leaders can change the opportunities available for generations of women in a country. As Madsen put it, “Bottom line, what leadership looks like in their country, how much of a voice the women leaders

are having, influences what leadership is and what it means to its women. For example, in the Middle East, the top leaders are kings or sheikhs, and there is a big separation between the leaders and society. Oftentimes, the women of those cultures just don't see themselves in those positions, so their understanding of leadership is more male." And that, perhaps more than anything else, is what Ben Said, Chahal, Igoye, and other women like them around the world stand to change.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

---

**SHARMILLA GANESAN** is a writer and journalist based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

---