WOMEN'S EXECUTIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: JACINDA ARDERN AND ANGELA MERKEL

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic offers the perfect opportunity to study how gender and leadership expectations influence the management styles of political state leaders in executive positions during crisis situations. This article tests the association between female leadership stereotypes and crisis situations by analysing the discourse and policymaking of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the peak of the pandemic (March-April 2020).

Based on the social role theory, I start from the idea that women are stereotypically empathetic, nurturing sensitive and interested in the others' wellbeing, while men are prevailingly assertive, autonomous, ambitious and dominant. By these predefined profiles, leadership is typically attributed masculine traits. Other factors introduce further difficulties: the existence of fields that are seen as either predominantly masculine (politics, economics) or feminine (health, education), and the perception that top hierarchical positions require masculine characteristics (positions in lower tiers being less sensitive to the gender factor).

I test these arguments in a critical analysis of the political discourse of two female leaders. The main conclusion is that the relationship between gender and

leadership is not stable, as Ardern and Merkel both displaced male and female attributes (steadfastness in decision-making, but also an empathetic speech).

Keywords:

COVID-19; female leaders; Germany; New Zealand.

1.INTRODUCTION

With socio-political changes happening with increasing frequency and intensity, affecting large segments of the globe's population, today's leaders face challenges that test their abilities like never before. This complexity requires a shift from earlier simplistic models of leadership to more sophisticated ones (Zaccaro 2012, 720). A leader is nowadays viewed in complex socio-political configurations and is examined by considering a wide variety of criteria simultaneously – the unique attributes of the leader (personality traits, ethical character, biological traits, etc.), the context in which a leader exercises leadership, the effect on the followers/ public opinion and the power of the leader to inspire others (Zaccaro 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a valuable context to analyse the concept of leadership 'in action' in a complex and unanticipated crisis situation. The focus of this paper will be to further explore the relationship between gender and leadership by critically analysing the public discourse of two state leaders in executive positions (New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel) during the peak of the pandemic (March-April 2020).

Why am I going to refer to women in executive positions? O'Brien and Reyes-Housholder (2020, 5) state that executive representatives enjoy unparalleled symbolic 'power'. The policies they promote have the widest media coverage and are the most visible in the public space, so the fact that leaders in executive positions are predominantly male may lead to the hypothesis that governance is a male act, discouraging women's participation from the start. Recent research in

social role theory shows a tendency for a natural association between the prototype of the political leader and the male gender (primarily based on the analogy between the attributes considered suitable for an effective leader and those considered typically male – rationality, ambition, competitiveness, etc.) rather than female (empathy, sensitivity, sociability, etc.). The parallel is additionally complicated by the existence of some fields considered stereotypically masculine (example: politics), respectively stereotypically feminine (example: health), but also by the perception that the positions at the top of a hierarchy are rather masculine, compared to the base of the hierarchy, where attention to the gender factor is diminished.

However, there is a sort of natural association between female leaders and crisis contexts. This is explained by factors ranging from the disadvantages (material, emotional, etc.) of positions of leading in a crisis context (that are not necessarily 'courted' by male leaders) to the need to have leaders with typical traits feminine (emotionality, empathy, sociability, etc.) in exceptional situations. The proven links on the axes female leadership - crisis situations and female leadership - the health field (a specifically female field, of 'care') turn the pandemic into a crisis with typically female valences.

Interest in the way women leaders tackled the pandemic and the communication strategy they used was raised immediately after the onset of the pandemic, as international media praised the way female political leadership approached the crisis (Aldrich and Lotito 2020, 960; Priola and Pecis 2020, 621; Willis, Smith, and Devine 2021, 241). Johnson and Williams (2020, 947) also observe this trend. Although the media continues to 'drag' female leadership into the private sphere (using stereotypically female adjectives – 'kind', 'caring', 'sincere' and 'attentive'), female leaders seem to enjoy in the media a level of appreciation that was not specific to the period before the crisis. This exposure is not surprising given the proven links between female leadership and crisis situations in general, and specifically between female leadership and the health domain (considered a female field of 'care'), associations that turn the pandemic in a crisis with typically feminine valences.

Coscieme et al. (2020, 13) take from George Lakoff the metaphor of leaders as parents and thus dissociates between the models of the 'strict father' *vs.* the

'loving mother' as analogies for political leadership in the pandemic. Thus, the 'father' has absolute authority and recommends that people identify solutions to get through the experience of the virus, while the progressive 'mother' believes that the best solution is isolation.

This paper makes a contribution to the literature on leadership in crisis and women leadership. By examining the speeches of Ardern and Merkel during the peak of the pandemic, this paper adds to the existing picture of executive leaders' communication strategies in crisis situations, but also of their responses to crises. The discourse and policymaking of leaders has proved vital during the pandemic. Even if the institutions and governments were responsible to adopt and implement the decisions on reducing the virus, the leaders were responsible to create a trust link with the public opinion – the most important actor in the fight against the virus. Overall, besides from explaining to the people the strict measures that were imposed and the lockdown, leaders also had to deal with the effects that the virus had at the individual level (sickness or death in the family, the work from home regime, the closure of schools, the need to isolate from the loved ones, etc.). This paper delves more into the issues approached by women leaders in their discourses during the crisis and provides more insight into the way women deal with crises situations.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the crisis discourse theses promoted by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in March-April 2020 in order to be able to establish how and if the two leaders' communication strategy is subject to gender clichés. More specifically, the following research questions are posed in the study:

Q1: What are the main themes approached by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in March-April 2020 in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Q2: How are the main themes approached by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in March-April 2020 reflecting the social role theory?

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has shown that political leadership is gendered. Some of the typical approaches to leadership - regardless of whether they focus on character traits that differentiate between political leaders or on the socio-political context in which the leader acts - seem to favour the male leader prototype:

a) both the concept of leadership (Karl and Cormack 2021) - the syntagm established by Schein *'think leadership = think male'* - and the political field are grosso modo associated with masculinity. According to Laura Sjoberg (2009, 157), the typical ideal leader is masculine in terms of gender, appearance and character traits. This conclusion derives from the analysis of ideas and assessments that political communities and researchers disseminate about leaders and leadership (social constructs). Piazza and Diaz (2020, 2) further distinguish between top/ male policy areas (e.g., economy, agriculture, tax affairs, employment, crime, security) and 'basic'/ female policy areas considered of lesser importance (e.g., education, health and other 'children and family' issues);

b) situational approaches to leadership recognise many of the traits associated with masculinity as being 'called for in a variety of situations (e.g., force in times of war, rationality in times of peace), while many features associated with femininity (emotion, interdependence) are rarely required in leadership positions (Sjoberg 2014, 5).

Specialised research proves that the 'tension' between the female role and behaviour and leading roles (the so-called 'glass ceiling') reaches its peak at the highest levels of management (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003, 581; Koenig et al. 2011, 619). The meta-analysis of the publications from 1973 to 2010 (made by Koenig et al. in 2011 to test the extent to which stereotypes of leaders are culturally masculine) shows that leaders that are higher in the hierarchy are associated with stronger masculinity. An argument identified by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen (2003, 572-573) for this conclusion is that lower managerial levels (middle and line management) require a higher degree of relation/ socialisation (female specific attribute) compared to top management positions (which tend to be more isolated). Haslam and Ryan

(2008, 530) identify further arguments in the literature. In addition to the perceived incompatibility between the personality traits of women and the requirements of management functions, there are to be taken into account, for example: sexism in the workplace, women's responsibilities towards the household/ family care (which are time consuming, leaving less time for the career), and women's fear of success.

2.1. Social role theory literature review. Leadership stereotypes

The existence of prototypes is relevant given that people tend to pay attention to patterns of traits or behaviours, rather than process individual elements or exceptions. Thus, the expectations or perceptions of public opinion about a leader can be shaped by how the leader has features consistent with those of the prototype (Dinh and Lord 2012, 655). Depending on the situation, certain people may be more or less likely to end up in management positions. For example, in a competitive environment, leadership prototypes can focus more on individual characteristics such as 'dominance' and 'aggressiveness'. In contrast, in contexts that focus on cooperation, a more 'sensitive' and 'generous' leader prototype may be activated (Dinh and Lord 2012, 655). From this association we can generalise, for example, that in times of war there is a need for a strong male leader. Also, in some cases women are selected for positions associated with the male gender (e.g., defence portfolio) based on their perceived reluctance to conflict (Barnes and O'Brien 2018, 30). Much of the literature that theorises female leadership focuses on the differences between women's leadership and men's leadership style and how this diversity affects the leader's efficiency or performance (Eagly, Gartzia, and Carli 2013).

The literature associates female traits and behaviour with transformational leadership style and communal personality traits that are rather subsumed to the well-being of others (and derive from the role of 'caretakers' that women are more prone to assume): tenderness, empathy, care, affection, gentleness, honesty, trust (Eagly and Karau 2002, 574; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003, 572; Kulich et al. 2021, 4; Cretti and Toshkov 2021, 4; Bauer 2014,

692). On the other hand, the male attributes and behaviours are considered transactional, laissez-faire, and are associated with authoritarian personality traits, subsumed rather to one's ego and objectives: assertiveness, autonomy, ambition, competitiveness (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003, 572; Badura et al. 2018, 5; Bauer 2014, 692). Authoritarian individuals are more likely to express their suggestions and opinions within groups ('the babble hypothesis'), which is another reason why they are considered more suitable for leadership positions (Badura et al. 2018, 10). In contrast, women participate in a group mainly to meet their needs for sociability and the perceived obligation to support others (Badura et al. 2018, 10).The transformational manager is characterised by the attention and care for the individual needs of the others, the ability to serve as a model (he has qualities that recommend him as an example for the subordinates) and the interest in the development of the organisation (including by finding innovative solutions that go beyond the job description) - Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003. The transformational leadership style is contrasted with transactional (authoritarian) management that is generally specific to male leaders. The transactional manager instead intervenes: a) to motivate his subordinates (through a system of bonuses or punishments); b) only in situations where the organisation faces problems (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003).

The direct linear relationship created on the axis women — transformational leadership — 'communal' personality traits (respectively men — transactional leadership — authoritarian personality traits) represents, in fact, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and it has led to a role conflict. The double gender bind derives from the expectations that women will simultaneously belong to the following two categories: a) assertive enough to be leaders; b) representatives for the warmth and sociability that the public opinion generally expects from women (Eagly, Gartzia, and Carli 2014, 11). Research on the topic of the double gender bind exemplifies various concrete situations/ cases when women face greater challenges and are assessed less favourably than their male counterparts. These situations are generally caused by the issue of women's legitimacy in leadership positions, so the fact that leadership roles are generally associated with male attributes is a hindrance to the career aspirations of women

managers. Thus, women often fail to comply with the double gender bind. On the other hand, even if women succeed to follow the double gender bind, they still risk to be 'sanctioned' by voters/ the public opinion either because:

- being in a leadership position makes a woman appear 'too masculine' to be able to assume at the same time roles generally attributed to women (Windsor et al. 2020; Bridgewater and Nagel 2020, 2). Specifically, social expectations about women's family commitments (the traditional woman's profile includes marriage, children and the taking care of the house issues) are in conflict with the demands of a full-time political career (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018, 13). As a result, many women seeking a political position emphasise their masculine characteristics, trying to 'present themselves as women who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes' in political decision-making. It is worth noting that this happens even when, in their personal lives, women do stand by gender stereotypes (Sjoberg 2014, 4). One thing women leader might have achieved with this behaviour (showing off 'masculine' traits) is to help perpetuate traditional gender expectations in terms of leadership.

Also, Fernandez-Mateo and Kaplan (2018, 1231) highlight Byrne and Barling's analysis of the 'Oscar curse' and show, using more than 200 surveys, that in heterosexual couples, a woman's higher status over her partner leads to marital problems and eventually divorce. Both partners may express dissatisfaction with how the dynamic family/ relationship - career is managed. Moreover, public opinion is more attentive to the physical appearance of women than men (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020, 134), which is why women sometimes also try to conform to male leadership aesthetic stereotypes in the attempt to inspire power; - or because some 'communal' personality traits of women (e.g. attention to the specific needs of each subordinate; extensive consultations with colleagues; sociability and interpersonal skills) may create the impression that women are, by comparison, more uncertain or unprepared than male counterparts in management positions (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003, 586). So, the literature on the topic reveals that women can be assessed negatively in leadership roles especially in situations when: a) their subordinates are men; b) they show an authoritative style of communication; c) they are considered highly competent (Carli 2001, cited by Eagly, Johannesen-

Schmidt, and van Engen 2003, 586). However, these negative reactions can be mitigated by the display of feminine behaviour (interest in the needs of others, smile, warmth, etc.) - Carli (2001, 573) cited by Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and van Engen 2003.

On the other hand, there are a number of variables/ conditions that, if fulfilled, provide the right context for advancing women in leadership positions. These conditions relate to voters/ the public opinion and can be classified as follows:

a) gender identification or gender affinity. In general, voters tend to see female candidates as more suitable for dealing with issues such as childcare, abortion and well-being ('women issues'). Thus, since women voters attach greater importance to these issues, they will vote for female candidates. Due to gender stereotypes and the tendency to over-generalise women's experiences, the public opinion tends to see women more suitable to promote policies favourable to their own gender category/ women (on issues such as maternity, equal political representation, abortion, etc.) — Cretti and Toshkov 2021, 17; O'Brien and Reyes-Housholder 2020, 15; Bridgewater and Nagel 2020, 5;

b) ideological/ party identification or ideological/ party affinity. A study by Cormack and Karl (2021) concludes (based on a survey of more than 1,400 U.S. citizens aged 18) that the argument of party membership (democrats *vs.* Republicans) prevails over the gender argument in public opinion preferences. This means that respondents were more likely to evaluate candidates belonging to the same political ideology they identify with more favourably. Gender, however, remains a component that should not be neglected. In this case, the female 'advantage' lies in the fact that women who are not part of the same party or do not share the same ideology with the respondent are assessed significantly better than men in the same situation (Cormack and Karl 2021, 19);

c) affective/ emotional identification or affective/emotional affinity. In the paper 'Big Boys Don't Cry: Evaluations of Politicians Across Issue, Gender, and Emotion', Karl and Cormack (2021) analyse the complexity of the way how leaders are rated according to their emotions and warns that there is, at least recently, a reverse of the medal in terms of the dual political affiliation. For example, women have greater 'freedom' to value emotions when working in policy areas that are considered congruent with the female gender (e.g.,

education, health). Equally well women can display, without being 'sanctioned' by the public opinion, male behaviours or traits in a context that requires a more assertive approach. Karl and Cormack (2021) explain that voters have lately started to differentiate between 'women politicians' and 'women' groups, respectively 'politicians'. As a result of this variation, 'women politicians' become a subgroup of 'women' and are subject to different expectations depending on the context in which they operate (fields considered typically masculine *vs.* feminine).

2.2. Leadership for crisis situations

In the specialized literature there is a direct association between female leadership and crisis situations ('think crisis = think female') - Haslam and Ryan 2008, 543; O'Brien and Reyes-Housholder 2020, 14; Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala, 2020, 65-66. A crisis is defined by Kulich et al. (2021, 2) as a difficult context that jeopardises the organisation's assumed objectives and that usually requires a rapid response. According to Ansell, Boin, and 't Hart (2014, 421-422), political leaders in crisis situations should juggle at least three distinct roles: a) sovereign (takes authoritative decisions on how the state's resources are used in times of crisis); b) facilitator (mobilises and organises the actions of the various stakeholders); c) symbol (for the rest of the political community and for the public opinion).

In general, the fact that female leadership is mostly 'demanded' in times of crisis has also some benefits (it gives women the opportunity to be visible in leadership positions), but it is also more 'costly' than if both women and men were equally represented both in risk contexts and in periods of relative stability (leaders are placed at the centre of a 'blame game' that often occurs in crisis situations - Ansell, Boin, and 't Hart 2014, 427.

Then why is there so much talk in the literature about the *think female-think crisis* paradigm? Building on her personal experience in an interview with Julia Gillard and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala in 2020, Christine Lagarde, the current President of the European Central Bank, identifies two other reasons why

women might have an advantage for appointment to leadership positions in crisis situations:

a) lack of competition for positions considered difficult/ risky. Lagarde states that the French the public opinion and political scene was sceptical of her appointment as Minister of Finance in France (2007) until the economic situation in the country worsened amid the global crisis (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020, 64-65);

b) the need for institutions to innovate and promote change/ modernisation. Lagarde was appointed to head the International Monetary Fund (2011) after the institution's former managing director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, was accused of sexual violence. Lagarde believes it would have been difficult to keep the position occupied by a man and believes that the gender favoured her in the race (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020, 65-66).

3.METHOD

This study seeks to examine the crisis communication strategy of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the peak of the pandemic (March-April 2020). More specifically, it reviews the speeches and public statements of Ardern and Merkel to explore if the messages disseminated are typical for female leaders or are not gender bound. The study will look to identify and highlight the main themes and markers of the speeches of Ardern and Merkel. I chose Germany and New Zealand leaders as case studies because both countries have been praised for the results obtained in dealing with the crisis. I chose to focus on the early period of the pandemic, when preparations were being made and the first steps were being taken to manage the situation. Also, Ardern and Merkel were more active communicators on the pandemic during the period under analysis. I have chosen 17 speeches/ public statements, COVID-19 updates, press briefings by Ardern (remaining aware that Ardern also transmitted messages via social media) and 5 speeches/ press briefings, addresses to the nation by Merkel (*Tables no 1 and 2* provide a detailed overview of the data used in the analysis).

The difference in numbers is explained by the fact that Merkel is renowned for not being very eager to communicate publicly (her performance during the pandemic being rather an exception in this sense). Based on the social role theory and the literature on I will divide the big themes identified in Ardern's and Merkel's into feminine/ 'soft' topics (e.g., calls for empathy and solidarity, health, education, policies that favour women etc.) and male/ 'hard' topics (e.g., politics, economics, strict measures/ restrictions, punishments for those who do not comply, etc.).

The series of speeches analysed by Ardern starts with the statements that the main priority is to 'protect people's health' and a precautionary approach is stressed, together with the need to self-isolate (Ardern 2 March) and ends with a relaxation of the restrictions and the announcement that 75 percent of the economy was operating (Ardern 30 April). Merkel's appeals also start with the enforcement of the need for 'solidarity and reason' (Merkel 11 March) and end with a greater trust in the capacity to control the virus ('However, we can, at the end of the day, only end the coronavirus pandemic with a vaccine, at least based on everything we know about the virus today' – Merkel 23 April).

Table no 1: Ardern speeches in March-April 2020

Type of speech	Date	Source
Post-cabinet press conference	2.03	Facebook live:https://www.facebook.com/jacindaardern/videos/803684923450577/
Post-cabinet press conference	14.03	The official website of the New Zealand Government transcript: https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/major-steps-taken-protect-new-zealanders-covid-19
Press conference	19.03	The official website of the New Zealand Government transcript: https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/stronger-border-measures-protect-nzers-covid-19

Press conference	21.03	The official website of the New Zealand Government transcript: https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/nation-steps-covid-19-alert-level-2
Ministerial Statement	25.03	New Zealand Parliament site transcript: https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/hansard-debates/rhr/combined/HansD_20200325_20200325
Post-cabinet press conference	26.03	RNZ transcript:https://www.rnz.co.nz/programmes/whakamaori/story/2018838125/level-4-lockdown-announcement
Ministerial Statement	27.03	Facebook live:https://www.facebook.com/RadioNewZealand/videos/2561206527467406/
COVID-19 media update	5.04	The Spinoff live: https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/05-04-2020/covid-19-live-updates-april-5-nz-case-count-closes-in-on-1000
Press conference	6.04	Transcript: https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/new-zealand-covid-19-briefing-transcript-april-6
COVID-19 media update	9.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-9-april
COVID-19 media update	14.04	RNZ live:https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/414206/covid-19-pm-unveils-new-support-for-students-on-nz-s-deadliest-day-to-date
COVID-19 media update	15.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-15-april
COVID-19 media update	16.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-16-april
COVID-19 media update	19.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-19-april
COVID-19	20.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-

media update		media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-20-april
COVID-19 media update	22.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-22-april
COVID-19 media update	27.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-27-april
COVID-19 media update	29.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-29-april
COVID-19 media update	30.04	Ministry of Health live: https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/news-items/covid-19-media-update-30-april

Source: selected and compiled by author

Table no 2: Merkel speeches in March-April 2020

Type of speech	Date	Source
Press briefing	11.03	In 'Coronavirus: Germany's Angela Merkel urges 'solidarity and reason', DW, https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-germanys-angela-merkel-urges-solidarity-and-reason/a-52719086
Press briefing	17.03	In 'Merkel announces strict measures, tells Germans to stay home in virus fight', France 24, https://www.france24.com/en/20200317-merkel-announces-strict-measures-and-tells-germans-to-stay-home-in-virus-fight
Address to the nation	18.03	German Federal Government transcript: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/coronavirus/statement-chancellor-1732296

Address to the nation	22.03	Jacobs University transcript: https://www.jacobs-university.de/addressing-nation-regarding-coronavirus-speech-angela-merkel
Address to the nation	23.04	German Federal Government transcript: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/regierungserklaerung-merkel-1746838

Source: selected and compiled by author

4.DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Ardern's communication markers
4.1.1. Feminine/ 'soft' communication topics approached

- Solidarity – was promoted as the main 'solution' to the virus, essential in obtaining the main objective stated by Ardern, respectively the 'elimination of the virus'. The mantra that was constantly emphasized by Ardern is that:

> We have the opportunity to do something no other country has achieved — elimination of the virus — but it will continue to need a team of five million behind it. Under lockdown, we've shown our ability to put in place a virtual wall that is breaking the chain of transmission. (…) But I believe that, as a team of 5 million looking after each other, that we will follow through on that, that we will want to make sure that we're successful, and so I have confidence in New Zealanders. (Ardern 16 April)

The need for a precautionary approach taken at the level of the individual was stressed and the need to self-isolate was carefully explained (examples, statistics from other countries and other periods of epidemics, like the swine flu, were given). The idea that 'we must go hard, and go early, and do everything we can to protect New Zealanders health' was repeated and instilled in the society. 'Please be strong, be kind, and unite against COVID-19' Jacinda Ardern said (21 March).

Ardern guided the New Zealanders through the whole period with detailed reports of the measures the state was taking to fight the crisis and examples of how one should deal with particular situations/ the needs one might encounter during the pandemic. Ardern admitted that 'success won't be instant' (25 March) and acknowledged success when she deemed it appropriate: 'New Zealanders have done an exceptional job, by and large, of sticking with what has been an extraordinary ask. Compared to the rest of the world, we've done something that I think is incredible" (Ardern 20 April).

> Finally, if you have any questions about what you can or cannot do during this period, apply a simple principle: act like you have COVID-19. Every move you then make is a risk to someone else. That is how we all must collectively think from now on. That's why the joy of physically visiting other family, children, grandchildren, friends, neighbours — for many, that is on hold now, because we're all now putting each other first, and that is what we do so well as a nation. So, New Zealand: be calm, be kind, stay at home, and break the chain. (Ardern 25 March)

As part of the 'go hard, go early' mantra Ardern closed borders 25 days after the first case and modelled an economic package 18 days after (Ardern 5 April). On 14 March Ardern was saying that 'Alongside Israel, and a small number of Pacific Islands who have effectively closed their border, this decision will mean New Zealand will have the widest ranging and toughest border restrictions of any country in the world.'

Ardern also regarded the pandemic as an 'opportunity' to eliminate the inequities in New Zealand and reduce the gap between the rich and the poor,

> to consider the wage situation of those on lower incomes, or whether it's the work that we're proactively doing to redeploy to drive a high-wage economy to see that we don't replace those industries that traditionally have had lower wages with more lower wages. This is an opportunity and we need to use it. (Ardern 29 April)

- Protection of vulnerable categories (the elderly, children) – Ardern offered concrete solutions to protect these categories of people and again solidarity was deemed as paramount and as part of the solution ('don't be on the chain of transmission'). Also, community support was requested for those unable to

support themselves in isolation: 'I'm asking everyone to support our older New Zealanders by doing things like keeping in contact with them and dropping off food or other supplies.' (Ardern 21 March)

- Acknowledging mental health – attending to people's psychical comfort was a great concern for the government.

> We've invested heavily in mental health responses, whether or not it's access to 1737 — the mental health telehealth service — or actively promoting and supporting apps that people have been able to access from home. That has been a strong part of our in-isolation response to mental health. We also know one of the best things we can do is try to get back to normality as soon as we can, safely. (Ardern 29 April).

Education – schools were closed. Education was not among the frequent topics, though the measures regarding schools closing were updated and explained from time to time.
"

4.1.2. Male/ 'hard' communication approached

- 'Economic issues' – the need to assist businesses impacted by the coronavirus and employees at a local, regional and nation level and the Māori economy was stressed. Meeting with businesses impact was one of the first issues dealt with by Ardern in her speeches (2 March). However, different aspects related to the topic were considered with level headiness, Ardern constantly admitting that the best protection for the economy was containing the virus.

> A widespread outbreak will hurt our economy far more in the long run than short term measures to prevent a mass outbreak occurring. I make no apology for choosing the second path. New Zealanders public health comes first. If we have that, we can recover from the impacts on the economy, the impacts on tourism, and the impacts on our airline. (Ardern 14 March)

Also, Ardern tried to induce her reasoning at the level of business owners, appealing to their emotions:

> I ask every business to use the time you have to prepare for what every alert level means for you. Treat COVID-19 like a health and safety issue. Ask whether it's possible for your business to operate with social distancing. Can you build in contact-tracing tools or mechanisms to keep track of your supply chain and customers? Help us get ready as a nation for the marathon that we must run together. (Ardern 9 April)

By 30 April roughly 75% of the economy was operating, a sign that Ardern's strategy was working – 'Our best economic strategy is still to win the fight against the virus—eliminate it—and that means we get out of prolonged restrictions on the way we live our lives sooner, and move business into recovery sooner.' (Ardern 16 April).

- Internal politics – Ardern constantly gave updates on meetings of the government. Matters of internal politics were only tangentially approached when the developments in the country required the raising of the topic. There were two instances when internal politics was discussed, following questions from the media:

a) after health minister David Clark was reprimanded for a non-essential mountain biking excursion, Ardern insisted that she still had confidence in Clark to do his job, and that the government was still putting prominent ministers up to answer questions. (Ardern 5 April);

b) when teased whether the opposition politicised the crisis, she made no comment, but 'You'll forgive me for being utterly focused on the Government's response to COVID-19, and that means that I have paid no attention to any, therefore, of the commentary that may have been coming from within the National Party itself.' (Ardern 22 April).

International politics – the topic was used for comparison and contrast in what regards the situation of other countries dealing with the pandemic: 'There is no easy way to say that but it is the reality we have seen overseas and the possibility we must now face here.' (Ardern 26 March)

- Sanctions were impose on those who did not comply with the rules, as Ardern said that 'there are still some whom i will charitably describe as idiots' (Ardern 5 April).

4.2. Merkel's communication markers

4.2.1. Feminine/ 'soft' communication topics approached

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'Solidarity and reason' – were defined by Merkel as central for the country's response to the virus (Merkel, 11 March). As Ardern, Merkel tried to make the community responsible and she constantly emphasized the uniqueness of the crisis and the fact that the measures undertaken were no breach on democracy. Merkel counted on a sense of community, where every individual is important

> And we are a community in which each life and each person counts. I would like first of all to address all those who as doctors, nurses or in a different capacity work in our hospitals and in our healthcare system in general. You are on the front lines of this fight for us. You are the first to see the sick and to see how severe the symptoms of the virus can sometimes be. (Merkel 18 March).

Also, Merkel named Germany's strong points: 'Germany has an excellent healthcare system, perhaps one of the best in the world.' (Merkel 18 March). Merkel's stated goal was 'to slow the virus down as it makes its way through Germany' (Merkel, 18 March). For this objective she put great weight on the need to learn from the expert community and follow their advice.

- Protection of vulnerable categories (the elderly, children) – emphasis was placed on protecting the vulnerable, children and people with pre-existing conditions.

> Ideally, we should avoid all contact with the elderly, because they are particularly at risk. A well-meant visit or a trip that is not essential can spread infection and really should not take place right now. There is a reason why experts say that grandparents and grandchildren should not come into contact with each other right now. (Merkel 18 March)

She repeatedly sent the message that 'we're fighting our battle against the virus also for them.' (Merkel, 23 April)

4.2.2. Male/ 'hard' communication approached

- Economic issues – Merkel stressed that plans for economic measures to shield business and industry from the effects of the virus are important.
- Internal politics – Merkel raised the topic and insisted on the need for unity: 'In my talks with the Minister-Presidents and now here in this House, I want to warn against squandering what we have achieved and risking a setback!' (Merkel 23 April)
- International politics – Merkel stated the priority and need for German/EU based products:

> The pandemic has taught us that procuring protective equipment exclusively from faraway countries isn't a good idea. Masks that cost just a few cents can become a strategic factor in the pandemic. The Federal Republic of Germany and the EU are therefore working to reduce our dependence on third countries in this area. We're working intensively to expand our productive capacities for protective equipment in Germany and Europe with this in mind. (Merkel, 23 April)

5. RESULTS

The analysis shows that gender roles are not stable. Ardern and Merkel combined communal behaviour (the display of traits such as empathy and compassion) with the need to address typically male domains such as politics and the economy. Both leaders showed that they master the gender double bind:
a) they imposed strict restrictions early into the pandemic (self-isolation was imposed, travel was banned, schools were closed), the ones who did not comply with the rules were reprimanded and punished and topics such as economy and politics (which can be considered a male appanage) were approached and dealt with;
b) at the same time, they radiated warmth and sociability. Their speech was clearly built around the idea that solidarity is key to the management of the crisis, the individual was place at the centre of the crisis management policies

and was made responsible for the health of the community, protection of vulnerable categories such as the elderly, children and issues such as mental health were raised and dealt with.

In this sense, Blake-Beard, Shapiro, and Ingols (2020) give Angela Merkel as an example of an androgynous leader able to juggle gender-specific behaviours. For example, she took a firm stance on the severity of the pandemic and did not hesitate to adopt quick and early containment measures, while he addressed the nation using relational language and asking Germans to work together. McGuire et al. (2020, 361) also analysed Arden's speeches in March-April 2020 and noticed the use of different mediums (parliamentary statements, daily briefings, Facebook Live broadcasts and podcasts) as mechanisms for engaging in dialogue with the public and creating social solidarity.

Ardern and Merkel displayed examples of care in politics. This may be one of the reasons why the population generally respected the rules in Germany and New Zealand, as explained by Merkel and Ardern in their speeches. A higher degree of public trust in political leaders (an important barometer in the context of the pandemic given that there is some evidence of a directly proportional relationship between the population's tendency to comply with the rules/ restrictions imposed by the authorities and trust in political leaders) is associated with the politics of care (Willis, Smith, and Devine 2021). In general, citizens sought communal and caring traits in their leaders during the pandemic, rewarding those who met their expectations with a higher level of trust (Willis, Smith, and Devine 2021, 241).

As opposed to Ardern's and Merkel's speeches, the male lexicon meant mostly the use of a war language to describe the virus and the measures needed to combat it; resistance to the input of experts and science (to maintain the independence and authority of the leader, who acts rather on his own/independently); creating the perception that the reaction to the virus is exaggerated (disparaging reactions) - Blake-Beard Shapiro, and Ingols 2020, 610; Sacca and Selva 2021, 18; Benziman 2020, 247; Windsor et al. 2020; Johnson and Williams 2020, 945. Brooks and Saad (2020, 1111) note, referring strictly to the US case study, that regulations regarding COVID-19 have been less focused on protecting individuals from the coronavirus amid the poor representation of

women among decision-makers in most US industries and in politics. In fact, according to the polls cited by Brooks and Saad (2020, 1121) from the spring/ summer of 2020, it appears that Trump would have lost support among women voters, possibly because of his positioning towards COVID-19. The hypothesis is plausible given that, according to Luoto and Correa Varella (2021, 8) women are generally inclined to show greater caution towards the pandemic than men – shown for example by wearing a mask, maintaining the possibility of working from home.

Ardern's discourse was often analysed in comparison with that of Trump (Sacca and Selva 2021) as the two were seen as archetypes of femineity and masculinity respectively.

Sacca and Selva (2021) observe (in their analysis of 75 speeches by Trump given from February 26, and April 26, 2020, and 43 speeches by Ardern from March 14 to May 14, 2020) that the speeches of Trump and Ardern were generally addressed the same concerns, only that in a different percentage. While Trump is much more focused on politics, Ardern is committed to public health. For both leaders, the economy is the third topic to be addressed. Furthermore, Ardern used a more empathetic discourse – insisted on the emotional burden on the families of the sick/dead (always relying on science) and expressed gratitude to all health workers (Sacca and Selva 2021, 15-18). Trump is anchored in populist rhetoric and strategy, has a muscular-masculine style that does not tolerate scientific caution, and tends to portray the pandemic as a war, while Ardern focuses on caution, solidarity and scientific arguments/rigorous plans pandemic management (Sacca and Selva 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

The discourse of women leaders during the pandemic has once again proven that the traits/ qualities associated with femineity are important for crisis management (the pandemic/ a health crisis in this case) and that they are appreciated by the public opinion and have the potential to raise the profile of the leader who displays such characteristics. To the same extent, however, there

is a need to address a crisis in a firm and coordinated manner, measures generally associated with the male gender.

Some studies show that women have achieved better results in managing the pandemic (considering objective results — number of COVID-19 cases and deaths — Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021. However, other variables should be considered in further studies, such as: a) the political and social features that have helped some states better cope with the pandemic (previous exposure to pandemics and people's trust in both state institutions and fellow citizens - Bosăncianu et al. 2020, 15; b) the maturity of democracy and the degree of representation of women in government and parliament fostering a better response of states in crisis situations (considered power structures that create conditions for the political leader to exercise power) — Park 2021, 1-3.

Regardless of the objective results of women leaders in dealing with the pandemic, this study concludes that the detailed advice (of how a person should act in different situations during self-isolation, etc.), the approach of many topics related to a person's and the community's wellbeing and the scientific approach that Ardern and Merkel favoured during the pandemic were key to their discourse on the crisis. The analysis of the data and the literature reveals the complex relationship between gender and leadership as both leaders used in their discourse both male and female vocabulary, showing that women are able to handle a crisis both using both empathy and steadfastness in decision making. Ardern and Merkel transpired as strong but humane through their speeches. Even if their discourse was dominated by an emotional note and constant calls for solidarity, pressing issues for the people were not neglected. In terms of visibility in public space the pandemic has benefited women's leaders. However, as with any crisis situation, there is also a reverse of the medal — Piscopo (2020, 8) notes that while the pandemic has increased the profile of women leaders, there is still a risk of turning them into symbols of COVID-19 isolation and increasing voters' dissatisfaction with their performance.

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