

**New Leaders, New Models:
Advancing the Role of Women in the 21st Century**

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Will the 21st century require new models of leadership?**

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One does not frequently look to recently war-torn societies for lessons on new models of leadership. Perhaps we should.

The history of the past decade offers more than a dozen examples of post-conflict countries stepping back from the brink, reconstituting and reconfiguring their societies after genocide, ethnic cleansing, civil war, and state collapse. Testament to the international interest in these efforts, Western governments, non-profit organisations, and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have poured millions of pounds and hundreds of manpower hours into these reconstruction efforts.

A striking parallel in all of these reconstruction efforts is the attempt to bring women into positions of leadership in the public sphere:

- In the wake of the horrors of the Rwandan genocide, government initiatives have focused on bringing women into power. Women currently make up more than 49% of seats in the lower house of the Rwandan Parliament, and Rwanda now ranks first in the world for its near-parity of women in parliament.¹
- In October 2004, Afghan women cast ballots for the first time in history with the knowledge that the country's new constitution reserves 25% of seats in its lower house of parliament and 17% of seats in its upper house of parliament for women.²
- In January 2005, Iraqi women voted with the knowledge that the Transitional National Authority, the elected body that will serve as Iraq's national legislature during the transition period, would include a minimum of 30% women.³

It is noteworthy that these recently-war-torn countries all have higher percentages of females in government than do the United Kingdom and the United States. Concerted efforts have been made to include women in the new governments of these countries for a simple reason: having more women in positions of power offers not only new leadership styles but also the possibility of radically transforming society. Not surprisingly, promoting gender equality and empowering women ranks third on the United Nations' list of Millennium Development Goals.

The challenges of the 21st century are daunting: eradicating poverty, curbing the spread of AIDS, lessening socio-economic inequality both within and between states, strengthening democratic institutions, protecting the environment, and combating terrorism are among just a few of the obstacles that face the leaders of today and tomorrow. Confronting these far-reaching challenges will require new thinking about leadership styles and leadership priorities. While societies emerging from the smouldering ashes of war still have enormous obstacles to overcome, by encouraging women to assume decision-making positions they have embraced a new model of leadership that is appropriate for the 21st century and applicable to every corner of the globe.

Women Leaders Bring New Models and Transform Society

¹ Lacey, Mark. "Women's Voices Rise as Rwanda Reinvents Itself," *The New York Times* (26 February 2005).

² "U.S. Commitment to Women in Afghanistan." Fact Sheet, Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State (22 February 2005).

³ Ibid.

While it might be an exaggeration to claim, as does Ranjana Kumari, Director of the Centre for Social Research in India, that “only women can produce alternatives to war,”⁴ numerous studies in recent years have highlighted the fact that women lead differently than men.

For instance, a study conducted by Northwestern University in the United States found that women are more likely to be ‘transformational leaders’ – leaders who try to serve as role models for their subordinates, to mentor and empower workers, and to encourage innovation.⁵ The report concludes that this style of leadership strengthens an organisation by inspiring members’ commitment and creativity.

Similarly, sociologist Carol Gillian observes that women leaders tend to place high value on moral strength, ethical standards, and establishing and maintaining good relationships with co-workers. Rather than traditional forms of autocratic, command-style leadership, women tend to emphasize democratic decision-making, the value of multiple opinions, the benefits of teamwork and positive incentive structures.⁶ Further scholarship suggests that women are often more cooperative and willing to negotiate than their male counterparts, who tend to favour more confrontational and adversarial approaches to leadership.⁷

The transformational power of having more women in leadership positions is not limited by sector, and there would undoubtedly be positive implications for the world of business, academia and civil service should more women break through the glass ceiling. However, encouraging more women leaders in the *political* sphere offers the greatest opportunity for not only transforming leadership styles of the 21st century but also revolutionising the very nature of society itself. Rectifying gender disparities in the public sphere has implications for individual societies and world politics as a whole. Politicians and other public sector leaders play a visible role in society; in gracing the printed press, the television, and the airwaves, they shape our perceptions of *who* is capable of leading. A dearth of women in leadership positions sends a silent message that politics is a man’s world, a message that trickles down and infiltrates society as a whole.

Increasing the representation of women in the political world will not only transform the leadership styles of the 21st century, but will also transform the very nature of society itself. This point is made poignantly by the comment of a young boy in Iceland, who grew up with Vigdís Finnbogadóttir as the female Prime Minister from 1980-1996. When this young boy was asked whether he could be prime minister, he replied that it was ‘a woman’s job.’

It is widely recognised that bringing women into political decision-making positions will change both the dominant, traditional styles of leadership, and the policy agenda. According to former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, women in positions of political leadership “raise issues that others overlook, pass bills that others oppose, put money into projects others ignore, and seek an end to abuses others accept.”⁸ Similarly, Chilean Senator Sergio Paez has noted, “Modern societies will only be more humane and more equitable when all of their subjects are

⁴ The White House Project, “Why Women Matter Summit: Lessons Learned,” Shauna Shames (ed.), 2003.

⁵ Eagly, A.H. and Johannesen-Schmidt, M.C. “The Leadership Styles of Men and Women” *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), (2001) pp. 781-797.

⁶ http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/news/manfocus/downloads/p12_13.doc

⁷ Bochel, Catherine and Jacqui Briggs, “Do Women Make a Difference?” *Politics*, 20(2), (2000) pp. 63-68.

⁸ Ibid.

actively involved in the decision-making process.”⁹ The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international organisation of 130 member parliaments dedicated to promoting peace and democracy worldwide, has long stressed the importance of increasing the presence of women in national parliaments. Christine Pintat, Assistant Secretary-General of the IPU, commented on the impact that female leaders have on politics:

Women tend to break with many of the formalities of traditional politics and to bring ordinary life closer to parliament and government. These developments help reconcile people with politics. [People] realize that women bring new skills, styles, experience and visions...They see that women aim at concrete, durable solutions that satisfy a broader range of society than those developed by men alone...The IPU claims that women’s involvement in party politics, in parliaments and in the executive brings about, almost everywhere in the world, a shift in political behaviour, language and practices; and a shift in political priorities, processes and outputs, with significant impact on ordinary people’s life [sic].¹⁰

Ultimately, what matters most in laying the foundations for a promising 21st century is not only the style of leadership employed by those in political, corporate, media or other positions of power, but also the substance and content of the changes advocated. Without high-quality and right-minded agendas, any model of leadership, no matter how shiny and new, will become hollow and purposeless. For these reasons, the 21st century requires not only leadership styles that promote consensus over hierarchy, inclusiveness and creativity over pyramidal management structures and dictatorial commands, but also leaders who will revisit the agenda, challenge the traditional, and push back previous frontiers. In short, the trick is not only to find new leadership *styles*, it is to find new *leaders* who will change the style, and the substance, of the public realm. Supporting the advancement of women in positions of leadership and decision-making therefore must be a central task of this century.

▲ **What Needs to Change: The Facts about the Existing Gender Disparity**

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Despite the advantages of the leadership models that women tend to employ, women are still dramatically under-represented in leadership and decision-making positions locally, nationally and globally. While women have enjoyed increasing access to jobs and education, and have benefited from the passage of equal opportunities legislation in several countries in recent decades, these successes have not necessarily translated into a rapid rise in the number of women in positions of leadership and decision-making. Women enter business but rarely get the corner office; become journalists but rarely attain editorial positions; earn advanced degrees but still lag behind their male counterparts in securing tenure; and vote at higher rates but hold significantly fewer seats in parliament.

Consider the following facts:

⁹ Cited by Christine Pintat in *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

- Worldwide, women constitute only 15% of all national parliaments¹¹; the number is increasing at a mere half percentage point per year.¹²
- Whilst women constitute 41% of the European workforce, they occupy only 10% of management positions and represent a mere 1% of executive board members.¹³
- Great Britain ranks 51st in the world for female representation in parliament; women constitute only 18% of the MPs in Westminster.¹⁴
- In Great Britain, only 15% of university vice chancellors, 9% of national newspaper editors, 12% of local authority council leaders, 8% of senior police officers and 9% of top business leaders in the country are women.¹⁵
- There is only one female CEO and one female chairman among all FTSE 100 companies.¹⁶

Studies have shown that this gender disparity is not due to systemic discrimination.¹⁷ Women candidates for public office, for example, traditionally receive the same institutional and party support as men.¹⁸ The reason for a dearth of women candidates is often the fact that women choose not to put themselves forward.

The challenge, then, in our quest to tap into the transformative power of women's leadership styles, is to propel women into the public sphere. As mentioned in the introduction of this essay, many governments and organisations around the world are utilising quota systems, electoral methods such as proportional representation, or party lists as the mechanisms for bringing more women into leadership positions in the developing world.

Convinced that these institutional mechanisms were not the only means of bringing about change in the political world, and inspired by research that suggests that women will run for office if they receive leadership training and have visible women role models, I set out to create an organisation, based here in Oxford, that would take a grass-roots approach to rectifying the gender disparity in the public sphere, including government, academia, and the business, legal, and charity sectors. Since February 2004, Oxford Women in Politics (OxWiP) has been providing leadership training and mentorship to hundreds of women in the city.

Oxford Women in Politics: Training Leaders who will Catalyse Change

¹¹ Getting the Balance Right in National Parliaments' Fact sheet from the Women's Environment and Development Organization. Available online at <http://www.wedo.org/5050/5050factsheet4.pdf>.

¹² Inglehart, Ronald and Pippa Norris (2003) *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 129. Cites data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000.

¹³ http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/news/manfocus/downloads/p12_13.doc.

¹⁴ Sex and Power: Who runs Britain? Report by the Equal Opportunities Commission. Available online at <http://www.eoc.org.uk/cseng/policyandcampaigns/whorunsbritain.pdf>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The 2004 Female FTSE Index. <http://www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/research/centres/cdwbl/downloads/FTSEIndex2004.pdf>

¹⁷ Elder, Laurel. "Why Women Don't Run: Explaining Women's Underrepresentation in America's Political Institutions," *Women & Politics*, 26(2), (2004) p. 27.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Women students of the University of Oxford have the potential to be the world's future female leaders. They face fewer institutional barriers than women of a generation ago, and are benefiting from a world-class education. Unfortunately, there is no reason to think that they are immune to the factors that generally inhibit women from leadership positions: political gender role socialisation, a lack of confidence, family responsibilities, and the relative dearth of visible women role models in politics.¹⁹ Oxford Women in Politics was designed to confront these challenges head on:

Political gender role socialisation persists in Oxford. A few examples from my personal experiences in the city may help to highlight a problem that is not officially documented. Only one-third of my fellow students in the postgraduate International Relations programme are women. Of the 105 academic staff members of the Department of Politics and International Relations, 84 are men and only 21 are women.²⁰ In the Department of Economics, only 9 of 60 faculty members are women.²¹ The world-famous student debating society, the Oxford Union, featured a term card in Hilary Term 2004 that had only one female guest speaker (out of a total of 26). The invited woman was Miss World.

In response to this paucity of women speakers and lecturers, over the course of the last year OxWiP has brought more than half a dozen prominent women speakers to the city. Immediately prior to the 2005 British General Election, Oxford Women in Politics hosted a panel discussion with five of Oxford's most prominent political women students. Furthermore, in order to bring greater recognition to the University's women students, alumni, and faculty, OxWiP publishes a newsletter that highlights their accomplishments.

Lack of confidence is a well-known factor inhibiting women's participation in the political world. OxWiP's Leadership Development Workshops were created to equip women with the professional skill-set and confidence they will need for successful careers in public life. Recent workshops have focused on public speaking, debating, journalistic writing, and networking. Workshop presenters are University faculty or alumni, thereby offering current students valuable professional contacts and fostering greater interaction among generations of Oxonians.

Family responsibilities. There is a high probability that most current graduate and undergraduate students will soon face the joys and responsibilities that accompany marriage and parenthood. Out of a recognition that the difficulties of striking an adequate work-life balance often contributes to women forgoing a career in public life, OxWiP asks its presenters to speak to the challenges and obstacles they face in their efforts to juggle professional and personal commitments.

A relative dearth of women role models – in Oxford, in Britain, and around the world. OxWiP's Distinguished Women Leaders speaker series – which so far has featured the renowned neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield, and First Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education Dame Ruth Deech – provides our members with opportunities to learn from inspirational female role models. Recognising the catalytic effect of mentorship, OxWiP also encourages its student members to inspire younger generations of women to be civic-minded,

¹⁹ Elder, Laurel. "Why Women Don't Run: Explaining Women's Underrepresentation in America's Political Institutions," *Women & Politics*, 26(2), (2004), p. 27.

²⁰ The University of Oxford Politics department website <http://www.politics.ox.ac.uk/about/stafflist.asp?group=acad> Accessed 10 Nov 2004.

²¹ The University of Oxford Law faculty website. <http://denning.law.ox.ac.uk/members/official.phtml> Accessed 10 Nov 2004.

socially-responsible and politically-engaged. The OxWiP Outreach Programme sends current OxWiP members to local schools to present an innovative curriculum on the role of women in public life.

The arrival of OxWiP was clearly long overdue and I am stunned by the overwhelming support it has received from the Oxford community. In just over a year's time, OxWiP has grown to encompass a membership of nearly 500 women and men undergraduates, postgraduates, faculty, alumni and professional members from around the world. A group of twenty dedicated women meet with me weekly to set OxWiP's agenda and plan for the future. In the year ahead we not only intend to expand our membership and to continue offering an exciting array of programmes, but also hope to raise the funds necessary to register as a charity, to develop an online, interactive database that will link our community members to each other and to potential employers, and to assemble an international board of prominent individuals to offer guidance to the organisation. Any financial award from this competition will be donated in its entirety to OxWiP in the hopes of realising these objectives.

At a time when the world faces daunting social, economic and political challenges, visionary models of leadership that emphasize teamwork, cooperation and communication are clearly needed. OxWiP not only exemplifies the models of leadership required for the 21st century but also works actively to endow these leadership qualities in the next generation of women decision-makers. As the 21st century is already upon us, there is no time like the present to begin putting these models to work. Thank you for your consideration.