'Women As Leaders: Negotiating the Labyrinth'
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It is an extraordinary honor to receive this honorary degree from this distinguished university. The 99th birthday of Erasmus University Rotterdam is a festive celebration, and I am extremely happy to be part of it. I thank Professor van Knippenberg, President van der Meer Mohr, and the selection committee for their generous support. And I thank all of you—professors, university staff, students, and guests—for joining us at this event.

I understand that this year is the first time the school of management has chosen a woman for this honorary degree. So, whatever meaning you may draw from this event, I think that we can agree that this award symbolizes change—change in the management school and in the wider world. Simply stated, this change is that women are now rising to excellence in business and management as in many other kinds of human endeavor that were once essentially closed to women.

This rise of women brings new voices to many kinds of work. However, I am going to talk about only one of these areas—the area that can yield the most consequential social change: This is the inclusion of women in leadership roles. Women sometimes serve as our leaders, even in high places: This is becoming more common.

Leadership is extremely important. The reasons it is so crucial are probably obvious to you. Leaders have more power and authority than the rest of us. They are at the center of decision-making, and in very high places they can change the world—for better or for worse. That’s why people care so much about who their leaders are and how they are selected.

If there was ever any doubt that people care about who their leaders are, I offer the example of the many months of intense campaigning that we Americans have endured prior to yesterday’s election. The campaign seemed to go on and on, and finally it has ended. And now after the election slightly more than half of our citizens are elated, and the others are fearful that the next four years will be disastrous for our nation. Thus, I think that we can agree that leaders matter.
Now let us think about women as leaders. I will especially consider women as leaders in powerful positions in business, government, and elsewhere in society. When I was young, the idea of women leading nations was virtually unthinkable except for the hereditary office of Queen. And back then women did not lead corporations.

Now some women do occupy these very powerful leadership roles: Currently 20 women are heads of state around the world. There are 13 women who are CEOs of corporations in the Global Fortune 500. These numbers amount to around 10% of nations led by women but only 3% of the largest corporations. On this and other indicators, the business community has lagged. It has been especially slow to allow women into the corridors of power.

Why is the pace of women becoming leaders so slow? For too long, many people have explained this situation by the cultural metaphor of the glass ceiling. This metaphor suggests that women are somehow stopped right before they get to the very top positions. The metaphor also hints that women are blocked by discrimination, presumably from men who are reluctant to share their power and the high monetary rewards that often come with such positions.

Is this glass ceiling metaphor valid? Actually, it is seriously misleading in its stark simplicity. Women surely can be blocked near the top of organizations and governments. However, a more accurate description of women’s exclusion from top positions is that they have been discouraged at all points along their careers paths. This discouragement can occur at the very early stages of women’s careers as well as later on. These challenges can slow down and often completely derail women’s careers. Therefore, I have argued that these challenges are better captured by a different metaphor—that of a labyrinth. This alternative metaphor symbolizes the true complexity of women’s career paths. Making one’s way through a labyrinth can be confusing and difficult. Yet, progress to the center of a labyrinth is possible, with effort, intelligence, and persistence. Men, in contrast to women, tend to have a straighter, more predictable road to their career goals. (Here you see a man quickly bypassing the labyrinth.)

Probing the complexities of this labyrinth reveals several interlocking factors. First, prejudicial beliefs deriving from cultural stereotypes fail to accord women the tough, assertive qualities that are thought to underlie strong leadership. Second, organizational structures define careers in ways
that fit men’s lives far better than women’s. And, most obviously, the traditional family division of labor erodes the career potential of very large numbers of women.

I am not going to elaborate these challenges in this talk. Rather, I will concentrate on what social scientists know about the women who do occupy leader roles—the women who have made their way through the labyrinth. There are enough women in leader roles that we are beginning to understand their typical characteristics. I will discuss whether these women different from male leaders. And if they are different, what are the differences? And do these differences matter?

If women lead differently than men, the direction of any differences could be toward better or worse leadership. But if women don’t differ—if women are virtual clones of men—that is not necessarily a good thing. You might be disappointed if that were the conclusion. You, like me, may hope that women will bring something different and admirable to leadership. As Bella Abzug, an American feminist and congressional representative, once wrote: “In my heart, I believe that women will change the nature of power rather than power changing the nature of women.”

To find out if women and men differ as leaders, I have invested considerable time and energy in surveying all relevant aspects of social science research. I will summarize what I have discovered.

Concerning the behavior of leaders, there are hundreds of studies comparing male and female managers that have been conducted since the 1950s. To produce a general answer about what these studies indicate, I have applied modern statistical techniques, known as meta-analysis. These techniques enable reviewers to quantitatively aggregate and integrate the results of many studies.

What have my meta-analyses revealed? In general, sex-related differences are present in leadership style. However, these differences take the form of overlapping distributions of women and men—that is, as this figure shows, differences exist on the average, but with much overlap of the sexes. So, consider groups A and B in the figure to be women and men. And even smaller difference can occur, as illustrated in this next figure. Here men and women differ only slightly.

Now, back to the question of leaders’ behaviors. One of the key differences in leadership style is that female leaders, on the average, are more democratic and participative than their male counterparts. Men, more than women, adopt a top-down, “command and control” style.
You may wonder whether women as leaders are just generally nicer than men—kinder, more cooperative, and more likable, as gender stereotypes would suggest. Sex differences of that sort are not necessarily present among managers. To the extent that women leaders are generally nicer and kinder, that is more often true in more feminine contexts, in leadership roles that are more female-dominated. When women have other women as colleagues, there is apparently more leeway for enacting such culturally feminine behaviors.

Usually, women adopt an androgynous leadership style that mixes the feminine and the masculine. Research has especially scrutinized an androgynous leadership style known as transformational leadership. This leadership style encompasses several interrelated types of behaviors. Transformational leaders thus act as inspirational role models, they foster good human relationships, they develop the skills of followers, and they motivate others to go beyond the confines of their job descriptions—that is, to give their very best to the organization. Transformational leaders thus act not only as charismatic role models but also act as good teachers and coaches. This type of leadership is highly effective in contemporary organizations, as hundreds of studies have shown.

Somewhat to the surprise of management experts, my meta-analysis of transformational leadership showed that female managers are more transformational than male managers. This finding has been replicated in a couple of very large studies, including one that was sponsored by the McKinsey organization. Related research has also shown that female managers tend to favor positive incentives based on reward: Women tend to frame their initiatives in a positive, optimistic way. Men, in contrast, offer a larger measure of more negative, threat-based incentives.

This research on transformational leadership is good news for female leaders. However, in all honesty, we don’t fully understand why women score better than men on transformational leadership. On the one hand, if women face a double standard in attaining leadership roles, a selection effect can account for them looking so good in these studies. On the other hand, cultural gender may also be at work because people usually react more favorably to women leaders when they have an androgynous style. Women tend to get into more trouble when they lead in ways that seem either very feminine or very masculine. A feminine style can seem weak, and a masculine style can seem too tough and macho. Yet, whatever the causes, women gain a slight edge over men in
adopting what many experts consider to be an ideal leadership style for most organizational contexts.

What is important beyond leadership style? There are other differences between women and men that may be even more significant for leadership. In particular, differences in leaders’ values and attitudes deserve our attention. This aspect of leaders’ psychology helps us understand their goals and motivations. If we know something about a leader’s values and attitudes, we know quite a lot about what that person will try to achieve as a leader. Most leaders thus have goals that go beyond the personal gains of wielding power and enjoying a high income.

Women and men do show some specific differences in their values and attitudes. Research by Shalom Schwartz and his colleagues has identified two broad social values on which women exceed men. One of these values is benevolence, which has to do with caring about and enhancing the welfare of the individuals that people interact with on a daily basis. The other value is universalism, which has to do with caring about and understanding all people, including those who are not part of one’s ingroup, as well as caring about nature more generally.

In terms of these two values, women tend to be more benevolent and universalistic than men, and there is some evidence that these value differences are present among organizational managers. Similarly, in my research on Americans’ sociopolitical attitudes, we found that women are more supportive of socially compassionate policies that promote the welfare of others. We also found that women are more supportive of traditional moral practices that uphold marriage, the family, and organized religion.

If female leaders are indeed more compassionate, benevolent, and universalistic than male leaders, we should also find that they proceed differently in leader roles. Political leadership is one place to look for such trends, and political scientists have carried out considerable research on this matter. They have found that, as members of legislative bodies, women are more likely than their male colleagues to advocate for policies that promote the interests of children, women, minorities, poor people, and families. Women tend to support policies that promote public welfare especially in areas such as health care and education. Although women are certainly not a monolithic political block, this theme transcends political parties and nations.
How about women as business leaders? In research by economists on women in corporate boards, trends have emerged that are similar to those found by political scientists among women legislators. On corporate boards in the Fortune 500 in the United States, the proportion of female board members predicted companies’ philanthropy and charitable giving. In other research on American corporations, the proportion of women on corporate boards was correlated with corporate social responsibility, especially through companies avoiding negative, unethical business practices. Likewise, the mandated addition of women to Norwegian corporate boards (the 40% rule) was followed by smaller workforce reductions with economic contraction. Economists have interpreted this reluctance to downsize as due to women board members’ greater concern with the welfare of employees and their families. Similarly, in a study of American private firms, those owned by women were less likely than firms owned by men to lay off workers during financial downturns. Such findings suggest that, as business leaders, women give more weight to the public good and consider a wider range of stakeholders.

Some scholars have made even bolder claims about the advantages of female leadership. American scholar and psychologist Steven Pinker has made such claims in his recent book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. In analyzing what he argues is a worldwide decline of violence over the centuries, Pinker quotes a Japanese man by the name of Yamaguchi who survived the atomic bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Amazingly, Yamaguchi lived to the age of 93. Before he died, Yamaguchi offered this prescription for world peace: “The only people who should be allowed to govern countries with nuclear weapons are mothers, those who are still nursing their babies.” Well, this glorification of motherhood will probably not convince you that Pinker is right about the rise of women being one of the causes of the worldwide decline of violence. However, it is certainly true that most violence has been committed by men leading our nations and tribes to war. We could of course debate nature versus nurture as causes of apparent sex differences in aggression and violence. Yet, the association of women with nonviolence and men with violence certainly holds as a rough generalization.

Of course, world peace would require more than having women occupy leadership roles. After all, in the Falklands War, Margaret Thatcher responded with very quick military action when provoked by the Argentines. It is thus reasonable to argue that nations’ cultures would have to change so that they no longer place such a high value on manliness and valor. Nations would have to relinquish warfare as an acceptable means for resolving international conflict. Therefore, concerning Pinker’s
theory linking the ascendance of women with the decline of violence, it is difficult to know the
direction of causation. Is it broader cultural shifts toward nonviolence that enable women to lead
nations? Or do women leaders actually facilitate such cultural shifts?

To conclude, there are multiple indications that women leaders proceed in what can be described
as a more compassionate, benevolent, and universalistic manner than their male counterparts.
Perhaps therefore women really can change the nature of power and make our world a better, more
peaceful place. So far, there have been too few women in high positions to allow social scientists to
construct adequate tests of such ideas. Nevertheless, it would appear that the potential gains of
allowing more women to hold the reins of power greatly outweigh the risks. I hope that you agree
with this assessment.