

Chapter 13

Does Gender in First– Time Leadership Represent Compassionate Leadership? The Case of Sri Lanka’s First Female Prime Minister

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand whether a first-time female leader’s executive leadership qualities reflect the attribute of a true leader. Using the gender diversity point of view, the chapter studies the leadership characteristics that contributed to the election of a female leader in South Asia, specifically Sri Lanka. This case from Sri Lanka highlights the election of a first-time political leader (prime minister). The study determines the relevance of personalized leadership style in influencing the emancipation of nations. It also considers how other context-relevant characteristics influence their executive roles. The study found that the election of the female prime minister was not based on compassionate grounds. Empirical evidence shows that this woman had proven leadership attributes prior to becoming prime minister. The study presents unique visionary leadership attributes, experiences, and lessons for future women leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

In general terms, leaders inspire their group members to achieve targeted expectations. Effective leaders recognize the value of accountability in maintaining a healthy environment and ensure a win-win outcome to emancipatory perspectives of stakeholders. There is a need to examine female leadership styles. According to Hoare and Gell (2009):

Increasingly there is a drive to go beyond this support women's leadership of the institutions and processes that perpetuate the gendered inequalities of wealth and power that reinforce the denial women's right, giving particular support and encouragement to transformative leadership that seeks explicitly to challenge those inequalities. (p.13)

Women have emerged in many modern leadership spaces. This momentum in leadership roles for women has been increasingly visible since the United Nations Security Council's October 31, 2000 adoption of Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on women, peace, and security. Expectedly, women leaders arose across the globe in areas like diplomacy and security.

The time is ripe to re-examine how and when women in leadership emerged and what lessons can be learned for future leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Guah, 2019; Lemoine, Aggarwal, & Steed, 2016; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). This study explores first-time women leadership attributes, specifically targeting the world's first female prime minister. Using the gender diversity point of view, this chapter discusses how this historic event impacted the world of political leadership.

Sri Lanka, an emerging middle-income economy in Asia, has a legacy of women leaders (see Appendix 1). In 1960, it introduced the first non-hereditary elected female prime minister, Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike, commonly known as Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike (here after Sirimavo) (Adler, 1996). Her husband, former Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, was assassinated in 26th of September of 1959. It is in this fraught context that the stalwarts of the party sought to persuade Sirimavo to accept the leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the leading left-wing political party in Sri Lanka, to preserve and perpetuate the "Bandaranaike vision and mission" in their country.

On July 21st, 1960, Sirimavo was elected as the first woman prime minister of Ceylon (after 1972, the country was named the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka). She served three terms over four decades: 1960-1965, 1970-1977, and 1994-2000. Despite being a novice in politics, she placed the stamp of her personality on the job of the chief executive of the country while playing an especially notable role in the foreign policy realm and history of Sri Lankan politics.

As a celebrated leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), her contribution to the furtherance of third world solidarity in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as her successful interventions on behalf of peace and stability both inside and outside the movement, are remarkably striking. During her leadership, she showcased her abilities as an effective leader. For example, on September 26, 1971, the Upper House of Parliament, the Senate of Ceylon through which Sirimavo entered Parliament in 1960, was abolished with a majority support of the parliamentarians. This abolition was a precursor to the adoption of the first republican constitution of the country. On May 22, 1972, Ceylon became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, which broke a 157-year link between the island and the British crown. This was marked by replacing the existing Soulbury Constitution, which was introduced by the British, and adopting its new autochthonous constitution (Britannica).

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