

How women-led nations succeeded during pandemic

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Farida Jalalzai (at left) with Katrín Jakobsdóttir, prime minister of Iceland.
Credit: Jalalzai

It took a pandemic to bring positive attention to women's political

leadership worldwide.

As COVID-19 spread rapidly around the world, a narrative emerged. The nations led by women, in many cases, managed the [public health crisis](#) well, according to various studies.

Why exactly were these leaders successful? What factors played into their executive-level decisions?

Farida Jalalzai, associate dean for global initiatives and engagement in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences who studies the behavior of women in executive political positions, decided to find some answers.

Jalalzai, along with her colleague, Katie Tyner, a senior associate at The Cohen Group, interviewed politicians, [medical professionals](#), journalists, and others in New Zealand and Iceland. Both countries, led by women at the time, successfully navigated the pandemic and its repercussions.

Jalalzai recently spoke about her research findings.

How did the idea for this research arise? And why did you choose New Zealand and Iceland in particular?

Jalalzai: When the pandemic hit, there were lots of newspaper headlines praising [women leaders](#) and their pandemic performance. Shortly after, these same women faced scrutiny. This led me to think about how people perceive women's leadership during times of crisis, but also the factors that explain better performance. These two countries were women led and were often mentioned as success stories. They are also developed countries with good social safety nets and islands that had faced crises in the past, particularly natural disasters. So these were

[important factors](#) that could explain outcomes (like state capacity and [emergency preparedness](#)) and could be controlled for.

What other details about these countries did you consider in your research?

Jalalzai: Globally, [pandemic preparedness](#) (among highly developed countries with high state capacity for example) was not necessarily indicative of whether a country would succeed or fail in responding to COVID-19. Both New Zealand and Iceland also differed from one another in terms of strategies, which was also interesting. Iceland never had a total lockdown, while New Zealand closed its borders. We were curious about behind-the-scenes decision making within the governments that led to pandemic outcomes. To gain an understanding, we interviewed over 40 people, many of whom were [public officials](#) or in key positions, including the prime minister of Iceland, Katrin Jakobsdóttir.

In what ways did the female leaders of New Zealand and Iceland handle the pandemic successfully?

Jalalzai: Both consulted experts, particularly the scientific community and took the threats to safety very seriously. They were very transparent and skillfully communicated the stakes of the crisis to the public. They were very empathetic, recognizing the stress (emotional, physical, and financial) that the public endured. They also were good at characterizing this as a problem that all could work together to solve.

For example, Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's former prime minister, repeatedly referenced the team of 5 million—the New Zealand population—as playing critical roles in pandemic success. They were also not afraid to admit mistakes and change course when new

information was available. When shortcomings were identified, steps were taken to address them. They also managed resources to cushion the financial blow and anticipated economic problems well ahead of many of their counterparts across the globe so that they could weather the financial storm. This is very significant because both countries rely heavily on tourism and this industry was obviously hit hard by the pandemic, so avoiding economic disaster took real skill.

What were the signals that these countries were successful in their pandemic response?

Jalalzai: There were very few deaths per capita in both countries and both countries were pretty successful in staving off financial problems. While New Zealand closed its borders, much of the time, citizens enjoyed a good deal of freedom compared to other populations. Both leaders were repeatedly lauded for their exceptional governance.

Katrín Jakobsdóttir, prime minister of Iceland, continues to lead a coalition, in large part because of people's satisfaction with her leadership. Ardern's party had a great performance in the fall 2020 elections (no longer needing a coalition) because of her leadership. This is not to say they did not face criticisms. For example, Ardern starting in early 2022 faced protests though the country was largely virus free, especially compared to the rest of the world.

Was this information surprising to you? Why or why not?

Jalalzai: When I was in Iceland, it was clear that the country was able to keep things open (including borders) throughout the [pandemic](#) and though there were obviously setbacks, people faced limited restrictions. I don't remember seeing many people mask when I was there in the spring

of 2021. Both [countries](#) had a slow vaccine roll out in the beginning but caught up quickly.

What do you hope that the results of your work will do? What could be the impact?

Jalalzai: It shows that having a diverse tool kit is essential to good leadership during a crisis and that women are more than up to the task of leading. Empathy, something men and women can both exhibit as leaders, does not mean that one is a weak leader—quite the contrary. The impact can be that it reinforces the benefits of having this type of leadership to the public.

What can male leaders learn from female leaders as a result of your work?

Jalalzai: There is nothing inherent about women and men that makes one sex better or weaker when it comes to leadership. In fact, feminine styles of leadership can be successful during crises but need not be employed only by women. A more open, empathetic, and holistic type of leadership can yield positive outcomes. And it does not come at the expense of strength. The reality is that we still have lots of public conceptions of women's weakness as leaders but the empirical evidence for this is nonexistent.

What are your plans with these results in the future?

Jalalzai: I will be completing my Global Fulbright in New Zealand this summer, which focuses on the symbolic empowerment [women](#) executives offer and is part of a larger book project for which I am in the process of doing fieldwork. I am going to focus on collecting additional cases (fieldwork in the Caribbean and other regions is still

necessary).

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