

Heads of State, Female

Since 1950, there have been approximately 70 women heads of state, not including monarchs or those appointed by monarchs to serve as ceremonial heads of government. A complete list is included at the end of this article. As the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report documents, women still remain vastly underrepresented in political leadership. While there has been progress in terms of women's political participation and representation globally, the numbers of women heads of state has remained relatively low, hovering around 10–12 women heads of state at any one time. It is important to note that

women have been elected head of state in almost every region of the world and that they span the ideological spectrum.

Heads of State Versus Ceremonial Leaders

It is critical to differentiate between heads of state in largely ceremonial posts and those with real political power. Title alone is not dispositive. Because countries have different governments and political systems, the president in one country can have significant power (e.g., the United States), while in another, the president does not (e.g., India). In a parliamentary system, the leader with the most political power is usually the prime minister; however, even in a parliamentary system, the amount of power a prime minister holds varies.

For example, Norway is a parliamentary democracy in which the prime minister is both the executive and legislative head of government. Former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland was the first, and to date only, woman to hold this position, holding it three times: in 1981, 1986–89, and 1990–96. Brundtland was a practicing physician before entering politics and served as minister for Environmental Affairs during 1974–79. She was asked to serve as head of the Labor Party, hence prime minister, when the Labor prime minister resigned. Her second and third cabinets were internationally recognized because virtually 50 percent of the ministers in each were women. Along with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, she was recognized by the *Financial Times* in 2004 as one of the most influential Europeans in the preceding 25 years.

In comparison, French prime minister Edith Cresson, that country's first woman prime minister, held less power. France's president chooses the prime minister from the party dominant in Parliament. When that party differs from the president's party, the prime minister has significant power. However, as was the case with Cresson, Parliament was controlled by President François Mitterrand's party and therefore Cresson had more limited power.

Even though ceremonial leaders do not have significant political power, they can play important roles. For example, both President Mary Robinson of Ireland (1990–97) and President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir of Iceland (1980–96) used their ceremonial posts strategically.

Robinson was elected to the Irish presidency in 1990, having served in the Irish Parliament for 20 years, focusing on issues of women's equality. Robinson was adept at harnessing the power of symbolism. According to Robinson, she used the presidency to focus on international human rights issues by serving as the rapporteur of an international human rights meeting in Salzburg. As a symbol of inclusion, she placed a light in the window of her presidential residence, where that light could be seen from the public road, to make the point to members of the Irish diaspora that they are part of Ireland.

The president of Iceland is seen as a cultural ambassador, who does not introduce legislation, and is mandated to sign into law all bills passed by the Icelandic Parliament. In 1980, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir was the first woman globally to be elected the head of state in a democratic election, even as a divorced woman who later adopted as a single mother. Finnbogadóttir was narrowly elected over three male opponents with 33.6 percent of the vote. She was subsequently reelected three times, twice unopposed. Finnbogadóttir was aware of the importance of her role as a woman head of state and received letters from women around the globe because of the historical nature of her election.

Similarly, the president of India, the world's largest democracy, has largely ceremonial powers. Most of the authority vested in the president by the constitution is in practice exercised by the prime minister. India previously has had a woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi, but current president Pratibha Patil is its first woman president. Like President Robinson, Patil held numerous positions in the executive and legislative branches of the state of Maharashtra, including heading several key ministries during 1972–85. She also served as a Member of Parliament (1991–96) and as governor of Rajasthan (2004–07).

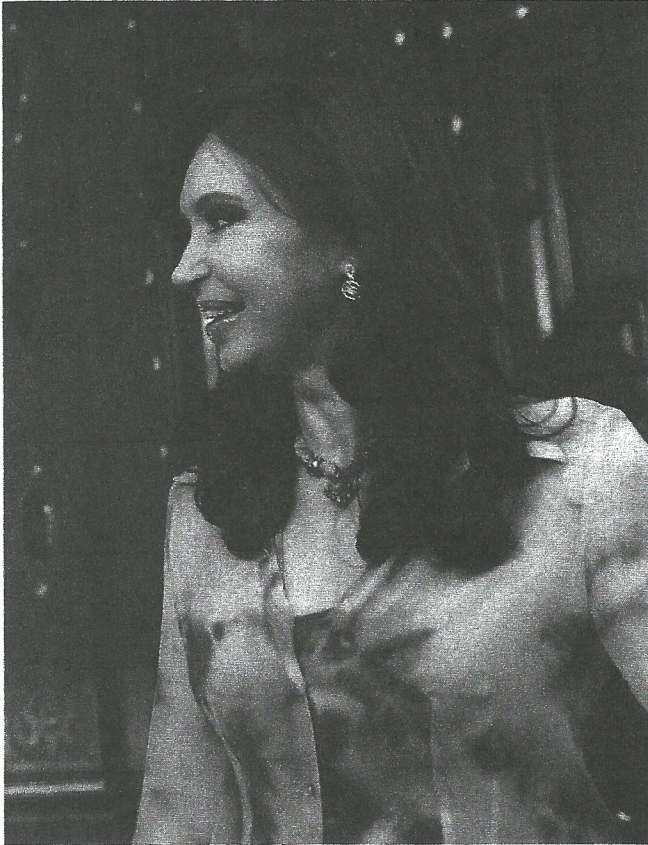
These women have taken one of two basic paths to power: (1) serving as a representative of a deceased (often assassinated) male family member and (2) climbing the ladder of the country's political and party systems. In many cases, the women in the latter category also come from families with political involvement. According to Laura Liswood, secretary-general of the Council of Women World Leaders and an expert in this arena, "often someone in the woman's family was involved in politics so that the woman had a level of

familiarity with politics. It's not quite a 'legacy' but ... women see that being involved in politics is possible." For example, Norwegian prime minister Brundtland's father was the Norwegian minister of defense; Costa Rican president Laura Chinchilla's father was comptroller of Costa Rica; Prime Minister Jenny Shipley's father was active in New Zealand politics.

Power From Continuing a Family Legacy

About a third of women heads of state have come to power following (although not immediately) a husband or father who was assassinated while in office or while running for office. These women are seen as representatives of their family's political legacy and campaign as such. Virtually every woman head of state in Asia and a significant number in Latin America have followed an assassinated husband or father into office. Many are from prestigious families with great name recognition. Examples include:

- Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Sri Lanka, the world's first woman prime minister (1960–65, 1970–77, 1994–2000), who followed her assassinated husband, Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike.
- Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India, who followed her father Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of newly independent India, into power and served as prime minister twice: 1966–77 and 1980–84.
- President Corazon Aquino, the Philippines, who was elected president after her husband Benigno was assassinated at the Manila airport returning from exile in the United States. She served one term from 1986–92.
- Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan, who took over the political mantle from her father, Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto. Her father was killed by the military while in office. She was elected prime minister twice (1988–90, 1993–96) and was the first woman to lead a modern Muslim state.
- President Violeta Chamorro, Nicaragua, who campaigned as a proxy for her husband, Pedro Chamorro, who was gunned down while driving to work in 1978. She followed him as publisher of the newspaper *La Prensa* and then later ran for office under the mantle



Cristina Fernández de Kirchner won the presidency of Argentina by the widest margin since civil rule was reinstated in 1983.

of her family legacy as the best candidate to unify opposition to the Sandinista regime. She served from 1990 to 1996.

- Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh, who served as prime minister twice, 1991–96 and 2001–06, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, Bangladesh, the current prime minister of Bangladesh, serving her second term, 1996–2001, 2009–present. These two political rivals have essentially alternated as prime minister of Bangladesh since 1991. Zia led protests after her husband, President Ziaur Rahman, was assassinated in 1981. Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the prime minister of Bangladesh and most of Hasina's family was assassinated in a coup in 1975.
- President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Argentina, who is the first women elected president of Argentina, and followed her husband Nestor into office, beginning in 2007.

As candidates, these women and their campaign organizations reflect the continuation of their family legacy, and people know of their lineage. Bhutto often referred to her father during her campaign. Chamorro invoked her husband, who had been assassinated and was seen as a martyr: "I am doing this for Pedro [Chamorro] and my country." Aquino returned to the Philippines after her husband was killed to lead the mourning for her husband's death and became a leader who could unify citizens and effectively defeat Ferdinand Marcos for the Philippine presidency.

With some exceptions, the widows have little political experience before running, while the daughters, such as Indira Gandhi or Benazir Bhutto, have significant political experience. Gandhi was a long-time party activist and head of the Congress Party. Bhutto's father asked her to carry on his work, and he groomed her for the role. Throughout her campaigns, she used photos and images of her father and his work. Since 1981, Sheikh Hasina has been the president of her party, the Awami League. There are exceptions, however, including President Cristina Kirchner, who served in both the state and federal legislatures in Argentina and was an influential party strategist before succeeding her husband as president.

Power From Climbing the Political Ladder

Many well-known women heads of state have climbed the ladder of political involvement, including Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Kim Campbell of Canada, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Prime Minister Brundtland of Norway, Prime Minister Cresson of France, Prime Ministers Helen Clark and Jenny Shipley of New Zealand, and Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia. Several stories illustrate this path to power across the regions of the globe.

Golda Meir

Golda Meir had been involved in Israeli politics for over 40 years before becoming prime minister in 1969. Meir and her husband moved to a kibbutz in Palestine in 1921. She gradually became more involved with the Zionist movement and at the end of World War II, took part in the negotiations to create the state of Israel and was one of two women signatories (out of 24) to Israel's

declaration of independence. In 1948, she became Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union and returned to Israel in 1949, when she was elected to the legislature and became minister of labor. She then became foreign minister and served in this capacity from 1959 until her retirement in 1965. In 1969, when Prime Minister Levi Eshkol died of a heart attack, many members of the Knesset asked Meir to return to politics and she did. While prime minister, she focused on developing support for Israel in the West.

Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher actively sought a political career and worked her way up the ranks of the British Conservative (Tory) Party. She served as leader of the Tories from 1975 to 1990, and as prime minister from 1979 to 1990. To date, she is the only woman to have held either post. Thatcher was raised by her parents to be interested in current events and grew up during the Depression and World War II. She became active in politics at university and was president of the Oxford Union Conservative Association. After losing her first two races for Parliament, she won a parliamentary seat in 1959. When Conservatives came to power in 1970, Thatcher was appointed secretary of state for education and science. After her party lost the 1974 election, Thatcher ran for and was elected Conservative Party leader in 1975. In 1979, she was elected Britain's prime minister and served for three consecutive terms. She is known internationally as the "Iron Lady" for her strong will, her government's austerity measures, and for prosecuting the Falklands War.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

Liberian president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf riveted the world's attention by being sworn in as the first woman president of an African country in 2006. After being educated in the United States, she returned to Liberia to work in government. She served as minister of finance in 1979–80; after the 1980 coup d'état, Johnson-Sirleaf left Liberia and held senior positions at various financial institutions. She ran for president in 1997, placing a distant second with 10 percent of the vote. In 2003, Liberian president Charles Taylor left office, after civil war and regional strife, and the interim government and rebel groups signed a historic peace accord. While Johnson-Sirleaf was proposed as a possible candidate for president, she was

not selected and instead served as head of the Governance Reform Commission in 2004–05. She then ran for president in the 2005 elections and won. Women, particularly market women, and the group Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, were instrumental in her election.

Angela Merkel

German chancellor Angela Merkel is the first woman to hold this position, and the first chancellor who grew up in East Germany. Like most East German youth, Merkel was a member of an official youth group. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Merkel became involved in the growing democracy movement. Following the first (and only) democratic election in East Germany, she became the deputy spokesperson of the new caretaker government. In the first post-unification government, Merkel was elected to the German Parliament (Bundestag) and after her party merged with the West German Christian Democrats, she became minister for women and youth and later minister for the environment and nuclear safety. In 2000, she became the first female chair of her party and later, leader of the conservative opposition in the Bundestag. In 2007, Merkel was also chaired the G-8, the second woman to do so after Margaret Thatcher.

Michelle Bachelet

Chilean president Michelle Bachelet is a moderate socialist who was the first woman president of Chile. She is a pediatrician and epidemiologist by training and also studied military strategy; she is a separated mother of three and describes herself as an agnostic. Her father, a Chilean general, was part of President Salvador Allende's government. After the coup that brought General Augusto Pinochet to power, Bachelet's father refused exile, was tortured extensively, and died in prison. Bachelet and her mother worked as couriers for the underground Socialist Party group trying to organize resistance to Pinochet. They were captured and tortured and later exiled. In 1979, she was given permission to return to Chile, and she became politically active in the fight to reestablish democracy. After democracy was reestablished in 1990, Bachelet ran unsuccessfully for mayor of a wealthy Santiago suburb. In the 1999 presidential primary of Chile's governing coalition, she worked for Ricardo Lagos's successful nomination and then

served as his health minister and defense minister. She was, in fact, the first woman minister of defense in the Americas. In the 2005 presidential election, Bachelet faced three male candidates in the primary, and was elected in a runoff with 53.5 percent of the vote. She won praise for her handling of Chile's financial crisis and has worked on post-earthquake reconstruction, both in Chile and Haiti.

Public Perceptions

In general, public perceptions of women as potential heads of state appear to be changing. This is in part evidenced by the small increase in the number of women heads of state and in the increase of women elected to office in general. There are more images of women heads of state, perhaps because the election of a woman president still generates a lot of press attention. Further, there has been some progress as women address tough issues, such as war, the fight against terrorism, and the world fiscal crisis. While Aquino found that her military commanders initially found it hard to accept orders from a woman, there have also been women heads of state who have aggressively prosecuted wars, most notably Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In addition, the contemporary high visibility of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has changed the perception of how women can deal with tough security matters, and this will shift even more as there are more women secretaries of defense. Bachelet won praise for her handling of Chile's financial crisis.

See Also: Bachelet, Michelle; Government, Women in; Representation of Women in Government, International; Merkel, Angela; Sirleaf, Ellen Johnson; Thatcher, Margaret.

Further Readings

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Stephanie Foster
Independent Scholar

Health, Mental and Physical

On average, women live longer than men. Life expectancy for women is now over 70 years, compared to around 65 for men. Longevity statistics alone, however, do not capture the full picture of women's well-being. Women's quality of life is frequently tied to physical and mental health concerns that uniquely or disproportionately affect women and girls. Some women's health concerns are related to biological sex. The role of prenatal care in preventing maternal mortality is an example of an issue pertaining specifically to females. Other health concerns are tied to gendered social conditions. For instance, in societies where women are paid less than men, the cost of healthcare is a concern for women's health. Understanding the mental and physical health issues that affect women around the world as well as their experience in healthcare systems is important to understanding the quality of women's lives.

Health has been conceptualized in many different ways throughout history and across cultures. Definitions range from broad subjective assessment of how well a person or group is thriving, to specific and narrow biomedical measurements of standardized physiological processes. Patriarchal cultures have frequently excluded women's voices and concerns from dominant conversations about health and medicine, and this has influenced how health is defined. Failing to include female participants in medical research, for instance, has led to the development of medical models based on male bodies. This has contributed to diagnostic standards based on typically male symptoms and the pathologizing of female body processes. Health education about myocardial infarctions (heart attacks), for instance, has historically overlooked the symptoms faced by women, while processes such as menstruation and pregnancy have at times been