

Are we asking the wrong question by comparing men versus women leaders?

Dr. William G. Obenauer, and a team of researchers located in United States, Netherlands, Belgium, Brazil, and Germany replicated that the findings of a paper (Sergent and Stajkoviv, 2020) that concluded that women are better strategic leaders than men during crises by comparing the number of deaths during COVID-19 in counties in USA lead by women and men governors. The findings of Sergent and Stajkoviv (2020) were based on comparison of 9 women leaders and 41 men leaders of 50 states of United States.

Dr William and his colleagues used the same data and controlled for endogeneity and removed superfluous control variables and extended the study in Brazil and with reasonable degree of certainty were able to show that there are NO DIFFERENCES in the effectiveness of leadership displayed by the biological sex of the leader. Adopting the mindset of a detective to investigate what might be contributing to the findings, it was discovered that the differences only held up due to the inclusion or exclusion of certain variables. When proximity to the epicentre of the COVID -19 outbreak was added to the analysis women and men governor lead states showed no difference. When stay-at-home orders were deleted as a control (because stay-at-home orders were not driven by the governor in practice), the differences between men and women leaders were not significant. Additionally, when the gender of the leaders in counties that shared borders (thus assuming that borders of counties are a political construct and do not necessarily mean that people differ in their thinking and political beliefs) were compared, no differences in the number of deaths were observed. Brazil was chosen as the site for replication of the study because its system of governance is comparable to the United States the site of study for the original study. The results were not replicated in Brazil either. Thus, it can be said with reasonable confidence that women and men leaders did not differ in the outcomes achieved in handling conflict. The research demonstrates how choices of variables can dramatically influence research outcomes. Thus, replication studies that test the validity of findings and the adoption of a sceptical mindset are possibly helpful before such research that tests for one group to be better than others in a certain context is shared as a given.

There are multiple fall outs from these beliefs. One, it places an undue burden on women to be empathetic and do the care work in organizations and those women who do not match the stereotype and are penalised for not being women enough. Second, if the belief that women are better strategic leaders during crisis is perpetuated, women are more likely to be given the responsibility of handling crises. This has multiple consequences- women would more likely suffer burnout; women would be passed over for leadership positions when there is no perceived crisis. Third, it also takes away the responsibility from men to be empathetic and step up to handle crises when it occurs.

The conversation based on Dr. Obenauer highlights that rather than searching for differences based on biological sex, it may be more useful to examine the impact of specific skills and behaviours of leaders on outcomes. For example, a mix of qualities associated with the masculine and feminine may be a better fit for leaders in crises compared to mergers or growth phases of an organization. Another interesting discussion that ensued was whether the number of deaths is too one-dimensional as a measure of leadership effectiveness. It was pointed out that future researchers can explore other indicators of effectiveness to study the question of differences based on gender.

Research, such as that conducted by Dr. Obenauer can encourage both academics and practitioners to move beyond simple narratives about gender and leadership effectiveness toward a more nuanced understanding of the complex skills and behaviours among leaders to handle crises.

References:

Obenauer, W. G., Sieweke, J., Bastardo, N., Arvate, P. R., Gazdag, B. A., & Hentschel, T. (2024). Are women strategic leaders more effective during a crisis than men strategic leaders? A causal analysis of the relationship between strategic leader gender and outcomes during the COVID-19 crisis. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35(6), 101812.

Sergent, K., & Stajkovic, A. D. (2020). Women's leadership is associated with fewer deaths during the COVID-19 crisis: Quantitative and qualitative analyses of United States governors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(8), 771.

YouTube video link to the talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc8SQqJWf28>