

‘SUCH WOMEN DESERVE PRAISE’ – COVID-19 AND WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

The novel viral disease known as COVID-19 has been a great battle for world leaders. Numerous strategies have been adopted by world leaders in the quest to curb the spread of the disease. However, only a few leaders have emerged successful. The study analyses strategies adopted by some women political leaders while bringing out some unique leadership traits that have spurred their success. Observations have been that these women political leaders, although not working alone, employed quick and prompt measures against the COVID-19 spread. Strategies identified include the establishment of early testing capacity, ban on contact, as well as the closure of borders. Others also adopted collaborative, participatory and cooperative strategies to control the Coronavirus pandemic in their respective countries. They have uncompromisingly upheld the recommended safety protocols in the absence of a vaccine. Reviewing these strategies and protocols, one sees unique traits in the leadership of these women which are comparable to some women in the Bible. These are empathy, boldness in decision-making, wisdom as well as proactiveness. The study concludes with lessons for the African woman and a call on all to embrace women leadership and motivate women for leadership positions.

Introduction

Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19 or “Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2” (SARS-Cov-2) first emerged as a disease with pneumonia-like symptoms in humans from Wuhan in central China, at the end of December 2019. Recorded cases on the 3rd January 2020 were 44 (bbcworldnews.com 2020), but by 11th March, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared it a worldwide disease and a pandemic due to its global spread. The contagious nature of the virus has made world leaders adopt stringent measures in an attempt to curb the spread. However, some countries seem to be on top of affairs with regards to the control of the virus. A critical look at worldwide recorded cases has revealed that most of the countries with low recorded cases of COVID-19 infections are led by women. The question that has been lingering is, what are these

women leaders doing differently? This paper presents an analysis and a review of the strategies adopted by these women leaders in managing their countries through the COVID-19 pandemic while bringing to bear their leadership traits especially as recorded on online news portals. The analysis is compared to some traits of women in the Bible and lessons are drawn for African women.

Achievements of women political leaders

COVID-19 has been a problem for all countries across the world. The WHO has been at the forefront encouraging all leaders to institute safety protocols like wearing of face masks, hand washing under running water, social distancing, and use of hand sanitizers. All the leaders of the countries in the world have been using context-sensitive measures to curb the spread of the virus, especially to trace, test and cure. For the purposes of this paper, attention is placed on some women leaders, such as in Germany, Finland, Iceland, and Denmark in Europe, New Zealand in Oceania, Taiwan in Asia, and Ethiopia in Africa. These women selected in no way are working alone, and it does not mean some men are not doing marvelously well.

Between January and June 2020, Germany, a large country with a population of over 83.02 million seems not to have been overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though their first case was recorded on the 27th January 2020, their total number of recorded cases as at 24th July stands at 205,146 with total deaths of 9,116 (Koptug 2020). These figures, especially of deaths, are on the low side, compared with countries like France and UK who have a lesser population, which is 67.89million and 65.27 million respectively (Clark 2020). France's recorded cases stand at 180,192 with 30,192 deaths, while the UK has recorded 299,426 cases with 45,677deaths as of 24th July 2020. Unlike France and UK, Germany is led by a woman. Reasons owing to Germany's relatively low cases include "early establishment of testing capacities, high levels of testing, an effective containment strategy among older people and efficient use of the country's ample hospital capacity" (Wieler, Rexroth and Gottschalk 2020). Mass gatherings and travels were increasingly restricted by the beginning of March 2020. On 22nd March 2020, the Chancellor, Angela Merkel announced the implementation of a "contact ban, limit on public gatherings to two people (outside families), physical distancing of at least five feet

and closure of many businesses" (Wieler, Rexroth and Gottschalk 2020). In fact, the Chancellor insisted that the country enforce strict physical distancing rules, banning all groups of more than two people in public and shutting down some businesses. From the above, it can be said that Germany had a successful plan right from the beginning and that the progress of detection was very early.

New Zealand, led by a woman Jacinda Ardern, went ahead to ban entry to any traveler coming through China on the 3rd February 2020, though there was no reported case as at the end of January. Any citizen coming from China had to undergo isolation for 14 days. By 16th March 2020, all citizens in New Zealand had to go into self-isolation (Jones 2020). The Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, closed all national borders when the country had recorded only 102 cases with no deaths. Unlike New Zealand that put in place an early plan and so controlled the spread of COVID-19, it can be found that the UK had recorded more than 6,500 cases with about 330 deaths, nonetheless, their borders were opened. Even self-isolation only began in early June in the UK (Jones 2020).

Control measures also taken in the case of Taiwan, led by a woman, contributed to the low spread of COVID-19. Taiwan adopted early cooperative strategies in fighting the COVID-19. As of 29th June 2020, Taiwan had recorded 447 confirmed cases with 7 deaths and 435 recoveries. These low figures can be attributed to the country's quick response through border control and activation of a Central Epidemic Command Centre (CECC) by 20th January 2020 to coordinate ministries and activities. The CECC liaised with "police agencies and the telecom companies to enforce quarantine with the support of mobile phone tracking" (www.theconversation.com 2020). In addition, Taiwan tested about 5,800 samples a day.

With a similar cooperative strategy, Iceland has been comparatively successful with the COVID-19 control. Iceland under Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, quickly activated a National Crisis Coordination Center on the 31st of January to coordinate the country's response to the disease. She engaged in a public-private-partnership strategy. These strategies yielded fruitful results and as of 29th June 2020, the country had recorded only 1,838 confirmed COVID-19 cases of which 1,816 had fully recovered with 10 deaths (www.theconversation.com 2020).

Finland under the leadership of Sanna Marin has adopted a hybrid strategy in the quest to ease restrictions since the measures she put in place yielded positive results, thereby reducing the number of infections. Prime

Minister Sanna Marin on 22nd April 2020 said at a news conference in Finland that the country would “test, trace, isolate and treat alongside winding up restrictive measures in a controlled manner.” The result of these measures is the total reported cases of 4,129 with 149 deaths and 199 hospitalised patients as at 30th June 2020 (www.reuters.com 2020).

Denmark, which is under the leadership of the young Mette Frederiksen, had as of 24th July 2020, recorded only 13,438 cases and 613 deaths (www.worldmeters.info 2020), which seems to be very low compared to the likes of Switzerland which is similar in population size, but has a high number of about 33,796 infected cases. Denmark adopted a strategy which could be best described as “act fast and act with force” (Olagnier and Mogensen 2020).

Sahle-Work Zewde, the President of Ethiopia is currently the only female out of the 54 Presidents in Africa. Zewde was listed as one of Africa’s “50 Most Powerful Women” in the March issue of *FORBES AFRICA*. Ethiopia remains with one of the lowest infection rates in the East / Horn of Africa region. As of 31st July 2020, Ethiopia had recorded a total of 17,530, with 138 in critical condition and 274 deaths out of a population of 109 million (www.telesur.tv 2020). Ethiopia remains one of Africa’s fastest-growing economies. Zewde, working together with the Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, also shares her views on women on the front lines, as well as supporting the reforms in education. At least, her modest contributions are more of an illustration of transformational leadership in times of crisis.

In early May 2020, the government of Ethiopia announced a package to bolster healthcare spending, food distribution, rebuilding SMEs, etc. to support the country’s most vulnerable. For Zewde, COVID-19 must not make people take their eyes off supporting the basic menstrual hygiene needs of women and girls, including those who are on the frontlines of the pandemic. She believes that it is imperative that girls and women living in poverty, the internally displaced, refugees, and those in quarantine and transit centres are provided with menstrual hygiene kits. This is part of preserving their dignity amidst the difficult conditions they are living in (www.iknowpolitics.org). This policy demonstrates empathy and thoughtfulness, which might be said to be more characteristic of a female leader. At a time like this, such is especially notable and commendable.

Ethiopia has been able to contain the spread of COVID-19 largely because of the government’s rapid response, including house-to-house screening

and diagnostic testing. The government responded swiftly and boldly to the COVID-19 crisis. Ethiopia's unconventional approach reflects the country's limited financial and human resources, as well as the low level of available international support. Despite these severe constraints, the results so far have been better than anyone expected. The leader insisted on the public-health measures taken to contain the virus's spread. Ethiopia initiated various essential measures in January, well ahead of most developed countries. The government then scaled up its response in mid-March, when the first COVID-19 case was reported in the country, and declared a state of emergency only on April 8. Moreover, it has encouraged production and other economic activities to continue during the crisis, thus considerably easing the pressure on vulnerable social groups and the informal sector (www.weforum.org 2020).

All these women mentioned above (and perhaps other women in other places) are praised not because they are perfect administrators of their economies or they work alone. At least, they played some key roles in their economies and their little achievements should not go unnoticed. Such leaders are hard to find in times of difficulties. As Proverbs 31:10 asks, 'a capable woman, who can find?' All of these women deserve praise for their key role in saving lives and showing able leadership. What are some of the character traits that can be learned from these leaders?

Women in Leadership, making the Difference

Leadership has been defined in different perspectives and disciplines. Definitions are often biased towards interest and what is hoped to be achieved. To Peter G. Northouse (2004:51), leadership concerns itself with the person of the leader and the dynamics between leaders and followers that result in a form of influence. James Baker (2001) suggests that "leadership is knowing what needs to be done ... and getting it done." His definition implies leadership and its effectiveness relates to the accomplishment of a task. J. Oswald Sanders (2007:29) sees leadership as "the ability of one person to influence others to follow his or her lead." A. Sinclair (2007:34) posits that:

Responsible leadership requires a deep sense of self and community – valuing diversity, ethics, the individual and the collective. It is something that involves all of us, as leaders and followers equally, binding us in a moral

relationship that can be quickly undermined through neglect or indifference. Leadership should be aimed at helping to free people from oppressive structures, practices and habits encountered in societies and institutions, as well as within the shady recesses of ourselves. Good leaders liberate.

A study by Baron S. Ihil & Agustina S. Hellya (2017:9) has also shown that to be a leader, one needs to have certain psychological qualities because leadership is the process of influencing and it involves interactions between the leader and the follower. They believe leadership training when received is expected to impact the leader positively with traits such as intelligence quotient, emotional quotient as well as understanding oneself. To Nhien Nguyen & Jens Ording Hansen (2017:5), managing and leading are distinct activities with different goals and means that need to co-exist. They opine that individuals should be prepared to either manage or lead depending on the situation and also to change their mind-set accordingly. A critical review of the above strategies as adopted and implemented by these women political leaders brings to light some glaring leadership traits and virtues which seem to be distinct. Some of these are discussed below.

1) Proactive and Wise

All the women leaders mentioned above took proactive measures right from the onset of the infections from COVID-19. Though most world leaders are tirelessly working to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, these women leaders stand out. One believes their “early bird catches the worm” approach and the result-oriented strategies have made them stand out. Since there was no vaccine for COVID-19 between January and June 2020, safety protocols have been recommended. While some countries have been slow to embrace the safety protocols, others have taken advantage of it and chalked some successes. These women leaders have been proactive and wise in their measures. Immediately after the first case was recorded in Germany on the 27th January 2020, the government mandated all health care providers to report COVID-19 cases within 24 hours to local public health authorities on the 1st February 2020 (Wieler, Rexroth and Gottschalk 2020). Barely after a month when the total cases were only 26, the government “set up an inter-ministerial national crises management group” to coordinate affairs (www.bundesgesundheitsministerium.de 2020). To Tracie White (2020), Angela Merkel of Germany has been “reasoning rather than rousing.” One also believes

the ambition of Jacinda Ardern to eradicate the Coronavirus rather than control it. Thus, closing New Zealand's borders to China even before they had recorded a case was a wise decision and a proactive step. The world is in search of such authentic leaders of value.

In the Bible, the prophetess Hulda's availability and wisdom must not be taken for granted. According to Susan Ackerman, Hulda's prophetic ministry was conducted in an environment where certain aspects of the domestic and public spheres were not widely separated. In 2 Kings 22:14ff and 2 Chronicles 34:22ff, she made her home available for King Josiah to consult her, and decision making was done in or near the home for the good of the nation (Ackerman 2002:59). Similarly, African women can learn from Hulda's example and position themselves very well so that in times of crisis they can be consulted. This allows women greater potential for the exercise of power.

2) Boldness in Decision-Making

One sees in these contemporary women leaders, boldness and courage. The effective containment strategy for old people by Germany and early lockdown by New Zealand all reveal the boldness as well as the decisiveness of these women. They stood against the odds of adverse economic growth and criticism to implement stringent strategies that will help control the spread of the disease. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was so bold that she instituted strict regulations in her country which many opposed but for which she said that "I would make no apologies" (Jones 2020). Indeed these women have played heroic roles in the midst of various challenges.

A key biblical figure who was a leader is Deborah. She was the only known female judge among the Israelites and one of the few women identified as a prophet in the Old Testament (Judges 4). Her boldness and multiple successes in a male-dominated culture is very commendable and worth emulating. Israel had been under the oppressive hands of Canaan for twenty years and when the Lord wanted Barak to lead Israel against the Canaanites, Barak insisted that Deborah, who was a woman, accompany him to the battle. Deborah agreed and as a result Israel defeated the Canaanites led by Sisera (Judges 4:1-15). All these buttresses the point that women can also lead and lead well. Such qualities can also be seen in biblical women like Shiprah and Puah who took independent decisions to save lives. These women were midwives who violated the command of

Pharaoh to let the Hebrew new-born boys live because of their fear of God (Exodus 1:15-22). Commenting on this text in the New Interpreter's Study Bible, Walter Harrelson (2003:88) presents that these "two women assume a heroic role in subverting the command of Pharaoh. Their story is that of civil disobedience, setting the fear of God against the tyrannical command of Pharaoh." These midwives were bold in their decision-making by preserving the lives of the Hebrew boys born.

3) Empathy

Empathy, which is expressed in compassion for others is evident in these women leaders. They have laid to bear their feminine traits through love and care for their followers, thus the adoption of quick and best measures to ensure their citizen's safety, protection and healing. For instance, Jacinda Ardern has been hailed for her "clarity and compassion" (White 2020). She, together with other women leaders, have not stood aloof or feigned unconcerned attitudes like some of their male counterparts whose citizens are dying yet they seem not to care. Rather, they stepped in for them, felt their plight, and worked for their wellbeing. In these women, we see the heart of Esther. Esther, when challenged by her uncle Mordecai, declared a fast after which she moved in to petition king Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jews though it was not lawful for her to do so at that time (Esther 4, 5). She was moved by empathy for her people and not simply the words of her uncle Mordecai. Esther's final words "if I perish, I perish" are the most poignant in biblical literature; her re-identification with her fellow Jews is complete" (Harrelson 2003:696). Just as Esther identified with the Jews and interceded for them, so have these women leaders.

Zewde of Ethiopia has not forgotten about the plight of women in other health-related issues in the midst of COVID-19. The Prime Ministers of Norway and Denmark have also engaged in a conference and television direct talks with the children of their countries to address all their questions and doubts about the COVID-19 pandemic (Wittenberg-Cox 2020). In these acts, one sees love and compassion. Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan has also extended love to other countries. She has sent humanitarian aid to countries like the USA (www.theconversation.com 2020). The empathy and love of these women leaders for other women and girls has been a strong trait in their quest to control the COVID-19.

Lessons for African Women

In an interview with Alice Eagly (1998:103), a psychology professor at North-western University, she intimated that "Women's tendency to be more democratic, participative leaders could reflect more than one cause. Women could prefer this way of treating other people because of their personalities and socialization, and perhaps their greater interpersonal skill at handling complex interactions." She added that:

Theorists of leadership have long maintained that there is no one generally effective leadership style, and I concur. Some situations call for a more autocratic, directive style, and others call for a much greater component of communication, consensus building, and participation by many parties in making decisions. The ideal leader therefore would shift from one style to another, after an astute sizing up of the style that would be optimal in each situation (Eagly 1998:108).

The above statement means that leaders should not be judged by their actions in one particular situation. However, one can take a cue from the good leadership styles at a point in time. African women are noted for their bold initiatives in leading and managing the home. In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, where health facilities are not enough in Africa, women have taken it upon themselves to manage the health needs of the family. They have been finding alternative herbal medicines and foods that boost the immune system so that their families would stay healthy in the midst of the pandemic.

African women know that good leadership is not about domineering. It is about participating in the common good of the people. Mark S. Aidoo (2019:84) argues that "A Christian theology of leadership must take account of the distortions of life recorded in Scriptures and offer practical perspectives that are not domineering but that which focuses on God's guidance in Christ, service, meekness, justice, wisdom, faithfulness and contentment." As such, African women must focus not on domineering but work hand in hand with men and other women to create a safe environment for the family in the era of COVID-19.

The political leaders of Germany, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Taiwan and Iceland have shown the way. In these women, we see a model for leadership for society. They have brought to light the fact that leadership is not domineering or autocratic but rather planning and serving. Leaders are not to be people who only give commands but individuals who

show concern and participate in all affairs of followers for their wellbeing. Leadership is thus other-centred. Mercy Amba Oduyoye & Elizabeth Amoah (1988:35) have said that “The Christ of the women of Africa upholds not only motherhood, but all who, like Jesus of Nazareth, perform “mothering” roles of bringing out the best in all around them. This is the Christ, high priest, advocate, and just judge in whose kingdom we pray to be.”

The exemplary leadership of political leaders who are women must also serve as a springboard on which African women will leap on to leadership positions. In these, the good qualities of women have been brought to light and this will act as an eye-opener to many. If women are seen to be good supporters or followers, they should also be seen to be good managers and leaders. Therefore, women must be given opportunities to lead and be encouraged to do so rather than being discouraged. Musa Dube (2016:149) has argued that African cultural worldviews cross-fertilize biblical worldviews and the Spirit became an agent of empowerment for women to assume leadership roles. As such, the “Spirit would enable women to claim positions of power, to become prophets and founders of churches, and claim to have heard God’s call to the office of ordination.” When African women take their rightful place in social and religious affairs, especially in times of crisis, the world will be a better place.

As heroines, they have acted as pacesetters and motivation for women not to shun leadership roles but rather to be encouraged to embrace them. The “can-do spirit” must be revived in women and they must be oriented against the notion that men are born leaders, thus women are only helpers. Women must be encouraged to know that all leaders are born and /or made and this includes women. Therefore, women can be born leaders or trained into good leaders just as men can.

Conclusion

“Many women do noble things” (Proverbs 31:30) and these women leaders are certainly part of them. They are indeed role models for women in this age. These political leaders are standing tall in the management of the COVID-19 crisis and this is an eye-opener to all and a great education. They are excelling because they have been participatory and have planned well. The world must therefore be informed and have a change of mind-set with regards to leadership and women. What the world sees as the

weakness of women (love and compassion) have been the strength of these leaders. Consequently, women must be equally respected and embraced in all helms of affairs.

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