

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSE IN COVID-19

Aroobah Lak* & Tasawar Hussain**

Abstract

The study attempts to uncover the gendered construction and understanding of subjects of politics and leadership. It argues that mainstream construction of Covid-19 leadership response as, 'success of femininity' and 'failure of masculinity' encapsulates naturalisation of 'essentialist gendered understanding' of subjects of politics and leadership. By applying theoretical and methodological framework of post-positivist feminist traditions and identity theory, the paper tends to contextualise the origin, source and objectives of gendered lens that juxtaposes femininity with politics and leadership. In essence, the article underscores that a political agents' leadership response to Covid-19 is a manifestation of his or her social and discursive identities, agent's understanding of their placement within power hierarchies and internationalisation of 'essentialist gendered identities' and argues in favour of reworking political assumptions and identity solutions to construct gender-neutral discourses in politics and leadership.

Keywords: Covid-19, Gender, Politics, Leadership, Essentialist Gendered Norms

Introduction

The article highlights the overlapping of gender, power, and identity in leaders' responses to Covid-19 and argues in favour of reworking political assumptions and identity solutions to form gender-neutral discourses of politics and leadership. It focuses on the 'leadership responses' to Covid-19 to uncover gendered construction of leader identities¹ that manifested in their crisis leadership. This article answers the following two questions: 1) How leaders' threat perceptions, political rhetoric and leadership response is rooted in their social and discursive

* Visiting lecturer at the Department of IR, National Defence University, Islamabad. Email: aroobahlak1@gmail.com.

** Assistant Professor International Relations, Iqra University, Islamabad. Email: tasawar.hussain@iqraisb.edu.pk.

¹ Karen Celis et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2013) 1-27.

construction of identities? 2) In what ways leaders' responses (policies and rhetoric) to covid-19 confirm their gender stereotypes.

The first wave of Covid-19 pandemic presents an excellent context to study leadership in high-stake bio-security crisis at a global scale. However, the ubiquitous nature of threat faced by national leader failed to elicit a uniform response across the globe. Epidemiologists and bio-security experts contend that human cost of Covid-19 pandemic could have been reduced if leaders across the globe had reacted sooner.² Eventually, it all came down to the promptness or delay in imposition of social distancing measures such as, lockdowns, and pandemic related restriction. The timely execution of Covid-19 restrictions has a direct correlation with flattening the curve that indicates the containment of the Covid-19 spread.³ Based on this understanding the dominant narrative on Covid-19 asserts that female heads of the states performed relatively better during first wave of Covid-19 pandemic and achieved better results on two counts: relatively low Covid-19 positivity rates⁴ and 6 times less Covid-19 related deaths.⁵

Moreover a 'perceived gender influence' is accredited for better performance of female leaders. Reliance on this discourse constructs success of female leaders as a, 'success of femininity' and 'blames masculinity' for bad performance of male heads of states. The article takes issue with this juxtaposition dichotomies in representation, discourses and analysis of male and female leaders that drive from the vantage point of 'private vs. personal' rooted in the discourses of politics and international relations.

Literature Review

Covid-19 as a bio-security threat transcended socio-political and geographical boundaries creating unique set of problems applicable across globe. However, the leadership responses, across the globe have been diverse and varied. From leaders reacting with 'swift and decisive' socio-political and economic policy responses to 'downplaying the threat' of the

² Ahmed M. Al Saidi et al., "Decisive Leadership is Necessity in the COVID-19 Response," *The Lancet* 396, no.10247 (2020): 395, doi:10.1016/ s0140-6736(20)31493-8.

³ Satyaki Roy and Preetam Ghosh, "Factors Affecting COVID-19 Infected and Death Rates Inform Lockdown-Related Policymaking," *PLoS ONE* 15, no. 10 (2020), doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0241165.

⁴ Leah C. Windsor et al., "Gender in Time of COVID-19: Evaluating National Leadership and COVID-19 Fatalities," *PLoS ONE* 15, no.12 (December 2020)

⁵ Luca Coscieme et al., "Women in Power: Female Leadership and Public Health Outcomes during the Covid-19 Pandemic," 2020, 1-10, doi:10.1101/2020.07.13.20152397.

virus engaging in tactics of 'shifting responsibility and blame game' to engaging in 'militarist wartime political rhetoric' and 'politicizing the virus for geopolitical goals'. Some even 'misconstrued it as a hoax', consequently, resulting into a quantifiable difference in the human cost of the pandemic across nations.⁶ Feminists have historically been protesting the invisibility of women from discourse on international politics, with the onset of Covid-19 - a bio-security threat, the discussion on female leadership has renewed in the global political commentaries.⁷

First wave of Covid-19 witnessed an uncharacteristic success of female leaders in taking charge of the situation with swift and decisive actions.⁸ An overview of the media representation and mainstream coverage of pandemic depicts female leaders as "secret weapons against corona virus", applauding them as the "voice of reason" and source of stability during the unforeseen times of uncertainties.⁹ Female leaders, from Merkel to Arden, Sanna Marin of Finland to Tai Ing-wen of Taiwan have been praised for being "proactive and decisive" conducting a 'coordinated policy' with 'effective messaging' in their Covid-19 responses.¹⁰ Female leaders with 'strategic decisiveness' implemented covid-19 social distancing rules and locked down their nations almost immediately as compared to their male counterparts in countries with somewhat similar socio-economic context and pandemic situation resulting in a lower Covid-19 positivity rates and less Covid-related deaths.¹¹

A critical overview of mainstream media portrays an unnecessary emphasis on female leaders' gendered identities as women. First, their framing in headlines such as, "women are the stronger sex in this crisis"¹² and arguing that traits of female leadership categorised as 'empathy

⁶ Peter Hartcher, "Xi and Trump: Insecure 'Strongmen' Who had Nothing to Offer in a Crisis but Vanity," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/>.

⁷ Avivah W. Cox, "What Do Countries with the Best Coronavirus Response have in Common? Women Leaders," *Forbes*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Arwa Mahdawi, "The Secret Weapon in the Fight against Coronavirus: Women," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/>.

¹⁰ Jon Henley, "Female-led Countries Handled Coronavirus Better, Study Suggests," *The Guardian*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/18/>.

¹¹ Jon Henley and Eleanor Roy, "Are Female Leaders more Successful at Managing the Coronavirus Crisis?" *The Guardian*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/>.

¹² Trevor Phillips, "Women are the Stronger Sex in this Crisis," *The Times*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/>.

traits'- adaptability, flexibility, interpersonal style of leadership are geared for handling a health crisis.¹³ This emphasis on 'gender of female leaders' uncovers the gendered nature of discourses of leadership and politics. Similar to their counterparts, the reporting on male leadership is driven from the vantage point of male leaders as 'great men', naturally destined to lead during crisis situation.

Male leaders have been judged in their handling of Covid-19 during the initial phase of the pandemic against the standards of 'hegemonic leadership qualities' that views leadership as a natural domain of 'strong men'.¹⁴ Apparently strong men thrive as leaders during crisis situations; they stand as a 'pillar of stability' for their nations.¹⁵ Western media barraged the "weak and self-interested"¹⁶ leadership response of male heads of states by declaring it a display of "lethal incompetence", "complacency" with adoption of "bombastic approaches" and personification of "reckless insouciance".¹⁷ The Sun claimed that male leaders are "big babies" running biggest nations on the face of earth.¹⁸

In hindsight, the overview of media coverage depicts naturalization of gendered discourse of leadership that considers agentic leadership as a natural domain of masculinity. The associations of reversing the gendered binaries of strong with 'women' and 'weak' with male leaders in their reporting, reflect its hegemonic nature that has somewhat acquired the status of common sense. Association of stereotypically feminine traits treated as 'weakness' such as maternal instincts, emotionalism, empathy, and kindness that has historically disadvantaged women¹⁹ in their struggle for leadership positions is being

¹³ Shaheena J. Jivaraj, "Why the Traits of Female Leadership are Better Geared for the Global Pandemic," *Forbes*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shaheenajanjuhajivraj/europe/2020/10/11/>

¹⁴ Ann M. Koeing, Alice H. Eagly, and Abigail A. Mitchell, "Are Leader Stereotypes Masculine? A Meta-Analysis of Three Research Paradigms," *American Psychological Association PsychExtra Dataset*, 2010, 12, doi:10.1037/e617292010-001.

¹⁵ Helen Lewis, "The Pandemic has Revealed the Weakness of Strongmen," *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/>.

¹⁶ Simon Tisdall, "Trump, Putin and Bolsonaro have been Complacent. Now the Pandemic has Made them All Vulnerable," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/17/>

¹⁷ Peter Hartcher, "Xi and Trump: Insecure 'Strongmen' Who had Nothing to Offer in a Crisis but Vanity," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/>.

¹⁸ Jimmy Leach, "While Strongmen Let Us Down, Women Show Us the Virtue of Competence," *The Sun*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11688949/>.

¹⁹ Johnson and Williams, "Gender and Political Leadership," 943-947.

viewed in an entirely different light.²⁰ The maternal side of femininity associated with female leader's sex is credited for their better leadership during the pandemic as the mother takes care of the sick in her family; hence female leaders are taking care of their sick national families.²¹ Chancellor Merkel is reported to have returned to "her role of nation's Mutti". Mutti in the German language means, mother. Chazan claims that Merkel is not a "touchy-feely" mum; but a strict "disciplinarian" mother²², although chancellor Merkel in her real life is not a 'mother'.

Media coverage surrounding Prime Minister Ardern's Covid-19 leadership focuses on her role as a new mother who is the "only second world leader to give birth in office after Benazir Bhutto." The western media praises her for managing the challenges of her recent venture into motherhood and spearheading a national pandemic response. She is commended as a "doting mother and a world leader", that she held "Kiwis' hands through the lockdown"²³ and how after "putting her toddler to bed, she empathizes with citizen's anxieties". She is considered a "perfect mix of epidemiology with empathy, law leavened with mom jokes" due to her warm and kind-hearted public persona.²⁴

Moreover, the mainstream media coverage of female leaders inadvertently falls back to 'subtle sexism' rooted in gendered discourse on 'female leaders.' It tends to focus on their 'physical features' with overt descriptions, dressing, personal styles, private lives, and sexuality; a scrutiny evaded by their male counterparts.²⁵ For example, the article that praises Ardern for her leadership approach of constructing a sense of national cohesion through her innovative social media public engagements doesn't forget to mention how tired she looked and what she was wearing while she repeatedly insisted on Kiwis being the "team of five million".²⁶

²⁰ J. Jivaraj, "Why The Traits of Female Leadership are Better Geared for the Global Pandemic," *Forbes*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/shaheenajanjuhajivraj/europe/>.

²¹ Carol Johnson and Blair Williams, "Gender and Political Leadership in a Time of COVID," *Politics & Gender* 16, no.4 (2020):943-950, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/>.

²² Guy Chazan, "Angela Merkel: Germany's Crisis Manager is Back," *Financial Times*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/>.

²³ Jon Henley and Eleanor Roy, "Are Female Leaders more Successful at Managing the Coronavirus Crisis?" *The Guardian*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/>.

²⁴ Avivah W. Cox, "What Do Countries with the Best Coronavirus Response have in Common? Women Leaders."

²⁵ Blair E. Williams, "A Tale of Two Women: A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May," *Parliamentary Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2020):398-420, doi:10.1093/pa/gsaa008.

²⁶ "Coronavirus: How New Zealand Relied on Science and Empathy," *BBC News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52344299>.

A perceived gender influence is also visible in scholarly research on Covid-19. Johnson and Williams argue that women leaders' femininity has provided them with leverage in health crisis, in a sense that pandemic blurred the boundaries of 'public and private' in politics. Female leaders' maternal tendencies have given them an edge over their male counterparts. They have conformed to their social and discursive duties inscribed to them through the traditional divisions of 'public vs private', assigning, the role of caregiving [empathy traits] to the women and leadership to men [agency], which tilted media coverage in their favour.²⁷

Garikipati and Kambhampati argue that feminine leadership traits such as, "big thinking, empathy and good communication skills," assisted female leaders and affected their threat perception of Covid-19 as a "life and death matter" that eventually guided their Covid-19 leadership. However, they take issue with the mainstream rationale that women being 'risk averse' reacted quickly and therefore performed better than their male counterparts. They contest the connotations of the said 'risk' itself and argue that female leaders displayed an aversion to the risk posed to 'human security', 'public health' and 'lives of their citizens', whereas they took greater risk in terms of 'economic and financial security' when they enacted prompt lockdowns in their countries. Therefore, it is not their "risk aversion" rather a 'low threshold for ambiguity' that dictated female leaders' covid-19 response.²⁸

Abras argue that the states with better social indicators tend to choose leaders irrespective of gender. Female-led states generally perform better in terms of social welfare services. Therefore, the better covid-19 indicators in female-led countries have a direct correlation with social and healthcare services in place.²⁹ Doyle highlights the tendencies of mainstream and scholarly analysis to harken back to gendered understanding of subjects of leadership and politics in analysis and research, especially pertaining to Covid-19 response. She argues that such emphasis on 'maternal aspect of femininity' of female leaders in their covid-19 response is intrinsically flawed and detrimental to their progress as leaders.³⁰

²⁷ Johnson and Williams, "Gender and Political Leadership," 943-950.

²⁸ Supriya Garikipati and Uma Kambhampati, "Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender 'Really' Matter?" *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020, 20. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3617953.

²⁹ Ana Abras, Ana C. Fava, and Monica Y. Kuwahara, "Women Heads of State and Covid-19 Policy Responses," *Feminist Economics* 27, no.1-2(2010):380-400, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9132784/>.

³⁰ Nancy Doyle, "Do Women Make Better Leaders in a Pandemic? Don't Trust the Data," *Forbes*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/drnancydoyle/2020/08/20/>.

Critical Analysis of Literature Review

Based on the understanding that, 'language is not neutral'³¹ the brief overview of literature depicts a reproduction and reinforcement of gender norms termed as 'essentialist' by feminist. The accreditation of 'maternal form of protective femininity' on female leaders' performance uncovers gendered treatment of female leadership. This discursive construction of Covid-19 discourse that directs the spotlight on female leaders' 'sex', and focuses on gender binaries of male and female leaders; their respective leadership attributes need to be contextualised considering Shepherd's assertion that gender lens only becomes relevant when a woman is concerned. Similarly, it is quite evident that female politicians and heads of states face a gendered treatment with a more critical, invasive, and personalised scrutiny³² evaded by male heads of states. Mainstream media coverage of the pandemic conspicuously missed any mentions of male leaders as fathers but highlighted female leaders' identities as mothers depicting the internalization of the gendered construction of leadership discourses.³³

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Michel Foucault presented a field of inquiry that explores and asserts that social reality of subjects is a product of discursive construction through reiterative application of key words, phrases, and statements in a constitutive manner. He proposes the understanding and application of 'discursive practices' to comprehend the dialectical and intertwined natures of "knowledge and power" within a historical context that shape the prevalent power relation. By doing so, it poses questions whether there are any 'essential human subjects'; agents that are subtracted from and independent of social-cultural and historical constructivism. For Foucault, discourse is not merely rhetorical; in fact, it is "responsible and responsive" to social and discursive construction, continuation and reproduction of pre-existing and new power hierarchies and hegemonies.³⁴ This is further elaborated by Richard Ashley's argument that, "knowledge is always constituted in reflection to interests"; this

³¹ Rukh Wodak, *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1989) 10.

³² Blair Williams, "It's a Man's World at the Top: Gendered Media Representations of Julia Gillard and Helen Clark," *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, 1-20. doi:10.1080/14680777.2020.1842482.

³³ Linda Trimble, Jane Arscott, and Manon Tremblay, *Stalled: The Representation of Women in Canadian Governments* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013) 643.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 22.

understanding about 'political nature of knowledge' falls within the broader scope of critical theory.³⁵

This understanding of social and discursive construction of reality, the impact of political nature of knowledge is imperative in understanding the origin, source, and objectives of intrinsic dichotomies of gender binaries in subject of politics.

Identity Theory

Identity theory explains how political discourse constructs identities by creating 'linkages of series of signs differentiated from one another'. The discursive construction of these identities is accomplished by the application of tools of symbolism and association through the strategies of representations and the process of othering.³⁶ Moreover, discursive means of 'silencing, denial and marginalization' of 'other identities' are applied to construct and establish dominance of particular social and discursive identities.³⁷

Thereby, subjects act based on their social and discursively constructed identities.³⁸ It is nevertheless pertinent to note that identity of subjects is not monolithic or static; in fact, it is a complex amalgamation of various subject positions that emanate in socio-political, cultural, racial, and physiological variables. Hence, a single aspect of identity cannot be isolated as fundamental. Moreover, the discursive construction of subjects is a continuous evolutionary process; identity of subjects is always in flux. Identities manifest themselves in speech, talk, actions, and perceptions of individuals; subjects as, identities are woven into a 'narrative' by processes of generalizations, simplifications and abstractions; a process that is intrinsically political and subjective.³⁹ In simpler terms, discourse give meanings to subjects' social identities making the latter product of their social and discursive construction.⁴⁰

³⁵ Richard K. Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interests," *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no.2 (1981):289. doi:10.2307/2600353.

³⁶ Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, "Identities and US Foreign Policy," in *US Foreign Policy*, ed. Michael Cox and Doug Stokes (Oxford University Press, 2012), 184.

³⁷ Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Pandora, 1989), 25.

³⁸ Ruth R. Pierson, "Beautiful Soul or Just Warrior: Gender and War," *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 77-86, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0424.1989.tb00237

³⁹ Rowley and Weldes, "Identities and US Foreign Policy," 185.

⁴⁰ Mary McIntosh and Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," *Feminist Review*, no. 38 (1991):131. doi:10.2307/1395391.

Post-Positivist Feminist Positions

When feminists talk about 'gender', they reject essentialised categories of male and female binaries established based on the bodies or sex they are born with. On the other hand, they emphasise how preconceived notions about male and female bodies and their connection to masculine and feminine traits influence and in turn are shaped by the actual circumstances and experiences of the people and institutions they construct and interact with.⁴¹ Similarly, post-structural feminists refuse that gender can be fixed in a single category. They assert that biological sex is in fact performed through discourse: gender identities are socially construed.⁴²

The aforementioned popular commentaries on pandemic leadership emphasise the complicated relationship between state and gender, as well as how they are ever-changing "subjects in process."⁴³ This brings Butler's argument on "performative nature of gender" that becoming a man or woman is equivalent to becoming a social and discursive construction with no specific end or beginning, rather it is a continuous process that is open to intervention and resignification. For Butler, 'performativity' is not a specific 'act' it is a "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" through stylized and sanctioned repetition of behaviours that associate meanings to an action.⁴⁴ In essence, subjects have no existence if subtracted from the political practices. A political being, be it state, or agents of state is constituted by political practices, preferences, and narrative.⁴⁵

On the same lines, feminists argue that state is a gendered construct, and its identity is constructed by the expressions said to be its results [meaning a mutually constitutive relation exists between state and discourses of state]. States as social and gendered constructs are manifestations of social and discursive processes and reflection of value identified with it through the dominant political discourse.⁴⁶

Gender, Politics and Leadership

Politics is viewed as a study of power, and feminists contend that the difference in how studying politics affects different strata of society is

⁴¹ Sandra Whitworth, "Feminist Theories and International Relations," *Feminism and International Relations*, 1994, 11-38. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-23572-82.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limit of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 2014), 35.

⁴³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 25.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Psychology Press, 2004), 12.

⁴⁵ Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interest."

⁴⁶ Weber, "Performative State," 80.

its most peculiar feature.⁴⁷ Feminists historically have been criticising the theory and practice of politics and statecraft for the invisibility of women's perspective, arguing that women's role in politics is either invisible or that of passive agents.⁴⁸ Feminists argue that politics is a patriarchal and masculine domain as it is rooted in Anglo-American traditions that could be traced back to the work of John Locke with its heavy reliance on analytical separation of public and private.⁴⁹ Gendered in its essence, theory and practice of politics establishes gendered binaries of rights and responsibilities by creating water tight divisions of public and private in its theory and practices; dedicating decision-making powers including leadership, combat, politics, economy and statecraft to male and reproductive duties to women.⁵⁰

In addition, subsumes women to private sphere through discursive and social construction of impermeable binaries and gender power hierarchies of 'agency' and 'empathy' within the political discourse. These gender binaries lay the groundwork for excluding women from 'agentic' political discourse of politics.⁵¹ Hence, the tendency to associate female leader's political response to health crisis to their inherent nature, that women are 'instinctively better' at handling human security problems. In this context, Pateman and Herschmann's explain this tendency in a sense that, performance of female leadership and political agency are 'viewed' and 'treated' in an entirely different perspective as their male counterparts from a vantage point of their "natural destiny as mothers."⁵²

Feminists argue that women contending for leadership positions in politics have to compete against the naturalisations of social identities of leaders within the political culture of the states⁵³. In the West, especially in the U.S. the most dominant social identities associated with the image of a leader are "white and male" that consequently results in biasness against

⁴⁷ Karen Celis et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-27.

⁴⁸ Hilary Charlesworth, "Feminist Methods in International Law," *American Journal of International Law*, 93, no. 2 (1999): 379-394.

⁴⁹ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 10. ; Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, *Gender and International Relations* (Didcot: Taylor & Francis Group, 1991), 20-30.

⁵⁰ Ibid. ; Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, *Gender and International Relations*, 20-30.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

⁵² Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, *Beyond Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Thinking about Women's Violence in Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 35-42.

⁵³ Martin M. Chemers, "Leadership Effectiveness: An Integrative Review," *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, 2008, 110-112, doi:10.1002/9780470998458.ch16.

and unacceptability of individuals that do not fit the description of 'white and male.'⁵⁴

Shepherd argues that this exclusive emphasis on 'sex' or 'physicality' of political agents emanate from naturalisation of traditional essentialist understanding of gender that asserts a 'direct relationship between body and behaviour'. In a sense that, if a body is 'braded male' it should possess the traditional 'masculine traits' of strength, power, assertiveness that falls within the broader category of 'agentic traits', whereas a female body should display traditional 'feminine traits' connoting 'empathy traits': kindness, irrationality, emotionality, empathy and, maternal qualities of care and nurture.⁵⁵

Such social and discursive construction of identities prevalent and dominant in discourses of politics and leadership has resulted in naturalisation of women's 'lack of fit' for leadership position.⁵⁶ This naturally points towards the fact that, women leaders have historically made a significantly smaller segment among world leadership of their times. Currently, there are only 21 female heads of the states in 194 countries, a fraction of only 20 percent among total world leaders. Feminists criticise this minority in representation as "single sex conjecture".⁵⁷ in the same line of thinking as representation of history as biographies of "Great Men".⁵⁸ This highlights a gap in study of leadership and politics due to the dearth of literature on correlation between genders of leader in a state of nation crisis.

Gendered division of 'agency' and 'empathy' establishes the foundation of social and political institutions. Based on which social and political institutions provide rationale for assigning of 'privilege or exclusion', 'punishment or justification' for a wide range of behaviours, attitudes, conducts and practices of political actors. Divergence in treatment of political and social actors somewhat appears organic and, embedded in nature; hence, widely accepted as such.⁵⁹ Consequently, the dominant discourses on politics and leadership tend to associate

⁵⁴ Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, "Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership," *Contemporary Issues in Leadership*, 2018, 146-167, doi:10.4324/9780429494000-17.

⁵⁵ Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender Matters in global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2010), 35-65.

⁵⁶ Eagly and Carli, "Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership," 150-155.

⁵⁷ Virginia Sapiro, "When are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women," *American Political Science Review* 75, no.3 (1981):

⁵⁸ Bert A. Spector, "Carlyle, Freud, and the Great Man Theory," *Leadership* 12, no.2 (2015): 250, doi:10.1002/9780470998458.ch16

⁵⁹ Fred Halliday, "Hidden from International Relations: Women and the International Arena," *Rethinking International Relations*, 1994, 147-169, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-23658-9_7.

connotations of 'masculinity' with that of 'leadership'⁶⁰. Evidently Joseph Roast's definition of leadership that synthesises 221 definitions of leadership from last century defines leadership as, "rational, management oriented, male, dominant, technocratic, quantitative, cost-driven, hierarchical, short-term, pragmatic and materialist."⁶¹ In a broader perspective, there is a superimposition of connotations of masculinity on ideals of state, politics, and leadership.

According to the feminist standpoint the association of feminine attributes such as, dependent, irrational, emotional, and peace loving being diametrical to the key values of state-rationality, autonomy, self-reliance, and aggressiveness, women are deprived of their political agency and leadership positions.⁶² The outcome of this construction is a plethora of scholarship on gender and leadership. It focused on the 'nature and impact of gender' and invested in exploratory studies on 'behavioural conduct' of female leaders.⁶³ The basis of such inquires and propensities is internalisation of gendered norms of leadership as a masculine domain that give birth to discourses that there is a difference between male and female leader's behaviour and leadership style.⁶⁴

Feminists say that the behavioural requirements for women leaders necessitate a look at the concept of 'political gender double bind,' which forces female leaders and politicians to face scrutiny that their male counterparts evade. Political gender double bind suggests that female leaders should possess and display both, stereotypical masculine as in 'act like a leader' and 'stereotypical feminine: act like a woman' characteristics to reach leadership position or break the invisible 'glass ceiling' in masculine domain of leadership and politics.⁶⁵ Johnson and William argue that pandemic presented an excellent opportunity to assess the validity of 'political gender double bind on female leaders.' The duality of expectations caused by the pandemic required leaders to take quick and

⁶⁰ Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice towards Female Leadership," *Psychological Review* 109, no.3 (2002): 573-598, doi:10.1037/0033-295x.109.3.573.

⁶¹ Joseph C. Roast, *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1991)

⁶² Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (Chicago: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 20-33.

⁶³ Jean L. Chin and Joseph E. Trimble, *Diversity and Leadership* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), doi:10.2307/448946.

⁶⁴ Debroh Alexander and Kristi Andersen, "Gender as a Factor in the Attribution of Leadership Traits," *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no.3 (1993): 521.

⁶⁵ Courtney Burns and Amanada Murdie, "Female Chief Executives and State Human Rights Practices: Self-Fulfilling the Political Double Bind," *Journal of Human Rights* 17, no.4 (2018): 470-484. doi:10.1080/14754835.2018.1460582.

decisive actions classified as a 'masculine trait,' and focus on the health and wellbeing of their nations: a duty, which falls under 'feminine trait.'⁶⁶

Furthermore, questions concerning the behavioural conduct of female leaders are of great value to the feminist scholars. They criticize the gendered nature of dominant discourses in gender and politics to be predominantly masculine, setting behavioural standards for female leaders to adopt to be accepted as leaders.⁶⁷ They argue that female leaders are 'expected' to 'adapt' and 'lean in', and to emulate masculine behaviour to be taken seriously within the political and institutional settings.⁶⁸

Gender stereotyping in leadership discourse stems from the understanding that female leaders possess the same qualities as 'women'. Therefore, the social and discursive construction of gender identities of women permeates in the association of 'female leadership traits' as well.⁶⁹ Female leadership traits are classified as 'empathy traits' that are deemed 'communal'; placed on the opposite side of 'agential traits: traditional leadership traits' on leadership spectrum. The traits of 'absolute understanding of leadership' require leaders to command/possess strength and power, display dominance, rationality, and assertiveness.⁷⁰ Thereby, the gendered structural and discursive impositions in leadership discourse such as, "women take care and men take charge" require female leaders to possess and display the 'absolute traits of leadership' that have been canonised as such.⁷¹

Individuals' political and leadership decisions amid a crisis have a strong connection to and influence over their identities. Individuals' (subjects'/leaders') identities are moulded by exposure to social and discursive constructions together with the inherent predispositions of

⁶⁶ Johnson and Williams, "Gender and Political Leadership in a Time of COVID," 945.

⁶⁷ Tomas C. Premuzic, "As Long As We Associate Leadership with Masculinity, Women Will Be Overlooked," *Harvard Business Review*, March 8, 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/03/as-long-as-we-associate-leadership-with-masculinity-women-will-be-overlooked>

⁶⁸ Tomas C. Premuzic, "Why do so Many Incompetent Men become Leaders?" *Harvard Business Review*, August 22, 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/08/why-do-so-many-incompetent-men>.

⁶⁹ Monica C. Schneider and Angela L. Bos, "Measuring Stereotypes of Female Politicians," *Political Psychology* 35, no.2 (2013): 246, doi:10.1111/pops.12040.

⁷⁰ Eagly and Karau, "Role Congruity Theory," 574.

⁷¹ Jeanine L. Prime, Nancy M. Carter, and Theresa M. Welbourne, "Women "Take Care," Men "Take Charge": Manager's Stereotypic Perceptions of Women and Man Leaders," *The Psychologist-Manager Journal* 12, no.1 (2009): 25-49, doi:10.1080/10887150802371799.

political discourse, which feminists believe is gendered in nature.⁷² Individuals' placement in gender hierarchies affects the formation and naturalisation of their social and political identities that emanates in their everyday interactions, perceptions and socialisations.⁷³ The overview of Covid-19 leadership response in the West explains how leaders' identities and positioning within gender hierarchies influenced their leadership responses to the Covid-19 bio-security threat. The socio-political environment that determines how leaders' identities are socially and discursively constructed, as well as how they are positioned within gender hierarchies and ideological frameworks, is reinforced and repeated in speeches and policies by leaders.

Leaders' Political Rhetoric and Crisis Communication

Leadership is a performative act accomplished with the help of language and rhetoric.⁷⁴ Due to the nature of the biosecurity threat posed by Covid-19, leaders applied a diverse range of emotional appeals in their political rhetoric to construct a sense of seriousness and urgency among their citizens. National leaders employed negative and positive emotional appeals to synthesize cohesive national responses to contain the spread of the virus: flattening of Covid-19 curve.⁷⁵

In this context, the inscriptions of social and discursive gender identities of leaders are transparent in latter's choices of rhetorical tools. National leaders have skilfully applied positive emotional rhetoric of pro-social appeals (personalization of loss, grief, hope, and empathy) in addition to negative emotional appeals (fear, loss, and guilt) and threat-based emotional appeals (militarism, wartime political rhetoric, and war semantic) in their crisis communication to achieve a targeted emotional response from the public.⁷⁶ There is a significant difference between leaders' choices of rhetorical tools and emotional appeals based on their genders. A study of female leaders' political rhetoric highlights their

⁷² Celis, *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, 10.

⁷³ R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity," *Gender & Society* 19, no.6 (2005):829-859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639.

⁷⁴ Manpreet Kaur, Rajesh Verma, and Frank N. Otoo, "Emotions in Leader's Crisis Communication: Twitter Sentiment Analysis During Covid-19 Outbreak," *Journal of Human Behaviour in the Social Environment* 31, no. 1-4(2021): 362-372.

⁷⁵ Naimah A. Al-Ghamdi, "Ideological Representation of Fear and Hope in Online Newspaper Reports on Covid-19 in Saudi Arabia," *Heliyon* 7, no.4 (2021): e06864. doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06864.

⁷⁶ Connor M. Chapman and DeMond S. Miller, "From Metaphor to Militarized Responses: The Social Implications of "We Are at War with COVID-19-Crisis, Disasters, and Pandemics Yet to Come," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40, no. 9/10 (2020): 1107-1126, doi:10.1108/ijssp-05-2020-0163.

reliance on personalized emotional appeals. The political rhetoric adopted by male heads of the state displays a masculinised militarist political rhetoric heavily infused with wartime, battlefield imagery, and out-right declarations of war against virus.⁷⁷

Dada et al. conducted a computerised study of speeches of world leaders from February 26th to April 6th, 2020, to study the political rhetoric of the leaders. The study declares that female leaders constructed their political rhetoric around the ideas of empathy and personalised emotional appeals, whereas male leaders' political rhetoric is heavily masculinised and militarised. While both male and female leaders refer to war metaphors, "the frequency and volume" is relatively higher for male leaders. Within the said timeframe of study: female leaders' used war metaphors at an average rate of 6.1 in 19 speeches as compared to male leaders who averaged 25.4 percent in 40 speeches. President Trump alone applied war metaphors 136 times in his 23 speeches.⁷⁸

Arguably, female leaders' reliance on a "wide-range" of emphatic and emotional rhetorical tools uncovers internalisation or performance of social and discursive identities of 'femininity' with emotionality, empathy, sensitivity, and kindness by the female leaders. Exposure to a wide range of emotional and linguistic expressions due to the associations of femininity with 'empathy traits' plays a mutually constitutive role. It develops a subliminal proclivity among women to express themselves with help of emotive expressions.⁷⁹

On the contrary, male leaders have displayed an excessive proclivity and tendency to engage in militarised wartime political rhetoric in their covid-19 speeches.⁸⁰ This uncovers the gendered identities of 'men' constructed in association with masculine identities of 'agent of political violence' and 'warrior' who needs to display the masculine traits of violence, strength, and power.⁸¹ Their gendered identities as 'agents of politics and political violence' manifest in a subliminal proclivity and propensity to engage in a militarist political rhetoric, the moment they face a crisis. The movement Feminists criticise wartime political language as

⁷⁷ Nathan A. Sears, "The Securitization of COVID-19: Three Political Dilemmas," *Global Policy Journal*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/25/03/2020/securitization-covid-19-three-political-dilemmas>.

⁷⁸ Sara Dada et al., "Words Matter: Political and Gender Analysis of Speeches Made by Heads of the Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2020, doi:10.1101/2020.09.10.20187427.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 81.

⁸⁰ Anuradha Chenoy, "Why Populist Leaders Use Rhetoric for All things Related to the Covid-19 Pandemic," *The Wire*, August 19, 2020, <https://thewire.in/politics/covid-19-war-militarism-public-health-populist-leaders>.

⁸¹ Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Women*, 35-50.

“inherently masculine, power based, paternalistic and violent”⁸² that is constitutive of and constitutes social and discursive gendered hierarchies within discourses and theory of politics.

The inscriptions of leaders’ gender identities on their speech acts could be better understood by taking Debra Cameron’s argument in ‘Feminist Critique of language: A Reader’ into account that there is a general social expectation from both sexes to engage in particular linguistic practices. For instance, there is a certain dislike for women’s use of profanities which teaches them to “circumlocution”.⁸³ In a similar way, it could be said that male gender’s exposure to excessively militarised language internalises their gendered identities of a specific way of male speech reflective of their violent agency.

Threat Perception of Leaders

Threat perceptions of leaders played a significant role in how the responses to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic unfolded. Arguably, a leader’s socio-political and gender identity manifested in his/her threat perceptions. Feminists’ argue that masculinised construction of states, theory, and practice of politics requires their ‘natural agent: men’ to present an identity of a ‘Strong Man’ when faced with a looming threat.⁸⁴

Moreover, this masculinised identity of strong men compels a refusal to acknowledge the ‘threat’ to display a facade of ‘fearless warrior’ as witnessed in the case of the pandemic. Initial refusal by male leaders to acknowledge the ‘threat of the virus’, resulted in a lacklustre response by many of the male leaders.⁸⁵

British Prime Minister Johnson’s ‘fearless warrior attitude demonstrated on the 3rd of March, 2020 when he boasted about shaking hands with Covid-19 positive patients eventually landed him into intensive care on 7th of April.⁸⁶ Trump’s depicting of “strong man” identity could easily be encapsulated by his claims of ‘powering through covid-19’

⁸² Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender Matters in global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2010), 35-65.

⁸³ Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Psychology Press, 1998), 10.

⁸⁴ Helen Lewis, “The Pandemic Has Revealed the Weakness of Strongmen,” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/>

⁸⁵ Ruth R. Pierson, “Beautiful Soul or Just Warrior: Gender and War,” *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 77-86, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0424.1989.tb00237.

⁸⁶ Simon Tisdall, “Trump, Putin and Bolsonaro have been Complacent,” *The Guardian*.

and 'feminization of mask wearing'.⁸⁷ Their reiterative insistence on downplaying the threat of Covid-19 created an illusion of control over circumstances in addition to their over-estimation of healthcare systems in their countries, resulting in worsening of the situation; rise of Covid-19 positivity ratios, and high Covid-19 related death tolls.

Female leaders anticipated the threat at the earlier stages, reiteratively asserted the severity of the threat posed by the virus and articulated uniform and consistent policy responses whereas, male heads of the states initially downplayed the covid-19 threat. Feminists in this context argue that threat perception of women and 'persons of colour' is strikingly heightened compared to white male because of their real-life experiences of 'lack of power'⁸⁸. Female leaders' anticipation of the threat resulted in prompt enactment of covid-19 social distancing measures and lockdowns of their countries. They understood and accepted the severity of covid-19 early on and articulated their crisis leadership and political rhetoric around the themes of seriousness that created a sense of urgency among their citizens and resulted in better compliance with social distancing measures.

Early acceptance of bio-security threats resulted in the formulation and enactment of quick, decisive, and task-oriented crisis leadership in female-led states. Crisis leadership in most male-led countries suffered due to ambiguities and inconsistencies in political messaging, delays in lockdowns, and social distancing measures affecting covid-19 curves. This reasserts the significance of understanding the underlying processes of construction of identities in individuals' behaviours, their speech acts and meaning making processes.

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic represents an excellent opportunity to deconstruct the discourses of politics and gender, to see how gender ideologies, gender binaries and gender power hierarchies are constructed, reconstructed, perpetuated, and naturalised in theory and application of politics. Arguably, the gendered nature of subject of politics produces gendered subjects who act on basis of their placement on tiers of gender hierarchies. Contextually, the hegemonic nature of such gender ideologies is rooted in assumptions that they somehow appear organic, common-

⁸⁷ Jimmy Leach, "While Strongmen Let Us Down, Women Show Us the Virtue of Competence," *The Sun*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11688949/>.

⁸⁸ Melissa L. Finucane et al., "Gender, Race and Perceived Risk: The 'White Male' Effect," *Health, Risk & Society* 2, no.2 (2000): 159-172. doi:10.1080/713670162.; Jeanette Norris, Paula S. Nurius, and Linda A. Dimeff, "Through Her Eyes," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 20, no1 (1996): 123-145. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1996.tb00668.

sense and consensual within the broader domains of politics. The social acceptance of such gender hierarchies is accomplished through discursive process, whereby the agents of such discourses and political processes fail to recognise their own gendered behaviours, masculine privileges, and sexism. Apparent inadvertent sexism is visible in representation and reporting of the Western leaders.

In retrospect, the meanings of 'masculinised and feminised' signifiers are rooted in and mediated by the discourse that underline the meaning-making processes of social and political identities of agents or subjects of politics employing social and discursive constructions political actors are exposed to through language and discourses. Individuals' social and political identities are produced and naturalised on basis of their gendered identities. Both male and female leaders act based on their identities which implicitly and explicitly comes forward in their political rhetoric, threat perception, and policy responses.

Gendered identities are most dominant as political identities of male leaders as 'strong men' and their rhetorical choices of militarised semantics and wartime metaphors. This displays a dominance of a particular way of doing male gender and association of masculinity [authority and aggressiveness] with an absolute understanding of leadership. Male leaders' failure to anticipate Covid-19 threat to a larger part is driven by their masculine identities as strong men. Strong men stand tall in face of calamity creating a facade of 'fearless warrior', they act by delegitimizing their enemies through association of binaries of 'us vs them'. Delays in acceptance of Covid-19 threat resulted in a late response and worsened the pandemic in their countries. Their political rhetoric is infused with wartime imagery, militarist, and nationalist language that uncover social and discursive inter-subjectivities of discourses of violence [war] with masculinity and politics.

Female leaders depict their gender rationality by acting according to their gender identities. Interestingly their leadership in Covid-19 confirms and contradicts gendered understanding of leadership discourses. While their leadership response comprises of 'personalised and emphatic political rhetoric' conforming to empathy traits, their decisive, task-oriented approaches seem to resist the ideal of female leadership and infringe upon the domains of agentic (masculine) leadership. And contest the credibility of gendered construction of water-tight compartments of femininity and masculinity within discourses of leadership and politics.

The construction of mainstream views on Covid-19 leadership as "success of femininity" and "failure of masculinity" uncovers the dominance and naturalisation of an essentialist understanding politics and leadership subjects which proves restrictive and insufficient. It calls into questions the naturalisation of gendered discourse of politics that

reconstitute cycles of hegemonies within the theory and practices of politics.

This inherent disposition in theories and practices of politics to revert to the physicality/physiology of leaders by focusing on their leadership through a gendered lens restricts the understanding of subjects of politics and leadership. The social and discursive association of female leadership with empathy traits and femininity further strengthens the binaries of empathy and agency within leadership discourses and may prove detrimental to the progress of political agency.

In the context of pandemic leadership, it is essential to highlight that gendering of leadership qualities in a certain context by claiming certain intrinsic qualities as necessary leaves incompetence and complacency unaccounted for and unaddressed. The construction of 'supposedly better female leadership' response to Covid-19 is an inadvertent effect of femininity of female leaders that makes them naturally better at handling a bio-security crisis owing to the very nature of the crisis. Female leaders performed better because they anticipated threat and acted decisively by undertaking great economic risks. To argue that political agents based on their biological 'sex' are predisposed to a way of leading and doing politics is a disservice to the subjects of politics and restricts it.

Crisis leadership is simply leadership under distress. If a crisis or security situation demands a particular leadership trait such as empathy or assertiveness it is only logical that agents of politics notwithstanding their social and discursive gender, learn that leadership trait instead of categorising, branding, and associating leadership qualities to gender identity. This calls for a gender-neutral discourse on leadership and politics.

