



Global attitudes about women as national leaders

Background

Throughout history, politics has been largely a man's world. The 20th century witnessed significant changes, through women's suffrage and the emergence of women as leaders of parties and nations, albeit at a slow pace and unevenly across the globe. Today, in the early 21st century, only a handful of countries have had women as political leaders. Just a couple of months ago, a woman candidate fell just short of becoming the USA's first female President.

The absence of women as national leaders is an undisputed reality, but what lies behind this? How much of it can be attributed to political systems and institutional barriers, and how much is due to culture and public opinion? The Environics Institute for Survey Research examined the latter dimension through a public opinion survey conducted in 60 countries at the end of 2016. The survey posed the following question to a representative sample of roughly 1,000 citizens in each country:

*Do you totally agree, agree, disagree or totally disagree with the following statement:
"Women are just as qualified as men to lead our country."*

The survey was conducted online in each of the 60 countries, using RIWI's proprietary platform that makes it possible to conduct surveys with general populations through laptops and smartphones, without reliance on recruited online panels (further details can be found at <https://riwi.com/how-rdit-works/>). A total of 62,918 surveys were completed (approximately 1,000 in each country) between November 4 and December 10, 2016. The margin of sampling error for each country will be plus or minus 3.0 percentage points, in 19 out of 20 samples.

Executive Summary

Despite the rarity of female national leaders globally (most countries have never allowed it), this survey reveals a surprising level of public support for the idea that women are just as qualified as men to lead ones country. A clear majority in almost all of the 60 countries surveyed agree with this idea, and in many at least half "totally" agree. By comparison, in only a handful of countries do more than one in six totally disagree with the premise.

Opinions vary by region and country, largely as a function of culture. Agreement that women are as qualified as men is most pronounced in countries with traditional patriarchal societies in Latin America, Southern Europe and some parts of East Asia; even more so than in most of the progressive western countries of Western Europe and North America (where feminist values are strongest). Disagreement with the statement stands out most in a handful of Muslim countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Algeria. Gender plays only a modest role (and not in all countries), while age and education seem to make little difference in attitudes about women leaders.

These findings do not mean we should expect to see a spate of emerging women national leaders across the globe anytime soon. But they do suggest that citizens in most of the world do not believe that women in their country lack the qualifications to lead them.

Survey Results

Global results. Despite the fact that the overwhelming proportion of national leaders have been and continue to be men, there is a surprising level of agreement around the world that women are just as qualified as men to lead ones country. Close to eight in ten say they totally agree (52%) or agree (26%) with this statement, compared with just one in five who disagree (10%) or totally disagree (12%). The “totally agree” percentage provides the best indicator of public sentiment, as it represents a definitive opinion that is not as likely influenced by social desirability – it is this metric that is used for the rest of the analysis presented below.

Region and country results. Perspectives on this issue vary noticeably across regions and individual countries, in a pattern that in some cases is counter-intuitive. By region, total agreement in women being as qualified as men is most widespread in Latin America (62%), South Asia (61%) and Western Europe (59%), with this view least apt to be shared in North America (45%) and West Asia (43%). There is considerable variation within some regions, notably Africa, East Asia and West Asia.

By country, total agreement with the statement is most pronounced in countries spanning several continents: Spain (72%), Portugal (71%) and Italy (65%) (all in Southern Europe), as well as Venezuela (68%), Kenya (66%), and Canada (62%). Low agreement in women being as qualified as men is evident in some Muslim countries, such as Algeria (22%), Saudi Arabia (24%) and Jordan (29%), but also in the East Asian countries of South Korea (26%) and Japan (27%). Major world powers mostly fall somewhere in the middle, including Germany (52%), China (49%), Russia (45%), and the USA (43%).

How opinions vary by gender. At a global level, there is a predictable if not dramatic gender gap in attitudes on this question, with women (57%) more likely than men (47%) to totally agree that women are just as qualified as men. But this gap is by no means consistent around the world. The gender gap is most pronounced in Central and Eastern Europe, including Greece (19 points), Kazakhstan (21), Russia (19), Austria (19) and Poland (18), as well as in Taiwan (19). In contrast, there is little or no difference in the opinions of men and women on this question in Ethiopia (0 points), Japan (1), the Philippines (4%) and Vietnam (5). Notably, the gender gap is similar in countries with very different views about women’s’ role in society, such as Sweden (8) and Saudi Arabia (7)

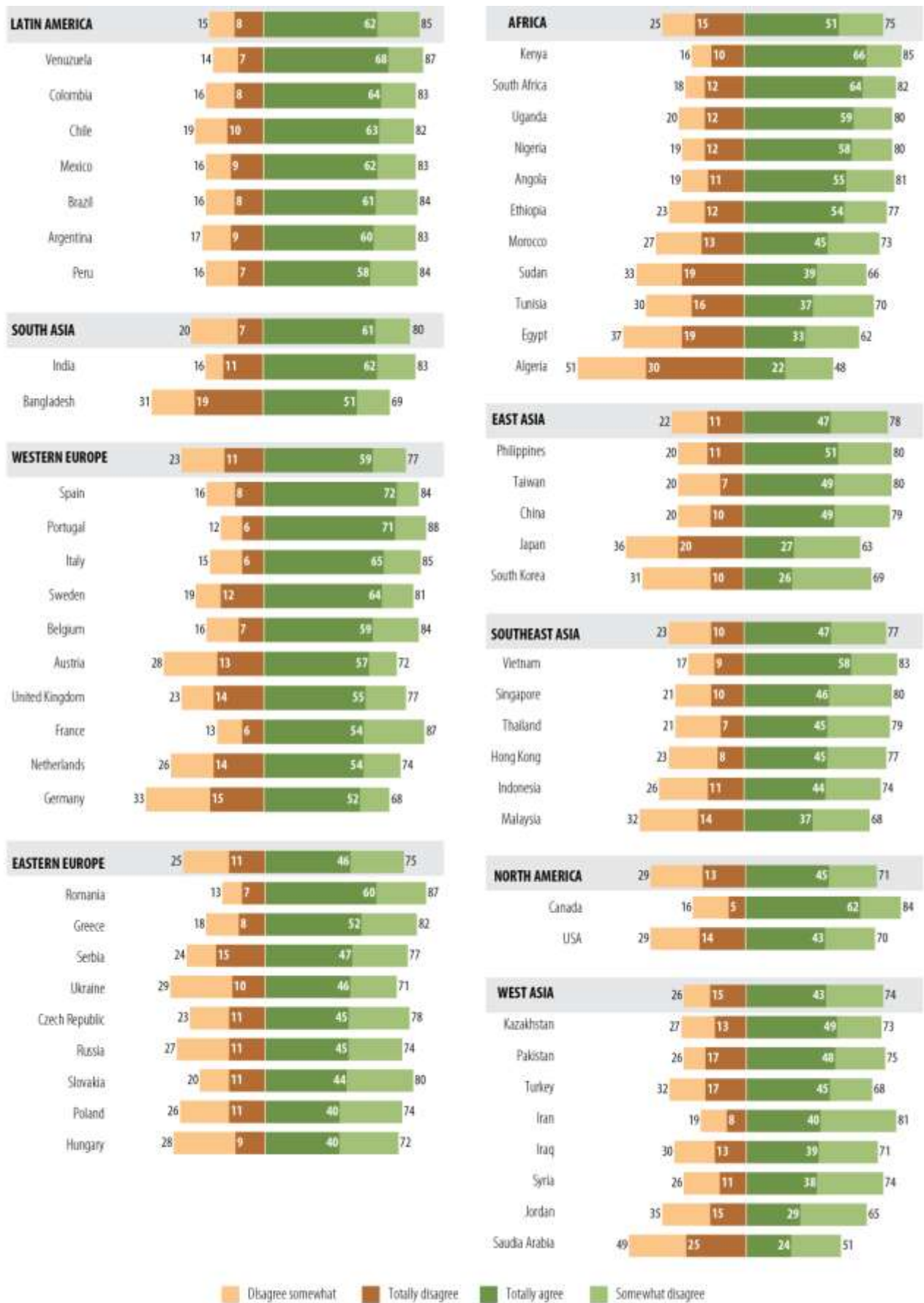
Does it matter if countries have had women leaders? A handful of the countries included in this survey currently have, or have had in the past, women national leaders (as Prime Minister or President). This experience does not appear to have had any noticeable impact on public attitudes about the qualifications of women compared with men. In the 12 countries that have (or have had) women leaders, 51 percent of the public totally agrees with the statement about women being as qualified as men, compared with 49 percent in the remaining 48 countries that have had no such experience.

How opinions vary by age and education level. Some might posit that attitudes about women as national leaders will be a function of age and education level (i.e. that younger and more educated individuals will hold more positive views about womens’ capabilities). Results from this survey do not support this hypothesis: Age and education make a noticeable difference in some countries but not in others, and the nature of the relationship is by no means uniform.

With respect to **age**, at a global level there is a small difference in the likelihood of totally agreeing with the statement about women being qualified as national leaders, with a positive view expressed by individuals under 45 (52%) a bit more evident than among those 55 and older (45%), while those 45 to 54 years of age are the most positive of all (62%). In only a few countries is there a noticeable gap between younger and older on this question – the largest being in Sweden (11 points) and Spain (10 points), and in both cases it is the older cohort who are most strongly in agreement about women being capable leaders.

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Agree – Disagree: *“Women are just as qualified as men to lead our country.”*



In terms of **education level**, once again there is only a modest link with attitudes about women leaders. Individuals who have not completed secondary school (high school in North America) are least apt to totally agree with the statement. But there is little difference in viewpoint among those who have a secondary school or post-secondary degree (it is those at the Bachelor's level who are most apt to totally agree about women being capable (57%)). In a handful of countries, support for women as being qualified increases notably with educational attainment – this includes Canada (26 point gap), Colombia (25), Greece (22) and Spain (22). But the reverse also applies in a few other countries, where it is those with less education who are most apt to agree that women are just as qualified to be leaders – this includes Morocco (24 points) and Iraq (6). And in many countries there is little to no gap between those with more and less educational attainment.

How opinions interplay with patriarchy. Finally, how do opinions about the qualifications of women leaders relate to social values surrounding patriarchy (belief in the view that “the father should be the master in his own home”)? In this case there is a notable relationship, but not in a consistent way across countries. Globally, total agreement with women being as capable as men to be national leaders is actually more prevalent among those who exhibit strong patriarchal values (67%), compared with those who reject this perspective (53%).

The pattern breaks in two directions depending on the country. Among western European countries, total agreement about women leaders' capabilities is strongest among those who reject patriarchy, in such countries as Sweden, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Hungary. But the reverse pattern emerges in some Asian countries: belief in the qualifications of women leaders is strongest among those who are among the most patriarchal in outlook – Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, India, Bangladesh and the Philippines. These results suggest there are two distinct perspectives on women as national leaders: in the West it is a function of a feminist perspective on women being equal to men in all respects; but in countries with a strong patriarchal culture, it may be a daughter or wife who, in the event of an emergency or the absence of a male heir, can step in and be a good leader (e.g., Indira Gandhi, Eva Peron).

For more information about this research:

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About the Environics Institute for Survey Research

The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 to promote relevant and original public opinion and social research on important issues of public policy and social change. The focus of the Institute's mandate is to survey individuals and groups not usually heard from, asking questions not normally asked. For further information see www.EnvironicsInstitute.org.
