

The Eurydice Moment: Women's Leadership in a critical time

University of Luxembourg

Women in Leadership Lecture Series

June 24, 2025

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you today about women and leadership. It's my first visit to Luxembourg and it is a great pleasure to be here.

I would like to speak in celebration of women's achievements as leaders, and in solidarity with all those who are female leaders or support women in leadership positions. I'm convinced that while we have come a long way, we still have a long way to go. I would also like to sound a word of warning about the difficulties we face in the current political moment. Finally, I will argue that it is important to re-commit to the goal of giving women equal opportunities to lead, both as a matter of justice and of practical benefit to us all.

I believe that today we face what I'm going to call a Eurydice moment. You'll recall that in Greek myth, Orpheus descends into the Underworld to find his wife, Eurydice, and restore her to life. His actions allow her *almost* to reach daylight. But at the last moment he fails and looks back...and in so doing condemns her to return to her position beneath his feet. I fear that at this political moment— of sabre-rattling and domestic budget-slashing – we are in danger of looking back, of turning back on commitments to women's rights.

Sadly, we see in many parts of the world, a tendency amongst governments to renege on former democratic commitments to women. **The United Nations has documented what it calls a 'gender backlash,' whereby one in four countries in 2024 experienced a weakening of legal protections for women,** in terms of ending gender-based discrimination, preventing gender-based violence, and improving access to reproductive health and sex education.¹ Living in America, I cannot fail to notice that the current administration has recently removed all the military's top-ranking female leaders, in addition to sacking other female leaders of major institutions like the Library of Congress and the Kennedy Center.

The fact that female leadership has become commonplace in many sectors should not blind us to the tenuous nature of that success. It is imperative that we not allow the progress that we've won, so painstakingly, over many years, to be eroded

by measures that return women to the place they held before they were freed to lead.

So today I will speak about women's achievements (particularly in education, public health, and environmental protection), but also about the gender backlash and how we can support women's leadership in a critical time.

*

First, some celebration. There are so many women leaders, who have inspired me, whom I could pick to talk about today. Some of them are historical figures like Europe's first female Professor, Laura Bassi, who was appointed Professor of Physics at the University of Bologna in 1732, aged just 21. She went on to earn international acclaim for her experimental work on electricity, becoming her university's highest-earning academic. She also gave birth to ten children in the course of her stellar academic career.

As I am in Luxembourg, I can't pass over the heroic figure of Anne Beffort. One of twelve children of a gardener, she succeeded in 1908 in becoming the first woman from this great country to gain a doctorate, at the Sorbonne. A specialist in the works of Victor Hugo, Beffort led a movement to create public schools for girls, and – during World War 2 – she was a member of the Resistance, advocating the value of French literature even under German occupation. Her efforts, like those of Belgian schoolteacher Andrée Guelen, who saved over 300 Jewish children by hiding them in schools, convents, monasteries and farms, remind us of the humane commitment at the root of the Humanities to sharing transcultural understanding and the promise of a better life. Beffort remains one of too few women leaders to have streets named after her.

My native country, Ireland, has had two inspiring female presidents, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, though notably never a female prime minister.

Education is one area in which women excel – and have been excelling for the century and a half in which they have been admitted into the academy. Indeed, according to a 2024 Cambridge University study based on UK data, girls outperform boys at all levels of education from kindergarten to college, with female students significantly more likely to go into higher education and to get a first-class degree.² Indeed, worldwide more women than men now attend universities and colleges.³

Yet, as we know, the solid educational lead that women establish between the ages of 4 and 21, does not translate into leading positions in salary tables or on

executive boards. In 2023, *Personnel Today* reported that median first-class female graduates were receiving £2000 less in starting salaries than their male counterparts.⁴ Over a forty year career, American women working full-time will typically earn \$462,000 less than their male colleagues.⁵ These pay disparities are stubborn, persistent, and observable across different nations and sectors.

Women's lower starting salaries are often attributed to a 'failure to negotiate', but one has to ask why inexperienced new graduates should be expected to *argue* in order to obtain an equitable initial offer from businesses. If we instead placed the legal burden on those businesses to show that they are recruiting men and women on equal terms, we would doubtless see a behavioural shift.

Katrín Jakobsdóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland, succeeded in transforming women's lives in just this way, by getting tough on employers, requiring them to prove via regular audit that they were paying men and women equally. In 2018, her administration enacted a law prohibiting unequal pay. In 2017, 13.6% of women in Iceland lived in poverty. Following the new law, that number dropped to 11.3% the following year. By 2023, the poverty rate had fallen further to 8.9% for women and 9% for men.⁶ Iceland now has the smallest gender gap of any nation.⁷ We plant the seeds of equality in leadership by mandating a level financial playing field, long before women or men start to shoot for the goal of the executive's chair. Rewarding women properly starts with rewarding them as new hires and valuing them equally at every stage of their career.

The more traditional an institution, the longer it tends to take to get women into the top job. I should know. St Andrews University took 600 years to appoint its first female Vice-Chancellor, Oxford took about 900 years. That was me in both cases. For its part, Harvard took 369 years to appoint its first female president. In higher education, female Professors remain in a minority, though steady progress has been made in recent decades. In France they are now about a third of Faculty; in the UK about 31%; in Germany around 28%; in the US 36% of full Professors.

Part of the reason that women don't go the full distance in what is often a very long career path, is that attrition rates are greater for women at all stages of their academic careers. Women leave academia overall at higher rates than men at every career age, in large part because of strongly gendered attrition at lower-prestige institutions, in non-STEM fields, among post docs and tenured faculty.⁸

Researchers call this the 'leaky pipeline' effect, whereby women are lost before they can reach the top jobs. Interestingly, research suggests that this is not only a result of the competing pressure of family life but also about the climate the job creates.

To obtain more female leaders sooner, we need to change that climate. One clue as to what goes wrong for women is obtained by a 2024 sociological study in Denmark, which showed unequivocally that men dodged service jobs – administrative roles that were seen as academic housework.⁹ They tended to undertake roles only that served their individual interests and expected then to be rewarded with progression. They opted out of the community’s tasks in the organisation. This finding was replicated in an LSE study of 2024 which concluded: ‘our research shows that men are more successful in pursuing individual interests against service demands’.¹⁰ Male success at evasiveness and barter meant that women were left doing more.

The other factor, of course, is that motherhood continues to be seen as a personal choice rather than a public good. Women continue to assume the bulk of child raising responsibilities. I don’t think anything I have done in my long career has been as tough as trying to balance three young children with a career. I could readily fill this hour with stories of hiding a child under a desk, sending a sick child to school, trying to look professional in spite of baby stains on my blouse, and trying to manage paying more to the university for childcare than I was paid as an assistant professor.

I am suggesting here, that getting women into more leadership positions is not so much about getting shy violets to stick their necks out. It is about changing the soil structures that reward rapid, invasive climbers and fail to support women’s leadership at grass-roots level.

The twenty-first century has seen significant progress on educational opportunity for women: UNESCO data suggests that 50 million more women and girls have been enrolled in education since 2015.¹¹ But that progress is fragile and fragmented.

In Afghanistan, as we all know, since 2021 when the Taliban regained power, girls have been banned from all but primary education and from undertaking work outside the home. They are neither to be seen nor heard. There have also been gender-restrictive developments in Pakistan, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, South Africa and Uganda, which limit what girls and women can learn. Meanwhile, in the United States, federal research proposals that contain the words ‘women’ or ‘gender’ will no longer receive funding, while swingeing layoffs of federal employees have disproportionately affected women. This does not feel like progress, it feels more like the switch on gender equality being thrown to the “off” position.

Public Health

Another significant area where women's leadership is manifest but not yet fully aligned with policy-making power is public health.

Do you remember where you were in the social-distanced Summer of 2020? I certainly do. In Oxford, researchers were in the thick of developing, at breakneck speed, the Oxford-Astro-Zeneca vaccine for Covid-19. Nobody slept much. Among those leading the team who made this enormously successful collaborative effort possible was Professor (now Dame) Sarah Gilbert, Oxford project leader, whose previous experience in developing vaccines against novel pathogens such as MERS, allowed her to race at a pace that nobody thought possible. The vaccine her team developed is estimated to have saved 6.3 million lives in the first year of its global roll-out.

Sarah Gilbert and her colleagues Teresa Lambe and Catherine Green are exceptional woman. But the history of vaccination and of public health more broadly, is a history of many exceptional women. June Almeida, a Glaswegian virologist born in 1930, was the first person to identify a coronavirus under the microscope. Her advances in electron microscopy contributed to the diagnosis of Hepatitis B and HIV, among other viral diseases.

Jonas Salk is generally credited with creating the polio vaccine in the 1950s. But his work would not have been possible without that of virologist Dr Dorothy Horstmann, who, through fieldwork and analysing samples in some of the poorest parts of America, established the blood-brain infection route in polio and was also active in developing the rubella vaccine. Dr Isabel Morgan, Elise Ward, and Bernice Eddy also made vital, hands-on contributions to the development of the polio vaccine, which Salk chose not to acknowledge when he famously announced his breakthrough on television in 1955.¹²

The truth is, without female leadership, we would have no public health. Women make up 70% of the global health workforce and 90% of frontline health workers.¹³

This has long been true, take Florence Nightingale. Today usually remembered as a pioneer of nursing, Nightingale was a formidable statistician who challenged her male colleagues on the preventable causes of death in military hospitals. Working

in the appalling environment of field hospitals in the Crimean War, where vermin, unsanitary medical practices and bureaucratic inefficiency were endemic, Nightingale gathered data that showed clearly that the vast majority of soldiers were dying from acquired infections rather than battlefield wounds. Graphically presenting her findings to the Press in the novel form of what we would now call ‘pie-charts’, she demonstrated the effectiveness of her reforms in hospital practice in reducing preventable deaths and campaigned for institutional change.¹⁴ Nightingale demonstrated the vital importance of taking insights from the front line to the front page, from the cavalry to the pen-pushers.

Other women who have led in public health by bringing research, enriched by gender-specific experience in the field, to revise protocols and develop new methodologies include Virginia Apgar, who developed the Apgar score still used to determine the health of newborn babies and – more recently – Folake Olayinka, whose transformational work in Nigeria increased vaccine take-up by interactive training, local knowledge and language skills, breaking down barriers and establishing trust to enable polio eradication by 2020 in one of its last strongholds.¹⁵ I am sure that you can think of many others.

Yet, a 2023 report from Women in Global Health shows that women are seriously underrepresented in global health leadership, holding just 25 percent of the top jobs. The report looked at how many women held leadership positions at Fortune 500 health care companies, the World Health Assembly, 90 global health organizations, top public health and medical schools, and ministries or departments of health in every country.¹⁶ Women were underrepresented across the board. They also earned 24 percent less on average than their male counterparts. **The [report shows](#) that the default health worker is a woman, but the default health leader is a man.** This situation, which so gravely fails to connect the knowledge and experience of women practitioners with power to direct health policy cannot continue. **We need women not just on the front line in healthcare, but in the top jobs.**

Surely it is no coincidence that countries with female leaders did much better in the pandemic at protecting the lives of their populations. An [analysis of 194 countries](#), published by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum, suggests the dramatic difference “may be explained by the proactive and coordinated policy responses” adopted by female leaders such as Germany’s Angela Merkel, New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern, Denmark’s Mette Frederiksen, Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen and Finland’s Sanna Marin¹⁷. Countries led by women had “systematically and significantly better” Covid-19 outcomes, locking down earlier

and suffering half as many deaths on average as those led by men. Farah Shroff, head of [Maternal and Infant Health \(MIH\) Canada](#), commented “[They] have really been the unsung heroes and ‘she-roes’ of this pandemic; 2021 is the tipping point for female leaders.”¹⁸

Yet, if 2021 was a tipping point, it seems to have been one that moved the world in the direction of more male, more autocratic and more insular leadership.

We talk about ‘the pandemic’ as if it were ‘the Titanic’: a disaster that occurred dramatically, with great loss of life, and will never happen again. But of course, Covid-19 was just one pandemic. Another is inevitable. Meanwhile, microbial resistance threatens to make once-treatable conditions fatal again. Yet, as spending on armed defence rises the World Health Organisation notes that countries are ‘deprioritising’ health spending.¹⁹ From India to England, governments have scaled back funding for their health services and overseas development aid since 2020.

Meanwhile the abrupt shutting down of USAID has had a devastating impact across Africa with modeling by Boston University suggesting that 300,000 people have died as a consequence. Women and children will, as ever, have suffered disproportionately.

More gender-equal leadership would, I suggest, lead to greater investment in life. Clayton and Zetterberg note in a paper of 2018 that a greater number of women in a country’s legislature is, associated with an increase in public health spending.²⁰ Rwanda is noted for [leading the world in women’s leadership](#) – almost 64% of parliamentarians are female – and its public health progress is just as noteworthy. Despite its poverty, Rwanda has a vaccination rate of 90%.²¹

Empowering women tips the needle on preventive care.

The Climate Emergency

The climate and biodiversity emergency is another area in which women’s leadership is everywhere apparent in research, in communication, in public advocacy, but not in decision-making roles.

The scale and implications of the emergency are so vast that, to quote Edmund Burke describing America, ‘fiction lags after truth; invention is unfruitful; and imagination cold and barren’. It is impossible to overstate the gravity of the accelerating poly-crisis we face. From crashing insect and bird populations to shrinking fish stocks, it will negatively impact every aspect of our lives, from food

and water security to heat-related deaths and home insurance rendered unaffordable by increased risk of wildfires, floods, and hurricanes. Sea level rise threatens the continued existence of many of our islands and coastal cities.

In terms of our understanding and protecting the fragile, miraculous, interdependent web of life that calls our planet home, women have always been leaders.

I think, in Britain, of early conservationists like Octavia Hill, one of the founders of the National Trust, a charity that with 5.37 million members has a far greater membership than all UK political parties combined, and owns over 600,000 acres of land and 600 miles of coastline, which it protects in the interests of nature.²²

In America, we remember Rachel Carson – author of the seminal *Silent Spring* – who led the way in voicing concern about the use of agricultural pesticides and resulting loss of bird populations. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai, the extraordinary academic, politician and environmental activist kickstarted efforts to halt deforestation by leading the Green Belt movement which had, by the early 21st century, planted some 30 million trees. Her influence and activism in educating other world leaders inspired similar initiatives in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe.

In the present day, we do not lack leading female researchers or activists. Yet women were not at COP 28. Only 15 out of 133 world leaders and 34% of national delegates were women. Only 2% of delegations had a gender balance. These numbers have remained relatively unchanged over the past decade, highlighting ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in climate negotiations. At COP 29 (2024) only 8 out of 78 world leaders were women. As CARE International notes, ‘Delegations at the United Nations’ Framework Climate Change Conference are consistently increasing in numbers, but women’s representation has stagnated and even decreased. The underrepresentation of women leaders at the top table of COP29 is mirrored across all levels of climate decision making.’²³

Professor Helen Pankurst has observed: ‘Women and girls are contributing the least to the climate crisis, yet world-over they are paying the highest price. If we want to see a fair outcome from climate negotiations, which make a genuine difference, we’ve got to start seeing women represented equally at the very highest levels’.²⁴

As is true with public health, women's representation falls as the scale of power to effect major change increases. At recent G20 summits half the world's population have been represented by just two female leaders.²⁵ The statistics on financial leadership show a stubborn resistance to change. The 2024 Gender Balance Index revealed that just 12% of all the CEOs in the commercial banks it monitors were women, backsliding from 16% in 2023.²⁶ No wonder we predominantly have 'business as usual', when those who control global finance are invested in retaining their majority share in the corporate world.

Progress, yet systemic inequality persists

Nevertheless, globally we have made great strides in the last 60 years on female representation. 80 countries have had at least one female leader. 113 have not yet made the experiment.²⁷ Some gaps are beginning to close. In Latin America, for example, strong legislation in the last decade has resulted in greater parity in income and opportunity for women.²⁸ In 2023, for the first time, women led about 10% of Fortune 500 companies.²⁹

It is notable that women are more likely to become elected leaders in parliamentary systems than in presidential ones.³⁰ In a parliamentary system, women can rise through the ranks. Where women already have seats at the table of power, there is less distance between them and the head of the table. They can see their way there, a few chairs over. There is more emphasis on decision-making by cabinet or committee and less emphasis on a single, all-powerful figurehead. How we construct, model, and support leadership determines who leads us.

We know that, whether in corporate, organisational or government contexts, certain behaviours make leadership more likely for women.

1. The first of these is transparency.
2. The second is more open, less hierarchical career structures.
3. The third is creating more equitable systems of reward that encourage cooperative working rather than competitive individualism.
4. The fourth is removing the 'motherhood penalty' (the financial and social price that women typically pay for every child they have.)³¹
5. The fifth is accountability and regulation.³²

These policy imperatives need to be accompanied by support for women to achieve their goals. (PS. If you are only getting women to do the mentoring, you are just giving senior women extra housework.)

Organisations need to stem the leaks in the pipeline. To support women early: by paying them equitably; providing childcare; creating a climate in which they are valued and can readily accede to power through experience, rather than having to fight to be seen. Employers also need actively to fly the flag for why it matters – not just to their optics but to their success – that women should be given opportunities to lead and the positive rewards that flow from releasing the full potential of more than half the workforce. A McKinsey study, for example, found that companies with at least three female executives outperformed other companies in exiting the financial crash with greater speed and better outcomes.³³

Finally, we need to value the work that women *already do* as a form of and bridge to leadership. Too often we separate care and communication and fieldwork roles from money and management and ‘head office’ roles; we under-represent women in decision-making because we consider their social and professional experience less relevant or desirable to the negotiation at hand.

We often do not recognise that women are *leading already*; just not doing so as visibly or in modes as highly remunerated as those with budgetary oversight. So improvement is not just a matter of bringing women up to the top table, but of extending that table so that it sits fairly and squarely in the place where women’s lives and experiences already are.

I would now like to address the hostile wider environment and why, in certain ways, it is getting worse not better, in a world of invasive social media and digital domination.

The hostile environment: women leaders walk the tightrope

All leaders are placed, to some extent, in a spotlight. They will be judged as people, with personal lives and attributes, as well as professional strengths and weaknesses. Women, however, typically don’t just face a spotlight: they face a tightrope walk. They are intensely visible. It often feels that every wobble produces a thrilled gasp from the crowd.

This is, I think, because people tend to react to women as women first, and leaders second. We react to their bodies, their faces, their physical attributes and behaviour before we attend to their words and deeds. If they are tough or disagreeable to us, we use words to describe them that we wouldn’t use for men: they are battle-axes, witches, bitches, harpies, cows. If they are deemed too assertive, they are bossy, controlling, strident, shrill and ‘nasty’. A former Polish

prime minister, in 2011, weeks before a General Election, opined that unattractive female candidates ‘repel voters’.³⁴ Women, that is, are required to be physically pleasing first, and only then can they be politically persuasive.

Women leaders often acquire derogatory nicknames. Rachel Reeves the first British Chancellor of the Exchequer in 800 years to be female, is dismissively referred to by some media as ‘Rachel, from accounts’. Whether you approve of Reeves’ policies or not, this is belittling: it implies that the highest financial decision-maker in the government is a bureaucratic underling, who (despite economics degrees from Oxford and the LSE) does not have the background or gravitas to preside over the Budget. In a similar manner, in South Africa, [Lindiwe Mazibuko](#), former Opposition leader, was dismissed by one politician who refused to debate her as ‘a nobody, a tea girl’. Women leaders such as Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris have been repeatedly denigrated with sexual slurs – that they advanced their career through granting sexual favours; then simultaneously denigrated with accusations that they are insufficient as wives and mothers.

Women know that currently they put their bodies on the line, on the tightrope, and their personal lives under scrutiny in a different way from men when they step up. They will be always in view. It is very rare for men’s clothes to be a topic of critical debate in politics. It happens exceptionally, often when a man is on the back foot for a reason other than gender. Zelensky’s combat attire. Barack Obama’s tan suit. When men fail to conform to the camouflage code of ‘serious’ politics – a navy suit and monochrome tie – they may be sniped at. But the appearance and clothing of women leaders come under a constant rain of friendly fire. In 2017, the British newspaper, the *Daily Mail* reported a meeting between Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and British Prime Minister Theresa May, by comparing their pencil skirts, with a headline: ‘Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it’.³⁵ From Sarah Palin’s pantsuit to Sanna Marin’s leather jacket, women are associated with their wardrobe more than their Cabinet.

Women are also routinely blamed more harshly for all behaviours that might seem to suggest inconstancy or unreliability. A string of divorces; children by more than one partner; carelessness in the separation of private and public obligations. We can all think of male leaders who have committed these social faux pas and survived – even thrived – in office. Women are very rarely allowed to do so.

When there is a scandal that affects both men and women, it is the women who tend to be remembered. **If a woman fails in a high-ranking post, another woman will not be appointed to succeed her. She has failed not just as a**

leader, but as a woman leader: a trailblazer who fizzled and fell.³⁶ When a man fails in a high-ranking post, he fails only as a leader, not as a man. Another man will easily be appointed in his stead.

When women embark upon the tightrope of high office, they therefore know that not only will they be doing a difficult job. They know that they do it while others will be gazing at their garments, assessing their attractiveness, judging their private – as well as public – actions by a higher moral standard than that applied to men. They know they will be held responsible as exemplars of their sex, whose failure affects other women’s chances of being appointed. It is no wonder that many women step away from leadership opportunities, choosing not to encounter this abuse.

Interestingly, a recent study of sectors where women are in the majority rather than the minority, revealed just as much evidence of bias and negative behaviour around female leadership as one might expect to find in a more male-dominated field. The researchers found that there was no “sweet spot” where a woman could position herself without being criticized. Women were either too young or too old, too attractive or not attractive enough, too educated or not educated enough. Introverted women were not seen as leaders and extroverted women were viewed as aggressive. They ultimately found that women leaders were “never quite right.”³⁷ It turns out, there is no ‘Goldilocks’ age or character type or resumé for female leaders.

It is imperative to tackle the hostile environment that women enter when they assume leadership positions. I support mentoring schemes and affirmative action that encourages women to see themselves as leaders, to gain experience in senior roles, and create positions within organisations that expressly attend to gender equality. Luxembourg, as the only state in Europe with a ministry specifically tasked with gender equality, is a pioneer in this regard.

If we do nothing to shift the balance of power, the business of politics and the politics of business *outside* the mentorship space, we are training women to walk the tightrope without regulating the circus. We need to call out the hostile environment at every opportunity. To fight it and, where necessary, to indict it.

Worrying trends: Tech-tosterone and digital domination

There are, moreover, worrying trends that we should attend to that suggest the digital sphere is partly responsible for the blowback that is turning the tide on female progress. For decades, support for women's leadership and workplace rights grew steadily. Today, 82% of British adults agree that women are just as capable as men in leadership roles. Yet, beneath this consensus lies a sharp decline in support among young men.

In Britain, the proportion of men aged 15-24 who believe women are equally capable leaders has fallen from 82% in 2019 to just 51% today. In Germany, the number of young men agreeing that "a woman's place is in the home" has surged from 5% in 2021 to 22% today. In Brazil, the proportion of men who 'completely agree' with this outdated view has jumped by 50% in just three years.³⁸ Researchers see a correlation between possession of these views and intense internet usage.

The Internet is, at various levels, a riot of what one of my colleagues has called 'Tech-tosterone'. If you ask Twitter (aka X) for a GIF of 'a professor', it will give you fifty pictures of men and five women.³⁹ It is notoriously also a positive orgy (or rather a negative orgy) of pornographic content. By some accounts, some 30% of all Internet content is porn and 88% of porn contains violence against women.⁴⁰ (90% of boys and 60% of girls are exposed to Internet porn by the time they are 18.⁴¹) Men assert control over women through their screens in multiple ways: from upskirting, to vicious trolling of women on social media, to non-consensual use of women's voices in advertisements. In 12 countries in Europe and Central Asia, at least 53% of women have experienced one or more forms of gender-based violence online.⁴²

Keeping women offline isn't a solution, either. Tech exacerbates a wider framework of male domination and female exclusion. In the world's least developed countries, the [gender digital divide in internet access is the largest at 33%](#), and in low and middle-income countries [1.7 billion women do not own mobile phones](#).⁴³ This gap in access is a serious hurdle for women to face where [90% of jobs](#) around the world require a digital component. Without the means to participate in today's digital society, women and girls are unable to gain the skills required for digital work and leadership.

Resistance to regulation and accountability amongst male leaders in Big Tech has negative real-world consequences. Mark Zuckerberg of Meta recently rolled back automatic content monitoring on his platform.⁴⁴ The digital realm is a new Wild West. Like the original Wild West, it isn't a safe place for women. The popularity

of openly misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate means that young women are exposed to catcalling from a dark digital alley, long before the age when they would usually be allowed out alone on the street. Part of the New Misogyny, perhaps rooted in the general disempowerment that many under-30s feel – with despair over their ability to buy a house and make a good living – is a desire, in some young men, to return to a mythical past when men were kings and women were handmaids.

Young men who spend most of their time online can be alienated from the inclusive values of the school, the home or workplace – enjoying the power that the screen gives them to see women treated badly, and even to enjoy such domination anonymously at arm's length, without having to encounter the grief, the harm and loss of dignity such behaviour entails in the real world.

We can't pretend this isn't happening. We need to find a way to make Big Tech face and bear the moral, social and fiscal consequences of its actions, rather than disclaim or disown them. We need to connect women better to digital empowerment. We need to enable young men face and bear the reality of the harm that is done to women, and to society, by stripping women of their dignity, their full and equal rights to personhood, including their capacity for leadership.

The Eurydice moment: danger and opportunity

Sadly, since the pandemic, as the UN has noted, one in four countries is facing a withdrawing tide whereby women's democratic rights are being eroded or swept away. The journal *International Development Studies* in 2024 published an issue documenting aspects of 'gender backlash' in countries including Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Uganda.⁴⁵ The authors remark that the phenomenon is complex and has specific local parameters, which may include the re-assertion of more conservative religious views, and the nativist argument that gender equality is a 'foreign' doctrine that has been imposed on traditional culture. Sometimes misogynistic ideology is sponsored financially by powerful neo-conservative lobbies.

In 2021, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention, a landmark treaty against violence against women and domestic violence, signifying a significant step back in its commitment to gender equality. This move, alongside failure to implement gender quotas and address sexual orientation-related discrimination, highlights a broader trend of backsliding on progressive policies and individual freedoms.⁴⁶

The wider context for this rollback is one of increasingly fragile democracy and violence in many parts of the world, with signs that tribalism and authoritarianism are on the rise. In 2021, Freedom House reported that the number of countries designated as democracies had declined for the past 17 consecutive years.

⁴⁷(Freedom House itself has recently had its funding slashed by Executive Order.) Data presented by the UN Women report found that conflict-related sexual violence has spiked 50% in the past 10 years.⁴⁸ In 2023, 612 million women lived within 50 kilometers of armed conflict, a 54% increase since 2010.

In America, dispiritingly, we have seen rollback on gender commitments in a number of key areas. Reproductive rights have been constrained. Many high-profile women have been sacked. The election and appointment of men to high offices who have records of sexual abuse and harassment, sets a different tone and signals that this – rather than a behaviour that ought to exclude one from positions of public trust – is a trivial matter, that can be disregarded, and is perhaps even to be expected in powerful men. We have also seen the platforming of a train of female representatives who, with their elaborate make-up, skirts and heels, look less like political heirs apparent and more like old-fashioned air hostesses. This is a playbook familiar from other countries. Jair Bolsonaro, the Brazilian President, has become famous for inflammatory, openly misogynistic rhetoric. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi's administration was well-known for its parade of former models, showgirls, and even porn stars. The messaging is clear: women are less valuable for their political expertise than for their youth and plasticity.

We can all think of other examples of countries close to our homes that have been rolling back equality legislation, undermining the bold United Nations platform on women's advancement they signed up to in Beijing in 1995.

Conclusion

We face a Eurydice moment. Women, for most of my lifetime and yours, have been surfacing, their talents no longer buried and wasted, their voices no longer suppressed: taking an increasing role in leadership, in government, in business, in universities and every facet of public life. There has been a slow but steady march toward equality. Now, however, there is a risk that those who supported female emancipation will turn back on us. That women will have glimpsed the light of day on equal pay, on maternity rights, on representation in decision-making – the world of full human possibility - only to sink agonisingly back into the shadows.

At this critical time, there is no room for complacency, or warm words without meaningful action. We cannot say that gender equality is too expensive; too burdensome in the face of other pressing fiscal demands. **We urgently need not to de-fund it, but to defend it.**

The good news is that what is good for women's leadership is good for everyone. Women's rights are human rights and the realisation of women's full potential is the realisation of full human potential. (I often try to imagine what poems might have been written symphonies composed, diseases cured, scientific discoveries made if women had access to the same education as men over the centuries.) When we reaffirm our commitment to models of leadership that acknowledge women's equal role in decision-making, we invest in a safer world.

Crisis is the enemy of human progress. Too often, women get trapped under the wheels of the juggernaut of armed conflict, of climate crisis, of famine, disease, population displacement and other humanitarian emergencies. When, globally, we abandon cooperative international models of trade, diplomacy, and norms of human rights, women are the first to suffer. But ultimately *everyone* suffers. When we invest in a future where women are empowered to lead, we look forward. We refuse a narrative of false nostalgia. We take responsibility for the root causes of the global crises we face – many of which lie in social inequalities, overconsumption by a minority, and violent attempts to gain access to ever scarcer resources. In other words, when we stop making gender part of the problem and recognise full gender equality as part of the solution we move closer to addressing those crises for the benefit of all.

Ultimately, we are in a moment of jeopardy. But such moments are also critical moments of *kairos*, of 'right and proper time for action', where change becomes possible.

In a rapidly warming world, with threat levels rising, change is required of us, and fast. Rather than reacting by deprioritising women's advancement to a position of equality in leadership, we need to speed it up. Either, like Orpheus, we allow the world to slip, turn back, and lose everything and condemn ourselves to a hell we could have avoided. Or we keep our eyes on the horizon, and keep walking the walk, knowing that in freeing women to fulfil their true potential, we are moving toward a more sustainable, fair and fruitful future in which we all can thrive.

Thank you for listening.

-
- ¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-report-finds-women-s-rights-weakened-in-quarter-of-all-countries/8000755.html>
- ² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2024/01/14/from-kindergarten-to-college-girls-are-outperforming-boys/>
- ³ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/03/07/mind-the-gap-gender-differences-in-higher-education/>
- ⁴ <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/graduates-gender-pay-gap/>
- ⁵ <https://nwlc.org/resource/the-lifetime-wage-gap-state-by-state/>
- ⁶ <https://borgenproject.org/global-leaders-driving-poverty-reduction/>
- ⁷ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/699658/IPOL_BRI\(2021\)699658_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/699658/IPOL_BRI(2021)699658_EN.pdf)
- ⁸ <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adi2205>
- ⁹ <https://kifinfo.no/en/2024/03/women-end-doing-academic-housework>
- ¹⁰ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2024/03/08/compliance-evasiveness-barter-and-investment-why-women-do-more-academic-service-work/>
- ¹¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/progress-girls-access-education-what-new-unesco-data-reveals>
- ¹² <https://www.ladyscience.com/features/the-netowrks-of-women-behind-the-polio-vaccine>
- ¹³ <https://pmnch.who.int/news-and-events/news/item/16-03-2023-global-health-women-largely-deliver-while-men-largely-lead>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.york.ac.uk/depts/math/histstat/small.htm>
- ¹⁵ <https://polioeradication.org/news/women-leaders-in-polio-eradication-dr-folake-olayinka/>
- ¹⁶ <https://womeningh.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EXECUTIVE-SUMMARY-Leadership-Report-Press-Preview-1.pdf>
- ¹⁷ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10649683/>
- ¹⁸ <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/women-led-countries-performed-better-in-pandemic-response/>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-12-2024-new-who-report-reveals-governments-deprioritizing-health-spending>
- ²⁰ Amanda Clayton and Pär Zetterberg
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325080536_Quota_Shocks_Electoral_Gender_Quotas_and_Government_Spending_Priorities_Worldwide
- ²¹ https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b30_report_rwanda_en.pdf
https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/UN/polpart_impactwomenlegislators_unicef_dec2006.pdf
- <https://www.parliament.gov.rw/women-representation>
- ²² <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/the-history-of-the-national-trust>
- ²³ <https://www.careinternational.org.uk/press-office/press-releases/cop29-only-8-out-of-78-world-leaders-attending-are-women/>
- ²⁴ <https://www.euronews.com/green/2025/03/07/climate-change-is-sexist-we-need-more-women-leading-the-crisis-response-experts-say>
- ²⁵ On general backsliding in 2024, a big global election year, see here:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy895l25gwxo>
- Nearly half the world's population - 3.6 billion people - had major elections in 2024, but it was also a year that saw the slowest rate of growth in female representation for 20 years.**
- Twenty-seven new parliaments now have fewer women than they did before the elections - countries such as the US, Portugal, Pakistan, India, Indonesia and South Africa. And, for the first time in its history, fewer women were also elected to the European Parliament.
- ²⁶ <https://www.omfif.org/gbi2024/>
- ²⁷ As discussed, these figures vary slightly depending on how you construe 'country' and 'leader'.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2024/06/in-the-biggest-electoral-year-in-history-113-countries-have-never-had-a-woman-head-of-state-new-un-women-data-shows>
<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/22/world/women-global-leaders-countries-dg#:~:text=A%20lot%20of%20them%20came,first%20female%20president%20of%20Mexico.>
- ²⁸ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf
- ²⁹ <https://fortune.com/2024/06/04/fortune-500-companies-women-ceos-2024/>
- ³⁰ Proportional representation also helps more women get elected. See here:

<https://electoral-reform.org.uk/proportional-representation-helped-women-get-elected-in-2022/>

³¹ I'd note that some people describe a 'caring penalty' because women also disproportionately lose work time to caring for elderly relatives, persons in the family with disability etc:

https://wecareyoucare.info/system/files/uploads/documents/2023-08/the_caring_penalty_0.pdf

³² As with so many things, the type and level of accountability matters. If a company just has to report its gender data, it may not improve. If it can be sued on the basis of audited figures – as is true in Iceland – for paying women and men differently for the same work and the onus is on the company to prove that it does pay its staff equally (rather than on women to complain) then evidence suggests that behavioural shifts are rapid. There need to be laws with teeth.

³³ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>

³⁴ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/8778967/Ugly-female-candidates-repel-voters-says-former-Polish-prime-minister.html>

³⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-39416554>

³⁶ There is some evidence that women are also more often appointed into a crisis situation where failure is likely because the organization is in trouble – the so-called 'glass cliff':

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/nov/05/over-the-glass-cliff-female-chief-executives-have-shorter-tenure-than-men-due-to-crisis-management-roles>

³⁷ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/hrdq.21555>

³⁸ <https://www.kantarmedia.com/news-and-resources/how-the-shifting-attitudes-of-young-men-risks-stalling-progress-on-female-leadership-and-how-these-minds-can-be-changed>

³⁹ I've done this experiment myself, repeatedly, and can testify to the consistency with which Twitter (X) provides male images for 'professor' if you ask for a GIF: at least 10:1 on all occasions.

⁴⁰ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/all-about-sex/201611/dueling-statistics-how-much-the-internet-is-porn>

⁴¹ <https://www.uwhealth.org/news/problems-with-pornography>

⁴² <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-report-finds-women-s-rights-weakened-in-quarter-of-all-countries/8000755.html>

⁴³ <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Connected-Women-Gender-Gap.pdf>

⁴⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/meta-new-policy-changes/>

⁴⁵ https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/journal_contribution/Understanding_Gender_Backlash_Southern_Perspectives/26433751

⁴⁶ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/politics-and-gender/article/democratic-backsliding-and-the-instrumentalization-of-womens-rights-in-turkey/7A2015147AD1F524D052FA23AAD2A2A9>

⁴⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

⁴⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security>