

REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

6

Frontline warriors: What the COVID-19 Pandemic teaches us about feminist leadership

May 2020

*Eunice Musiime**

A publication of the Uganda Transitional Scenarios Thought Leadership Group

The global response to the COVID -19 pandemic has noticeably won women leaders' critical acclaim for their decisive and progressive strategies to flatten the curve, as the world awakened to the gravity of the crisis. The emerging narrative from several analysts is that women-led countries like Germany, Iceland, Taiwan, New Zealand, Finland, Denmark, and women in leadership across Africa, have shown the world [how to lead](#) in a difficult time. Possibly this pandemic is the opportunity to show the world alternative ways of exercising power when it matters the most. In this think piece, I explore whether arguably the success so far registered by women leaders has the potential to expand the frontiers of feminist leadership and to spark further thoughts on the potential of feminist leadership advancing a more transformative agenda.

How have women leaders led so far?

[Wittenburg -Cox](#) in her opinion piece in Forbes magazine noted that among the first and fastest responses was from Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan. In January, at the first sign of the illness, she introduced 124 measures to contain the spread. She then went on to send 10 million masks to the U.S.A and Europe. Tsai managed what CNN has called "among the world's best" responses, keeping the pandemic under control.

Cox further shines a spotlight on Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, who stood up early and calmly and told her country that this was a serious bug that would infect up to 70% of the population. "It is serious," she said, "take it serious." She did, so they did too. Testing began right from the get-go. Germany jumped right over the phases of

*Eunice Musiime is a lawyer, feminist, and development specialist with considerable experience in advancing social justice at national, regional and international level. She is the Executive Director, Akina Mama wa Afrika.

denial, anger, and disingenuousness we've seen elsewhere. Every death, Merkel said, is "a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner. "It's people," she said. "And we are a community in which every life and every person counts." The outcome is that the country's numbers have been far below its [European neighbours](#).

Likewise, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand has been lauded for her early response to lock down the country and the absolute clarity on the maximum level of alert she was putting the country under-and why. She imposed self-isolation on people entering New Zealand early, when there were just 6 cases in the whole country, and banned foreigners from entering soon after.

In Africa, while the 54 member states are led by male Presidents, 13 Ministers of Health are female. These female health ministers have equally been recognized for their pivotal role in fighting the pandemic. Beyond their competence, sections of society have approved of how they have stood tall in the delivery of their duties at the helm of this pandemic. Health Ministers go beyond providing counsel to the presidents. They have also played a critical role in managing the global crisis, as they provide all kinds of support to doctors, nurses, and other health workers in their countries while collaborating with their counterparts to make sure patients receive treatment and citizens are well informed about the situation in their countries. African countries with [female health ministers](#) include Angola, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda.

In Uganda, Health Minister Jane Ruth Aceng, state minister in charge of healthcare Joyce Moriku, health state minister (general duties) Robinah Nabbanja and health ministry permanent secretary Diana Atwine, have been lauded by sections of the public for the solid leadership they have offered the country during this difficult COVID -19 period. Minister Aceng has attributed her success to a well collaborated effort involving colleague ministers from other dockets and strategic leadership from the president as well as support of different stakeholders and the Ugandan citizenry.

What has made women's leadership stand out in the current crisis?

Empathy and Care

Of the women leaders that have registered success in flattening the curve with few fatalities, empathy and care has also been at the center of their response strategy. In contrast, we have seen a couple of hyper masculine leaders responding rather aggressively. Generally, the empathy and care which some of these women leaders have demonstrated is what feminist leaders have for long advanced as a key tenet of feminist leadership. [Jessica Horn](#) notes that African feminist collectives have developed forms of care praxis, often in response to crisis. She references one of the most compelling models

of radical care in African communities that emerged at the height of HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa, with women's support groups coming together to respond to practical and existential needs around staying alive.

For instance, in Uganda, at the beginning of the crisis, [Janapher Nassali](#), a young woman who rose from the position of a flower picker to General Secretary of Uganda's Horticultural, Industrial, Service Providers and Allied Workers Union (UHISPAWU) - the trade union representing workers in the horticulture sector - traversed all 14 flower farms in the country to ensure that thousands of workers retain their jobs. Under her leadership, the Union is reported to have been able negotiate collective agreements benefiting thousands of workers and while helping to save numerous jobs during the Corona crisis..

Application of an Intersectional lens to response strategies

In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege. The concept emerged from [Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's work](#), and has been adopted and mainstreamed as a paradigm by feminist theorists.

It is widely recognized that women tend to pay greater attention to the multiple and intersecting dimensions even during a crisis. While there are certainly exceptions to this rule, the rule still stands: when a health crisis comes up, women appear to be more likely to think strategically about who they need to help through the crisis. They see the value of including the needs of everyone when making decisions for their countries, which is very much about who is vulnerable. Those with multiple vulnerabilities are being hit harder.

For example, beyond elected leaders, and cognizant of the scarcity of women voices in decision-making spaces, women leaders have created alternative spaces to bring to the fore the dearth of a gendered response in the current COVID -19 response. On 21st April 2020, Phumzile Mlambo, Executive Director of UN Women, and Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff, convened and chaired the Women Leaders Virtual Roundtable on COVID -19 and the Future to address the disproportionately [negative impact the COVID -19 pandemic has on women and girls](#). The discussion confirmed that women's leadership is more needed now than ever to go through this crisis.

During the meeting, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said: "One of the most devastating aspects of this pandemic is the way that violence against women, including domestic violence, has raised so sharply in so many countries. All governments should declare services to prevent and respond to violence against women as essential. They should not only get the attention and funding they need now, but those resources should continue after the pandemic. In addition, socio-economic stimulus packages should include special provisions targeting women."



Casting alternative visions for the future

As this pandemic has exposed all the long-neglected cracks in our society and systems, it also affords us an opportunity to transform them in the world beyond this crisis. The COVID -19 crisis has simply brought to the fore the fact that the current systems have failed and alternative visions for an inclusive future are urgently needed. Rethinking current systems, norms, practices requires investment in feminist approaches that address the root causes. The world for far too long has failed to focus enough on dismantling the systems and structures that contribute to marginalisation and oppression in the first place.

So what does empathy, intersectionality and feminist envisioning spell for feminist leadership?

[Poltera and Schreiner](#) posit that women's leadership so understood is distinct from "feminist transformational leadership" that has a particular philosophical and political agenda, and can be understood as a normative account of leadership - that achieves positive social change, advances women's rights and gender justice, and aims to redress power relationships. Arguably leadership practice is shaped by the contexts in which specific women or groups of women enact leadership. For example, women who practice leadership in developed, western countries and contexts are likely to face different opportunities and barriers compared to women in developing countries in Africa. African women in rural communities are likely to face different leadership opportunities and barriers than, for example, Indian or European women executives in business centres.

Scholars argue that democracies in general are more woman-friendly than authoritarian regimes while others demonstrate no significant impact of the level of democracy. It follows therefore those assertive and strong women leaders in restrictive environments must navigate the murky corridors of power often and are likely to pay the price. In [Dr. Mira Matembe's book](#) released in 2019, *the Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Betrayed*, she recounts how she fell out with President Museveni as his regime became more authoritarian.

Indeed, the pandemic experience is not short of examples of women leaders who have not exuded feminist leadership. Instead they have been at the fore front of entrenching oppression especially of marginalised populations and exploiting the crisis to advance their own selfish interests. For example, in the few weeks of Uganda's lock down, statistics trickling in depict the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women and girls. Yet it was expected and it chimes in with past crises that debilitate the marginalised. This clearly demonstrates that not every women leader is a feminist and would apply an intersectional lens to the issues at hand.



What do these examples of leadership portend for a Post- COVID-19 feminist leadership scenario?

The emerging stories of stellar women's leadership at such a time of an existential crisis, spotlights to the world what an alternative future could look like in terms of leadership. The trove of lessons emerging from this pandemic is the danger of undervaluing women's leadership. Women leaders in all their diversities need to have a seat at the decision-making tables at all levels. Women are the vanguard of community resilience and have shown that they are the lynchpin in this fight and more.

Further, it emerges that we need more investment in feminist alternative visions for several areas, governance, economy, public health, etc. This crisis has brought to the fore how oppressive systems like patriarchy, capitalism, extractivism have failed us on all fronts. Capitalism for example does not protect the planet, or our health. We need to invest in generating alternative forward-thinking options- too little money goes to support building inclusive feminist theoretical frameworks. There is urgent need to support feminist theorists in all sectors including those developing alternative visions for the future.

In sum, the experiences of women's leadership and how this translates into a progressive feminist transformative agenda requires more rigorous intellectual work to analyse how systems, structures and social relations of patrimonial states, patriarchy, capitalisms, ethnicity and cultural oppression influence the leadership practice of women.

About the Uganda Transition Scenarios Thought Leadership Group - UTSTLG

We are a network of independent multi-disciplinary professionals committed to critical inquiry on contemporary and emerging governance and public policy issues in Uganda. UTSTLG is driven by a desire to be intellectually thought provoking and asking questions behind the answers. UTSTLG is hosted by the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (www.glissafrika.org). The views expressed in UTSTLG publications and think pieces do not represent the views of GLISS or the collective thinking of individual members but are the views of the authors.

For more information, please contact: Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies, P.O Box 398, Kampala. Tel. +256 414 660439