

"Women in Power - A Theoretical Framework"

by Mary Hartman

University Professor and Director, Institute for Women's Leadership, Rutgers  
University/USA

ABSTRACT

I will be speaking out of my own background as a historian of western society, and of the implications for women's leadership that I will argue emerge from the case I make in my book "The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive Interpretation of the Western Past" (Cambridge University Press, 2004). I will contend that what we are confronting is obviously troublesome, and often worse than troublesome, but that it remains a *stall* rather than a *reversal* in the movement toward more women in leadership, and that regardless of the opposition, there will be no turning back in this trend, which amounts to a truly major historical change with globally transformative potential. I will talk about the whole range of resistance behaviors and strategies we are seeing of late to women's advancement in leadership, and I will contend that women's networks across national boundaries will be a major part of the breakthrough to women's expanded leadership everywhere.

When people in my country are asked to comment about women in leadership, the questions too often take this form: when do you think a woman will become president of the united states, and how will the country change if that happens? This narrow focus on the presidency may sound like useful shorthand to gauge women's progress in leadership more generally, but for the U.S., or any country, these are the wrong questions to ask if we aim to understand and advance women, their power, and their leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

True, we now have more women becoming heads of state. between 1985 and 2000, for example, 37 women served at some time as presidents or prime ministers in 34 countries. Yet there is no evidence that these still rare examples are signaling an impending flood of new women heads of state, or even that they tell us much about women's wider leadership options in these places. It is true that in some countries with women heads, Iceland and Norway, for example, the national indicators for work, education, income, political empowerment, and general well-being are very positive. On the other hand, we know that women have also risen to become heads of state in countries such as Pakistan and Rwanda, where most women still confront profoundly unequal circumstances compared to men there.

The fact that women are serving as heads of state is nonetheless noteworthy on several counts: first, they are doing so more often and in more places than at any period in history. second, regardless of regime, they set out role models where women have never been before. and third, in a basic sense, women heads of state prove that contrary to lingering fears that are still out there, a country does not slide off the face of the planet when a woman comes to power! Still, there are better ways than counting women heads of state to set about constructing a theoretical framework for understanding women in leadership, and for reckoning the prospects of women in power – locally, nationally or globally.

A better approach to what our session title calls "the way forward" in women's leadership is first to get a clearer sense of what we are up against at this historical moment. When Harvard professor

Rosabeth Moss Kanter was asked what would be different if women ran the world, she said: “the world would already have changed if it were possible for women to run it.” She is right, but it is also true that although women do not yet run the world – and most would likely settle for equally shared power with men --- change of the sort to which Kanter refers is already well underway.

A big part of that change, after all, is mounting success in all those equity initiatives outlined just now by my colleagues on this panel -- success, in other words, in efforts, many of them led by women, to empower ever more women – whether through expanding their economic opportunity, enhancing their political involvement, improving their educational attainment, or advancing their health and well-being. These efforts in and of themselves do not offer any grand leadership blueprint for the future. (I’ll get to that in a moment.) But they are already helping to level the leadership playing field for women. After all, each such effort, whether addressing equal pay, or the right to vote, or protection from violence, or reproductive rights, is focusing on one feature of a larger female condition -- whether we are looking at the global south or north, or at developed or undeveloped regions of the world.

The condition to which I refer is the one that U.S. Congresswoman, Eleanor Holmes Norton described in an interview she gave to our institute: “Issues around women’s status,” Norton said, “are part and parcel of every society in the world, . . . which is to say that we have everywhere built in the notion that there are the first people, and there are the second people; and women are the second people. We are the second people [in the U.S.], and we are the second people in Afghanistan. We are the second people throughout the world.”

One effect of some success in efforts on the ground to close all those gaps between women’s and men’s conditions and choices, or to hold countries accountable for their formal commitments to close those gaps, is that we may be allowing ourselves to imagine that if we can manage to equalize women’s and men’s opportunities, including opening those doors to leadership, that will take care of things. But it does not seem to be working that way, does it? Even now, when barriers to women’s leadership have been lowered, women are not clamoring for high political office, nor are they storming the corporate board rooms. In fact, there seems to be something of a stall. Progress is real; but it has been painful; and it has been slow.

In U.S. politics, for example, 85 years after gaining the vote in 1920, women now constitute only 14 percent of members of Congress (the U.S., by the way, ranks 59<sup>th</sup> among nations in the percentage of women in elected office). For the first time, too, we are seeing a leveling off and even a downturn in elected women officials, with fewer women running for state legislative offices in 2000 than in 1992. On top of this, despite forty years of equal opportunity legislation, the United States workforce everywhere remains segregated and stratified by gender, with women over-represented at the bottom and under-represented at the top, even controlling for education.

Evidence of this sort raises questions about the frameworks that we are currently using to gauge women’s progress in leadership. Some, of course, simply argue that this shows what they have known all along: women are not leadership material, they may even be biologically unsuited for top leadership. For those of us who would deny that, however, such evidence still suggests that we need to look again at explanations for why women are everywhere still held to be the “second people.” In addition, any new

leadership framework must be clearer about what we mean when we talk about women in leadership, and when we label some women leaders and not others.

Third, a new framework to interpret women in leadership needs to take a fresh look at how historians and policymakers have understood, or misunderstood, the west in relation to the rest of the world. Fourth and last, we need to ask: “What will the world be like if women cease, once and for all, to be the “second people?” What will or should women’s leadership and women’s power look like then? Will these terms continue to mean something in a world in which differences between the sexes are no longer framed within a hierarchy in which women are always on the bottom and men on top? or is there finally no escape from that hierarchy?

Ok, let’s start with explanations for why, despite major change, women everywhere in the world remain the “second people.” For long scholars argued that this situation is inevitable, owing to sexual differences that everywhere reproduce male dominance, be it physical or intellectual. Others (with whom I agree) say no, anatomy is not destiny, women may be everywhere the “second people,” but that is owing to interacting environmental, biological, and perceptual factors that have changed over time, and are still changing.

Anthropologists in fact tell us that our ancestors, as hunters and gatherers, were less interested in gender hierarchy and male dominance, than in gender difference – that they even celebrated that difference with heroic depictions of males in the hunt, as well as females as goddesses of fertility. This benign arrangement owed much, they say, to daily activities that enabled males and females alike to experience ease and symmetry in arriving at a sense of their social identities. Men’s bodies were readily perceived to equip them for the hunt, women’s for bearing and raising children.

This easy symmetry in achieving social identity changed with the arrival of fixed agriculture about 10,000 years ago. While both sexes continued to be able to view women’s bodies as creating their identities, a major change in how human livelihood was made meant that men now had a much harder time seeing their daily activities as an extension of their bodily features. they were obliged instead to find identities outside their bodies in the land they farmed, the offices they held, the work they did, and the money they made. a new asymmetry thus emerged, in which men had to put more effort into creating their identities than women. The upshot was new anxiety among men over manhood, which in turn fed a new habit of viewing women as the “second, and subordinate, people.”

Not until the modern era is this asymmetry finally being interrupted, with vast implications for women’s lives, including their leadership. Women are ceasing to view themselves, and be viewed by others, as creatures whose bodies dictate their social identities. Owing to increased ability to control their fertility, women, like men long before them, are coming to recognize that their bodies no longer contain their destinies. For this inquiry, this means that access to public leadership, as to education and employment, is ceasing to be constrained on the ground of women’s presumed destiny as mothers.

Now then, if it is true that a gender hierarchy favoring males is not inevitable, then we can imagine that women will ultimately escape from constraints that have long made them the “second people.” The prospects for women in leadership thus would appear bright. Also, given evidence that the processes we are looking at stretched out over many thousands of years, we might even be tempted to say that what we are witnessing just lately, in women’s failure to crowd into leadership positions now open to them, is

simply a matter of lag. Former U.S. Congresswoman Pat Schroeder expressed such a view recently in identifying remaining roadblocks to women's leadership progress. "Women have mixed emotions about their own roles," she said. "We're still conflicted about whether to be a doctor or to marry a doctor." she added that the media tends to portray "opting out" from top leadership-track positions as a trend among all women, not just the privileged, and also that the U.S. displays a lack of family-friendly policies in the workplace.

I don't disagree with these observations, but I think that what we confront in the current stall in women's leadership involves more than a time lag. While I would not deny that barriers still stand in women's way, I would not dispute the more controversial view that a number of capable and prepared women are also choosing not to lead. I even think that they have some good reasons for doing so. But to clarify what I mean by this, I need to address the second issue i mentioned earlier in calling for a new theoretical framework around women in leadership: which is the need for more definitional clarity.

When we say fewer women than we might expect are stepping up to leadership positions, we need to be aware that the positions being talked about are a particular subset: namely, the most visible, institutional or positional leadership roles. Many of us tend only to recognize as leaders those people who occupy these few positions, which is why we too often imagine that women have only recently emerged as leaders at all. We forget that throughout human history, women, like men have always led, even though for long they did that leading from the institutional base of their immediate households and extended kinship networks, rather than from the many religious, political, economic and cultural institutions that, over time, came to be erected outside those household networks.

As societies in the modern era shifted more of their critical functions to places beyond households and communities, in other words to new "public" places that men occupied sooner than women owing to women's continuing domestic responsibilities, leadership itself came to be associated ever more tightly with whatever men did in such places -- whether praying, making money, waging international warfare, or passing trade legislation. Only in recent years, as we know, have growing numbers of women left their households daily for paid work in these public places. In the process, the leadership women used to exercise almost exclusively within their households and communities has begun to be felt in union halls, legislative assemblies, faculty meetings, and corporate boardrooms.

So the point to add to our new framework for women's leadership here is that not only is women's status as the "second people" not inevitable, and everywhere being challenged, but that vital leadership is still being carried on by women in households and neighborhoods, as well as in increasing numbers of important, if less visible, public places. Indeed, more than ever, ordinary women are taking the lead in countless organized efforts, linking across regions and nations. a corollary here is that the observed stall in women's progress to leadership, along with the much discussed "opting out," are real but limited phenomena. What is slowing down is not women's participation in the wider economy and society, nor is it women's entrance into leadership positions overall. It is instead the rate of their entrance into some top leadership positions.

To help explain why this is so, I turn now to the third item that belongs in a new theoretical framework on women in leadership. It is in some ways the most critical as it affects many decisions about women being made now, worldwide. I refer to the need to review our understanding, or

misunderstanding, about the role of western societies in relation to the rest of the world. This huge subject goes far beyond women's participation in leadership, but the fact is, in that as all else, mistaken views about western developments have been incorporated into declared models for all global regions, with unhappy effects – not just outside western societies but inside them.

The reigning official view of the role of the west goes like this. Western societies consciously pioneered modernity in the late eighteenth century through two vehicles: democratic political revolution and industrial-capitalist economic development. Women were outsiders to both developments, only becoming genuine players later on as they fought for rights such as suffrage in new democratic nation-states, and as they joined paid work forces in new industrial economies. These still-standard accounts of the advent of modernity ignore data available since the 1960s that show that prior to conscious notions of gender equality or women's leadership being born, a peculiar nuclear household structure inherited from the middle ages in western Europe quite unintentionally produced such equalizing, activist behaviors, well before they were given names.

Though we don't know why this household structure featuring late marriage emerged, we do know brides were in their mid or even late twenties, rather than being adolescents up to ten years younger than grooms, as in most agricultural societies outside western Europe. Rather than having arranged marriages, and moving into the existing household of the groom's parents, both sexes left home as teenagers to work as household servants. They met and courted future spouses on their own, and set up brand new nuclear households, pooling resources when they married. an unplanned byproduct was enhancing the wife's authority as one of two adults running a household, a different scene than being imported as a young teenager into her husband's family's household and working for her mother-in-law. I have argued elsewhere in a book called "The Household and the Making of History: A Subversive View of the Western Past," that it was this late marriage pattern itself that set in motion the two huge movements of modernity, the democratic and industrial revolutions.

Yet even if I am wrong in making that admittedly controversial claim, it remains true that basic marriage and household structures in western Europe were dramatically different from those in much of the rest of the world. This alone ought to have raised doubts about holding up the Western experience as a readily exportable model. After all, in the west, modernity appeared in a region of weak and unstable nuclear family households, where women were already used to working outside the home, where women had fewer children to care for owing to later marriage, and where women were usually not responsible for elder care for their inlaws. Elsewhere, peasant households were not only far stronger institutions with many more functions, but gender roles were more distinct. (With only two adults, there was far more boundary crossing in the aberrant, weak western households.) Still, since interpreters don't see households as critical historical sites, such differences have been ignored.

The effect has been that even well-meaning attempts to introduce positive change with western models have brought dubious results. To take one example, mild enough, the Republic of China on Taiwan was transformed along western lines in less than 50 years from a poor agricultural society to a rich industrialized one. With state-run family planning, the birth rate declined from 6 births per woman in the 1950s to just 1.77 in 1995. Women employed outside the home increased to 46% in 1997; women undergraduates jumped from 11% in 1950 to 48% in 1997. Women's age at marriage rose to the mid-

20s; urbanization reduced the number of extended families; and growth in nuclear households increased women's domestic autonomy. At the same time, serious negative effects were disproportionately borne by women. The family planning program triggered a sharp increase in female neglect and infanticide in a society where sons remain more desired than daughters, both as heirs of property and supporters of elderly parents. Since even now most Taiwanese elderly live with their married sons, wives' double burden as paid workers and unpaid care givers mean that the vast majority of married women, anyway, can't seriously contemplate more active public roles in leadership, even though these are now technically available.

It is worth noting, too, that in western societies, men had had lots more time than men in early marriage societies outside the west to adjust to women's more public lives beyond households. This helps to explain those men's often hostile reactions to change that expands women's public roles, including their appeals to fundamentalism and calls for repression of women. We tend to overlook, by the way, that western societies also had a painful adjustment of their own to more equal roles for women, one that featured 300 years worth of witch hunts from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

While copying western models outside the west has often produced unintended, negative results, or failed to produce intended positive ones, such as freeing women for expanded leadership roles, another more subtle effect occurred first in the western context itself, and helps to explain the stalling noted earlier in women's movement into top leadership positions. That is that the distinctive evolution of household change in the west actually made women's lives look ever more like men's, so that when notions of equality between the sexes finally crystalized in the modern era, they were "gendered male."

Why? Well first, women postponed marriage in the west -- like men; women worked outside the home before and after marriage -- like men; postponing marriage meant fewer children and less childcare -- less of women's traditional responsibilities; and finally women shared more tasks with men in running households rather than sticking to more "female" tasks. All this resulted in making women's lives look more like men's well before the modern era, embedding a sense by now that equality between the sexes means that women should be permitted to do whatever men do. Unfortunately this in turn meant that women's own long historical experience in caring for and valuing children, the elderly, households, and family connections tended to be systematically devalued, by women as well as men.

All this helps to explain why as men's activities moved outside the household, and as ideals of equality came to permeate public discourse, they came to be linked almost exclusively with activities men pioneered in public spaces, where latecomer women had to conform to existing rules that they themselves were too often prepared to interpret as "equal," rather than "gendered male." And now, instead of recognizing and trying to address this sorry situation in the west, we are unwittingly exporting it to other countries that still honor these important priorities more than we do in the west.

So there is a two part lesson here: for those who are championing women's "equality" in various organized movements, beware of buying into a "male gendered" equality that discounts dependent people: children, the elderly, the poor, and all who work with and serve them. To you will fall the collective leadership that helps more female "insider" leaders to grab the brass rings, and then go on to realize true equality, rather than male-gendered equality.

Finally, in setting out this theoretical framework to address women in leadership, we turn to the question of what the world might be like if women ceased, once and for all, to be the “second people.” What will or should women’s leadership and women’s power look like then; and will these terms actually mean something if differences between the sexes are no longer framed within a hierarchy in which women are always on the bottom and men on top? I would love for any of us to will live long enough for an empirical answer here, but I believe that we are indeed headed toward a huge milestone in human history, one in which the physical features of men, and now women along with them, are at last ceasing to serve as plausible markers of personal identity. What this means, which is good I think, is that there will no longer be an automatic shorthand to pigeonhole our leaders; neither women nor men will have an easy way out.

Such a state of affairs was brought home to me in a talk I heard recently by Angela Davis, a well-known African-American ‘60s activist, who now chairs a women’s studies program in California. Addressing prison reform, she called for forging cross-class,-race, and -gender alliances to save youth in our prison system and end linked abuses in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. We must learn how to be citizens, she said, in ways that hold our elected leaders accountable, including those who may look like ourselves. she said she never imagined our first african-american woman secretary of state would have the politics she has. “I want more African-Americans in the highest offices in my country,” she said, “I also want more women. But I would gladly trade our Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, for any white man who saw the need to reach out to all peoples around the world who have been shocked and saddened by our failure to act according to our own highest ideals.” In the end, then, we’ll still have to focus on leadership, even if we no longer have to focus on women’s leadership. And that should keep us busy: being accountable as leaders, and keeping others accountable.