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## Worldview | Will women show a new way?

By **Trudy Rubin**

This week saw the swearing in of two groundbreaking female political leaders: the first woman to be elected head of an African state, Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and the first woman chosen president in a major Latin American country, Michelle Bachelet of Chile.

Neither woman seemed a likely winner. Sirleaf beat a popular (male) soccer star in a country brutalized by a civil war led by vicious warlords. Bachelet prevailed in a macho, Latin, conservative Catholic country where memories of military dictatorship haven't dimmed.

It's enough to make one wonder whether global disgust with male-dominated politics is convincing skeptical voters that women might provide a better option. After all, Germany - whose motto once was "Kinder, Küchen, Kirche" (children, cooking, church) - has its first woman chancellor, Angela Merkel, and American pundits speculate about a Hillary-Condi presidential race in 2008.

Is there any evidence that women can conduct politics more skillfully than men? We can't yet generalize because the number of elected female politicians remains so small.

The women who have become leaders of major countries have won for qualities that had little to do with their gender. Take British Prime Minister Maggie "Iron Lady" Thatcher, who led the Conservative Party to three victories. She proved she was more macho than the male competition. She wielded her pocketbook like a club and struck fear in the hearts of her male subordinates. One almost forgot she was female.

Other women leaders in South Asia and Latin America won power on the coattails of deceased fathers or spouses. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi rose as part of a political dynasty founded by her famous father - and then became a semi-dictator. Benazir Bhutto followed her father's footsteps to power - and neglected women's issues once she took office. Isabel Perón took power when her husband died in office.

But the victories of Sirleaf and Bachelet seem to indicate a new political dynamic in which voters are seeking qualities they think only women can offer. Both Sirleaf and Bachelet combine political toughness (seen as a male characteristic) with a focus on social and economic issues. Both appeal to voters who desperately want to heal the wounds of past civil wars.

Sirleaf won office at a time when Africans are fed up with the old-boys' club of leaders who have led their continent down a path of bloodshed and corruption. In her stark white African turban, this no-nonsense, 67-year-old Harvard-trained banker promised she would make a "fundamental break" with her country's past.

News reports noted that cheering followers called her "Ma Ellen" and expressed the hope that their new mother figure would take care of them. Perhaps a Big Ma will do better than the Big Daddies who have so badly failed so many African nations.

As for Bachelet, the qualities that drew many Chileans to her were compassion and a promise of reconciliation. Her father, a general in the military, died under arrest by the Pinochet regime, and she was jailed and tortured. Yet she returned from exile and rose in the post-Pinochet era to the posts of minister of health (a female realm?) and defense minister (definitely a male realm). She retained a personal warmth that persuaded voters she could heal past political divisions - and reduce Chile's large social and economic gaps.

Sirleaf and Bachelet take office as ever larger numbers of women are participating in politics in developing countries. Fifty nations now set aside specific numbers of parliamentary seats for women. The United States now trails 66 countries in the percentage of women in its lower house, elections expert Swanee Hunt says.

Will larger numbers of elected women change the nature of politics in many parts of the world? "We've found that women do look at politics from a different perspective," says Marjorie Margolies Mezvinsky, a former Philadelphia-area congresswoman who now is president of Women's Campaign International, a group that trains women political

candidates in developing countries.

"Women are more interested in family issues and getting laws enforced that affect the family," Mezvinsky says. "They are more interested in issues like domestic violence and treatment for AIDS."

And Liberians and Chileans think they are more willing to fight corruption and avoid wars.

So it will be fascinating to see what Sirleaf and Bachelet accomplish, and whether they are the cutting edge of a trend. Increased numbers of women in power can't guarantee that politics will get cleaner and safer, but they can bring new perspectives. As long as they don't join the old boys' clubs wholesale, they can hardly make things worse.

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