

# Many countries that managed the pandemic well had one thing in common

March 25 2021, by Leah Cathryn Windsor

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Culture matters more than a leader's gender in how a nation survives a global pandemic, according to a [study I conducted on gender and COVID-19 management](#), which was published in December in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

My co-authors and I examined COVID-19 cases and deaths in 175 countries, 16 of which are led by women. We identified no statistically significant differences in deaths based on the gender of the country's leader.

Instead, we found that pandemic outcomes hinged primarily on how egalitarian a country is. Countries that prioritize the well-being of society in general have fared better over the past year than more individualistic cultures.

We identified two cultural variables with a statistically significant effect on death rate: individualism and "power distance"—a measure of power disparities among the citizenry.

When both elements are extremely high, as in the United States, that culture becomes a threat to COVID-19 survival. The average death rate predicted by our model under such conditions is 28.79 per 100,000. When both are extremely low—as in Trinidad and Tobago or New Zealand—culture aids the pandemic response. The average predicted death rate under such conditions is 1.89 per 100,000.

Our findings complicate evidence early in the pandemic that countries like New Zealand and Germany were doing well in the pandemic because they were run by women.

Leaders do have important power during a crisis. They can institute emergency policies—from mask requirements to stay-at-home orders—to halt the virus's spread. But it takes [everyone's cooperation to make these measures work](#).

President Paula Mae Weekes on people who have been flouting the COVID-19 regulations [pic.twitter.com/kxnCDH9uWL](https://pic.twitter.com/kxnCDH9uWL)

— Kejan Haynes (@KejanHaynes) [April 12, 2020](#)

Collective action may also come more naturally in egalitarian societies, where people grow up with the understanding that [everyone's well-being depends on the well-being of the community](#). When the pandemic hit, egalitarian places made policies promoting behaviors that benefited society, like mask-wearing, and penalized acts that jeopardized public health.

Well before the pandemic, egalitarian countries also generally had [universal health care](#), paid sick leave and subsidized child care. These policies made it easier for people to stay home and protect themselves—and others—from COVID-19.

Egalitarian countries also [tend to reject traditional gender roles](#), so are more likely to elect [women leaders](#). All 16 women-led countries in our study rated as "egalitarian."

In other words, there was a correlation between good pandemic outcomes and women's leadership, but not necessarily a causal one.

The relationship could be causal, but the world simply has too few women leaders to make strong, evidence-based claims about the effects of gender on pandemic outcomes.

In normal times, [women](#) world leaders are criticized both for acting too "masculine" or aggressive and also for acting too ["feminine" or nurturing](#)

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But that custom flips in crises like natural disasters. [Women are given more latitude to act](#), past research shows.

That happened in the [pandemic](#), too. Throughout last spring, analysts

celebrated New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern for the hard-line security policy of [closing national borders](#) and congratulated Norway's Erna Solberg for her compassionate press conferences [explaining the pandemic to children](#).

Women leaders enjoyed rare latitude during COVID-19 that allowed them [to do everything in their power to manage it](#). It shows in our data—there just aren't enough examples to be statistically significant.

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