



World female leaders hailed as voices of reason amid coronavirus chaos

Foto acima: A primeira-ministra da Nova Zelândia Jacinda Ardern discursa em uma entrevista coletiva em Wellington em 24 de março.

"É em mais do que nos Estados Unidos que chegou o teste de um povo disposto a aceitar uma mulher à frente. Tal como Trump, a aceitação de todos os Clinton representados é um teste global."

Élder Tess

**Jennifer Hassan e
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Silveria Jacobs is not kidding.

When cases of coronavirus began to rise in the Caribbean country of Sint Maarten, the 51-year-old prime minister gave harsh instructions.

"Simply. Stop. Change - Jacobs said on a video address. "If you don't have the kind of bread you like in your house, eat biscuits. If you don't have bread, eat cereal, eat oats, sardines."

The April 1 speech, in which Jacobs advised citizens to prepare as if a hurricane were on its way, but not to accumulate toilet paper, became viral, leading the little-known leader to stardom on the Internet for his absurd approach to the crisis.

Jacobs is one of several female world leaders who have gained recognition as voices of reason in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. They have attracted praise for effective messages and decisive action, in contrast to the bombastic approaches of several of the world's most prominent male leaders - including some who face criticism for failures that have fuelled the spread of the virus. "We can think of it as a halo effect on some women leaders," said Jennifer Curtin, director of the Institute of Public Policy at Auckland University in New Zealand. In fact, many women leaders have been successful in controlling the spread of the coronavirus while remaining calm. Her successes have been amplified in part "because we see two hyper-male leaders responding in a very aggressive way," Curtin said.

Here are examples of how elected leaders around the world responded to outbreaks of coronavirus in their countries.

New Zealand

When it comes to saving lives and flattening the curve, few world leaders have attracted as much positive attention as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who took office in October 2017.

Ardern has a history of bold responses to the tragedy. Last year, when New Zealand was hit by attacks on two mosques in Christchurch that killed 51 lives, Ardern pledged to cover the funeral costs of the victims of the country's worst terrorist attack, launched an outreach to the Muslim community, and promoted changes in the country's arms laws.

Only a year later, facing the threat of covid-19, Ardern quickly closed the country's borders and prepared citizens for prolonged measures.

His messages left no room for confusion. "To be absolutely clear, we are now asking all New Zealanders who are outside essential services to stay at home and stop all interaction with other people outside those in their homes," she said.

Ardern's crackdown seems to be working, with fewer than 1,500 confirmed cases and 12 confirmed deaths reported in the country. She regularly conducts interviews with key health officials, but also follows a related approach, broadcasting videos of herself at home in social media and telling children that she considers the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny to be "essential workers". Last week, Ardern announced that she and her office would receive 20% cuts in wages for six months.

She usually emphasizes empathy in her public comments, demonstrating, Curtin said, that "we can really lead with determination and kindness.

Norway

After weeks of blockade, Norway's infection rate declined so much that the country introduced plans to ease restrictions on certain businesses and close schools.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Sweden, where fewer restrictions were imposed, cases increased.

In an interview with CNN, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg credited an early blockade and extensive monitoring of her country's relative success. She said she is allowing scientists to take the lead in the medical response.

She received praise for a style of communication that extends beyond her scientific approach. In two press conferences last month, she shared messages aimed at young people.

"It's okay to be afraid," she said shortly after the schools closed. She said she missed hugging her friends.

"We think that children should feel that they are taken seriously in a crisis like this," Solberg told CNN.

Iceland

Worldwide, shortages of testing have left patients ill in limbo and disrupted official responses to the coronavirus outbreak, making it more difficult for healthcare professionals to identify and isolate infected people. But in Iceland, anyone who wants to do a test can do one.

The unusual approach is the result of a collaboration between the government, led by Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, and CODE Genetics, a biotechnology company based in Reykjavik that offers free testing. People interested in testing do not need to demonstrate that they have been exposed to a known case of the virus or have symptoms. The joint initiative has enabled nearly 43,000 people to be tested - or approximately 11.7 percent of the island's population.

Iceland has also launched an intensive contact tracing initiative that has helped to quickly isolate people who may have been exposed to the virus. Although social distancing restrictions have been adopted, extensive testing and early containment measures have provided the Icelandic authorities with the main data which allowed them to keep the restrictions a little more flexible than the leaders of other countries. The authorities announced last week that the restrictions will be gradually lifted as of May 4.

Germany

Last month, when the coronavirus spread rapidly throughout Europe, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a rare televised speech in which she alerted the Germans that the outbreak represents the greatest challenge since World War II.

"I am absolutely sure that we will overcome this crisis," she said. "But how many casualties will there be? How many loved ones will we lose?"

Constanze Stelzenmuller, a senior member of the Brookings Institution, said Merkel's comments were different from other public addresses she had given during her more than 14 years as chancellor. "It was very direct, very direct, realistic, empathetic and personal," she said.

Every death, Merkel said, is "father or grandfather, mother or grandmother, partner.

"They're people," she said. "And we're a community where every life and every person counts."

The speech marked a turning point in Merkel's leadership role in the crisis, after initial criticism that she hadn't acted quickly enough. Germany confirmed more than 145,000 cases of the virus and some 4,642 deaths - far fewer than the number confirmed in Italy and Spain. Experts say widespread testing has helped authorities screen suspicious cases more easily than in other countries. Merkel extended the country's blockade this month but also eased some restrictions on certain companies and said schools will reopen in May.

Merkel, who said he won't seek reelection next year, usually takes a more stoic tone. But many have praised his change of pace in the face of such an unusual crisis.

"She was appealing to people's sense of responsibility and their ability as citizens to assess risk and then do the right thing," Stelzenmuller said. "It seems clear to me that she decided that this was an exceptional emergency and therefore required a different approach.

Taiwan

When the coronavirus spread rapidly in the Chinese province of Hubei, the initial epicenter of the pandemic earlier this year, the autonomous island of Taiwan recognized the risk that the impending pandemic could pose. Traveling to the island of China is common, with millions of people travelling between the two each year.

The Taiwanese government, led by President Tsai Ing-wen and his vice president, epidemiologist Chen Chien-Jen, took early assertive steps to try to limit the spread of the virus by restricting many visitors and implementing new mandatory health checks.

Months later, the island of about 23 million people is reaping the benefits - reporting less than 500 confirmed cases and six deaths.

In an interview with The Telegraph, Chen credited the lessons learned from the 2003 SARS outbreak with helping the island prepare for and limit its exposure to this year's outbreak.

Taiwan's response to the coronavirus was not without controversy. Taiwan has repeatedly criticized China's response and earlier this month WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus accused Taiwan of participating in a racist smear campaign against him. Taiwan demanded an apology and called the accusations unfounded.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/20/female-world-leaders-hailed-voices-reason-amid-coronavirus-chaos/>