

# Why are American women last to take the lead?

BY ROSALIND CHAIT BARNETT AND CARYL RIVERS

Rosalind Chait Barnett, left, senior scientist at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University, and Caryl Rivers, Boston University journalism professor, are co-authors of

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Michelle Bachelet is elected president of Chile. Patricia Russo becomes head of the newly merged telecom giant (a merger of Alcatel and Lucent, based in France) that will be one of the largest companies in the world. Angela Merkel serves as chancellor of Germany. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is elected president of Liberia.

Meanwhile, in the United States, we're still arguing over whether women have "the right stuff" to be leaders. Harvard political science Professor Harvey Mansfield, in a new book ("Manliness") that is getting substantial media attention, claims there has been only one real female leader - Margaret Thatcher. Teaching other women to be assertive, Mansfield claims, might be "like teaching a cat to bark."

Women in other countries are earning the right to lead by working their way through the political system, as men have always done. Here, we are still wringing our hands about whether women have the right hormones, the right brains, the right motivation or the right abilities to take on the challenges of the modern world. Although the rest of the world seems to accept the notion that women are fit to command a nation or a huge company, in the United States women who have the audacity to put themselves forward for the top job face harsh questioning.

Hillary Rodham Clinton, for example, a leading contender for the Democratic nomination, has been called either a "witch" or "witchlike" in the media more than 50 times. There are constant innuendos about her sexuality - as evidenced by a book about her by former New York Timesman Ed Klein. As critic Tina Brown pointed out in The Washington Post, "Every time Klein describes anyone female in Hillary Clinton's circle, you hear the clump clump clump of stereotype-lesbian footwear."

As for Condoleezza Rice, mentioned as a Republican nominee, her single status is often commented upon as if her ambition were somehow unfeminine. There's also an inordinate amount of attention to her clothes and her style - her pearls, her southern accent, her size-six dress size and her high-heeled boots. This is in stark contrast to how Merkel, Johnson-Sirleaf and Bachelet were covered in their native countries, where the biggest focus was on their political credentials. When



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Elizabeth Dole threw her hat in the presidential ring in 2000, she was treated very differently from male candidates by the media - although she was the only Republican who beat Al Gore in several head-to-head polls. Many men would have given their eyeteeth for her credentials: former cabinet member in the Reagan administration and head of a well-known national organization (the Red Cross).

But researchers Caroline Headman, Susan J. Carroll and Stephanie Olson of Rutgers University note that, although political insiders and the public regarded Dole as a strong contender, the media did not. Dole never got the level of coverage that her polling indicates she should have had. The American press seems fixated on gender issues that don't seem to warrant much attention in other countries. Recently, headline stories in the U.S. press focused on whether women have the right brain structure for leadership, the right hormones to make decisions or enough motivation to devote themselves to a high-powered career.

Even in the absence of solid evidence, newspaper, magazine and television stories recently claimed that the best and the brightest American women are dropping out of the workplace and just want to go home to be housewives. In fact, study after study shows this not to be true.

When women fail in the corporate world, it's big news. For example, when Brenda Barnes resigned from a high-level position at PepsiCo, there was a media feeding frenzy of stories saying she couldn't handle work and family. But when Barnes was subsequently hired to head Sara Lee, no one claimed this was proof that women could indeed succeed at work and at home.

When women fail, it's seen as proof that they can't manage a career and family responsibilities. When men fail, no such claim is made. When women succeed, it's not seen as proof that women can indeed lead. Instead, such women are seen as having some special stroke of good fortune - a wonderful mentor, a lucky break, being at the right place at the right time. Not so, apparently, in other parts of the world. When women succeed, men, women and the media give them credit for their success.

In this country, the more we hear that women are unsuited for leadership, the more women and men will internalize this message. We may never get to the place Germany, Chile and Liberia appear to have reached, where a woman is judged not by some rigid sex role stereotype, but by the credentials she brings to the position.

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