



**MWMN**  
MEDITERRANEAN  
WOMEN MEDIATORS  
NETWORK

# LEADING EFFECTIVELY IN HIGH-PRESSURE ENVIRONMENTS

FRANCESCA STERZI



In an interconnected, networked and interdependent world, the COVID-19 pandemic is presenting leaders in every sector with certain challenges and a still-uncertain set of risks. Interestingly, the gendered aspects of the emergency, i.e., how the pandemic affects differently men and women, boys and girls, is being increasingly taken into account, testifying to a wider acknowledgement of the need for “gender lenses” to fully understand the repercussions of complex events and adopt better-tailored response strategies.<sup>1</sup> Gendered effects of Coronavirus<sup>2</sup> range from the consequences on households of the higher death rates among the male population, to the predominantly female composition of the healthcare workforce;<sup>3</sup> from the gendered distribution of caregiving responsibilities, to the adverse impact of forced quarantines in relation to spikes in the incidence of domestic violence and abuse.

With its multifaceted security implications, the present crisis confirms the relevance of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, whose twentieth anniversary is being celebrated this year. The importance of women’s participation in conflict prevention,

---

1 See UNWomen, *COVID-19: Emerging Gender Data and Why It Matters*, 26 June 2020, <https://data.unwomen.org/node/116>.

2 For some considerations of the gendered effects of the COVID-19 outbreak see, for example: Clare Wenham, Julia Smith and Rosemary Morgan, “COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak”, in *The Lancet*, Vol. 395, No. 10227 (14 March 2020), p. 846-848, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30526-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2); Alexandra Villareal, “Coronavirus Pandemic Exacerbates Inequalities for Women, UN Warns”, in *The Guardian*, 11 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/un-coronavirus-pandemic-gender-inequalities-women>; Martha Henriques, “Why Covid-19 Is Different for Men and Women”, in *BBC Future*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-women>. See also the report by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission: Zsuzsa Blaskó, Eleni Papadimitriou and Anna Rita Manca, “How Will the COVID-19 Crisis Affect Existing Gender Divides in Europe?”, in *JRC Science for Policy Reports*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2760/37511>.

3 See Mathieu Boniol et al., “Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries”, in *Health Workforce Working Papers*, No. 1 (March 2019), [https://www.who.int/hrh/resources/gender\\_equity-health\\_workforce\\_analysis](https://www.who.int/hrh/resources/gender_equity-health_workforce_analysis).



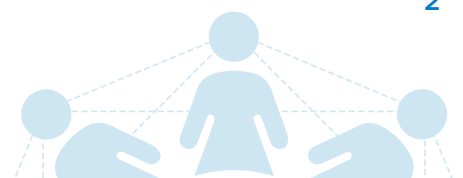
resolution and peacebuilding in times of crisis is even more evident during the current pandemic, where women are on the frontlines both as the majority of healthcare workers at a global level, as well as primary agents of community social work and civil society sectors across the world.

The variety of approaches adopted by countries and regional entities to contain and manage the effects of Coronavirus have shown how effective and resilient leadership is a true game changer during disruptive, unpredictable events. Moreover, COVID-19 has emphasised the need for inclusive leadership, with greater participation of women in politics and decision/policy-making contexts. The effectiveness and nuanced nature of the response implemented by some female world leaders, such as those of Finland, Germany, New Zealand and Norway, have highlighted the possibility of facing international crises with a more tailored, inclusive and empathic approach.<sup>4</sup> With more and more (even if still not enough) women taking up positions of power and responsibility in a variety of male-dominated sectors and professions, the debate on female leadership is now at crucial turning point, which goes beyond the mere numerical representation. If it is true that women have more power now than during thousands of years of exclusion and discrimination in both the private and public sphere, it is equally true that this often comes at the expense of women's true self. In order to survive, let alone thrive, in working environments made by men for men, women often find themselves willingly or unconsciously adopting gendered masculine stereotypical attitudes and behaviours. Changing this dynamic can be extremely beneficial both at the individual level, allowing for authentic and self-respecting leadership, as well as at the societal level, where the inclusion of the female perspective represents a benefit for all segments of organisations and societies.

With the aim of providing members with the knowledge and tools to discover and enhance their leadership skills, from 21 May to 11 June 2020 the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) has held an online training initiative titled "Leading Effectively in High-Pressure Environments". The workshop, delivered in four webinars, was held by Jennifer Wittwer, international expert, author and speaker on gender and Women, Peace and Security, with a vast experience in developing workplace education and women's leadership and participation programmes. Jennifer has thirty-eight years' military experience in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as a maritime logistics officer

---

4 See Louise Champoux-Paillé and Anne-Marie Croteau, "Why Women Leaders Are Excelling During the Coronavirus Pandemic", in *The Conversation*, 13 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-women-leaders-are-excelling-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-138098>; Amanda Taub, "Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better with Covid-19?", in *The New York Times*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>; Bethany Garner, "Female Leadership During COVID-19: What Can We Learn?", in *BusinessBecause*, 19 June 2020, <https://www.businessbecause.com/news/insights/7028/learn-female-leadership-covid-19>; Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, "Will the Pandemic Reshape Notions of Female Leadership?", in *Harvard Business Review*, 26 June 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/06/will-the-pandemic-reshape-notions-of-female-leadership>.



and strategic human resource specialist in leading people through organisational change, large-scale cultural and workplace reform, and implementing contemporary and niched people-oriented policy strategies and policy solutions. Since 2012 Jennifer has led the implementation of the United Nations (UN) WPS agenda within the ADF and the broader defence and security sector. She was also deployed as the first ADF gender adviser to NATO operations in Afghanistan in 2013 and she has participated in various NATO and UN forums and projects relating to WPS and women's representation in armed forces. In her last ADF role, Jennifer was seconded to UN Women in New York as a policy specialist on peacekeeping and sexual exploitation and abuse. After having collaborated with UN Women Ukraine, Jennifer is currently contracted to UN Women Jordan for 2019-21 to build capacity for gender mainstreaming in the security sector. For her engagement, professionalism and commitment to advance women's leadership, she has been recognised with a number of national awards.

Drawing from Jennifer's recently published book,<sup>5</sup> the workshop has focussed on developing core skills and exploring the leadership capabilities required to lead effectively in high-pressure environments. The workshop, attended by eight members of the Network, has helped participants to develop their self-awareness, cultivate a growth and change-oriented mind-set, and provided them with strategies aimed at strengthening resilience, while also managing and limiting the effects of stress. In particular, Jennifer has guided mediators in identifying their attributes and values and in incorporating them in their leadership styles with a view towards promoting authenticity. Secondly, mediators learned techniques to remain calm and maintain a positive attitude even when confronted with obstacles, and to turn the latter into opportunities. Thirdly, participants have been working on understanding and improving resilience and have discovered how to apply it to leadership. They also worked on identifying their inner strengths and capabilities and how they can apply them in complex and challenging environments. Finally, mediators have learned to recognise their stress triggers, to understand whether these triggers fall within their sphere of control, and to categorise them based on their relevance to themselves. They also delved into the psychological and physical effects of stress and into their own reactions to it, learning to distinguish between healthy and non-healthy coping strategies and how to change them. The whole process has been conducted with the assistance of a very practical workbook, aimed at guiding members through the self-reflection process. Through individual exercises and interactive group discussion, mediators had the opportunity to reflect on their personal and professional path and to share experiences in order to increase their influence, transform obstacles into opportunities, and not let setbacks prevent them from being great, effective leaders.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Wittwer, *Against the Wind: How Women Can Be Their Authentic Selves in Male-Dominated Professions*, Surrey Hills, MH Publishing, 2020.

