

## Women as Leaders in Covid-19 Pandemic Context

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### Abstract

*Pandemics suddenly and unexpectedly change the course of history, destroy the foundations of the strongest economies, affect humanity and "dethrone" the most powerful leaders. The consequences follows for many years after their passing, stability and prosperity being difficult to rebuild.*

*The paper has major importance, as we currently facing a new pandemic. It's a global tragedy, an urgent wake-up call for all of humanity and for the 21st century, COVID-19 is a tough, relentless, unforgiving teacher who is offering valuable lessons about survival, leadership, being a current and present subject in everyone's life.*

*The pandemic has disrupted important aspects of personal, but especially professional life, therefore, the question our paper is trying to answer is: Can the COVID-19 pandemic be a ramp for launching women into top management positions? The article provides an analysis of pandemics and an interdisciplinary approach to these valuable lessons about leadership.*

**Key words:** COVID-19, pandemics, diversity, firm performance, corporate culture

**J.E.L. classification:** H12, M14, L25, J24, M51

### 1. Introduction

The pandemic officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020 is certainly a Trojan horse of both the local economy and the national and global economy. Crises are characterized by both major and resounding failures and memorable developments generated by opportunities.

In these uncertain times, leaders are showing their face and determines quick approaches to the effects of the crisis. These moments of instability and unpredictability test the quality of leadership, and experienced leaders do not hesitate to make decisive decisions and measures. Thus, they can differentiate between being a loser or taking advantage of the opportunity generated by chaos and confirming or even consolidating their position in the business environment. Organizations that emerge victorious from turbulent times are often characterized by effectiveness.

The findings made by (Schoss et al, 2020) have determined characteristics that can be described as motivational and interpersonal (such as leadership style and motivation) influence work conflicts, while intrapersonal characteristics (such as be self-efficacy) does not influence conflicts of any kind. However, the diversity approach can suffer, as there may be situations where team members pursue different goals and invest substantially different levels of effort, which could eventually lead to more numerous conflicts. Nevertheless, conflicts mediate the relationship between leadership style, motivation and overall self-efficacy, on the one hand, and team effectiveness and satisfaction, on the other.

Therefore, the conclusion is consistent with those stated in their paper (Horwitz et al, 2007) determined that the diversity of members facilitates the performance of the team, despite many factors that influence its results.

This paper addresses the issue of leadership in the context of economic and social volatility and highlights specific characteristics of this type of environment determining the profile of the "savior leader".

## 2. Theoretical background

According to the World Health Organization, pandemics are caused by new pathogens and very few people are immune to it. Thus, if an epidemic crosses international borders, affecting a considerable number of people and countries, it turns into a pandemic. Some have left behind a small number of victims, but others have changed the course of history, taken the lives of millions of people and destroyed the world's strongest economies.

For a century, mankind has faced a large number of pandemics (Table no. 1), which have led to great human and economic losses. Some have disappeared, while others are still causing casualties.

Table no. 1. The most important pandemics in the last 100 years

Pandemic name	Time period	Number of victims (Deaths)
Spanish Flu	1918 - 1920	50 millions
Asian Flu	1957 - 1958	2 millions
Hong Kong Flu	1968 - 1970	1 million
HIV/ AIDS	1981 - present	35 millions
Swine Flu (H <sub>1</sub> N <sub>1</sub> )	2009 - 2010	284.000
Ebola	2014 - 2016	11.000
COVID-19	2019 - present	1,33 millions

Source: processing after <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/history-of-pandemics-deadliest/>

In just two years, Spanish Flu has claimed many lives around the world, including 500.000 in the United States, causing as many deaths as World War I, with some experts even claiming that the pandemic ended the world conflict. The rapid spread of influenza was influenced by conditions on the front or poor nutrition during the First World War.

Asian Flu was another global manifestation of root flu in China, killing more than two million people, including 33.000 in the United Kingdom and 116.000 in the United States.

It is believed that Hong Kong Flu also started in China, being caused by a variation of the H3N2 flu that spread quickly around the world, being the third flu pandemic of the twentieth century.

The disease caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) has traveled around the world, infecting about 35 million people. For decades the disease had no treatment, but after 1990 infected people could lead a normal life with regular drug treatment, and the year 2020 brings the second world case of cure.

The 2009 swine flu pandemic is a new subtype of influenza virus of Mexican origin that is transmitted to humans and contains genes from swine, avian and human influenza viruses, in a combination that has not been observed in the world until then. In 19 months, the virus has affected 1,4 billion people worldwide, and today the H1N1 virus vaccine is included in the annual flu vaccine.

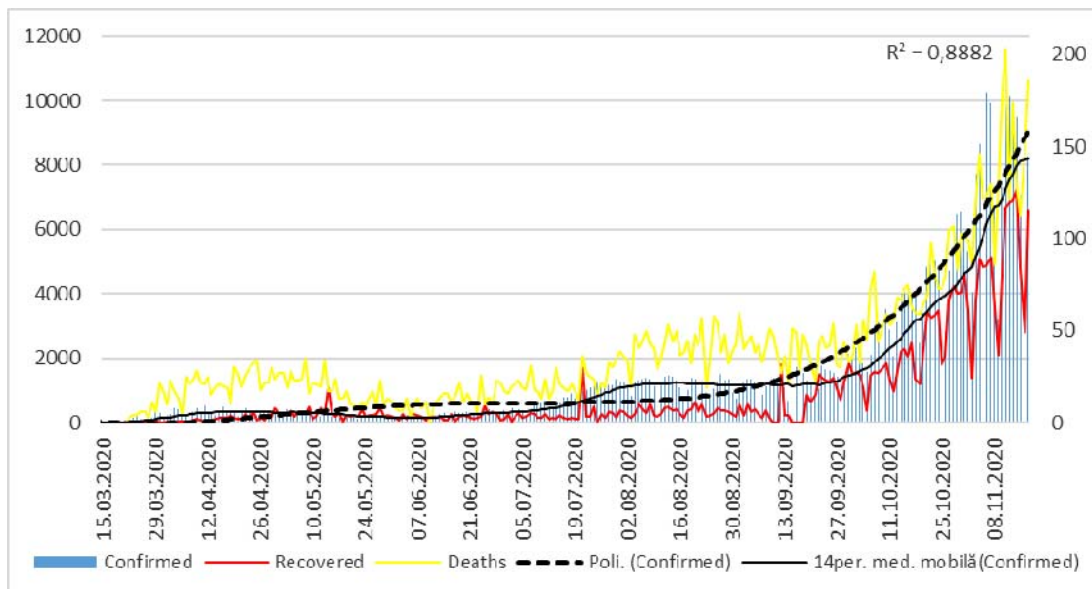
Ebola infection dates back to 1976 when the first case was reported in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The disease is extremely serious, common on the African continent, with a mortality rate between 25% - 90% of infected people. So far there is no approved treatment to treat this Ebola infection, but only "supportive" treatment.

It all came to a standstill for months, and in about a year the coronavirus pandemic (COVID19) wiped out several decades of global growth, from areas such as health, education, tourism to economic activities. According to Oxfam International (a confederation of 20 independent charities focused on reducing global poverty) it is estimated that by the time the pandemic will end, more than half the world's population (currently estimated at 7,8 billion people) he would live in poverty.

The massive spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a major challenge for the entire health system, and all reports present a grim situation, with significant loss of life both in Romania (Figure no. 1) and internationally. Governments' desperate attempt to stop / slow the spread of the virus has led to

travel restrictions, the closure of restaurants, cinemas, theaters, the suspension of sporting events and even a ban on leaving home.

Figure no. 1. The evolution of Sars-cov-2 pandemic in Romania



Source: processing according to the data of the Romanian Government ([www.datelazi.ro](http://www.datelazi.ro))

### 3. Research methodology

Our paper is an exploratory research which analyses the tendency of the modifications in nations' organizational culture using secondary dates: indicators defined by World Economic Forum one hand and the dimension of masculinity defined by Geert Hofstede on the other hand. The implication of leadership in times of crisis are studied using a qualitative method research. Mixing the analytical and descriptive research methods we could generate a verisimilar forecast regarding the role of women as leaders in times of crisis.

### 4. Findings

#### Stereotypes and discrimination

White / black dichotomous thinking, like me or not at all, clean / dirty, beautiful / ugly is a cognitive distortion and can generate a rock effect. This anomaly is also known in economics when thresholds are set for certain measures. An eloquent example of this anomaly in the case of Romania: the threshold for social assistance of a family with 2 members is 255 RON (52.5 EUR) in this case the family income is supplemented by another approximately 260 RON (53,6 EUR) and the income total family becomes 515 RON (106,1 EUR); if the family income increases above this threshold and registers income of 256 RON (52,8 EUR), the state allocated aid is no longer granted, and the family income remains 256 RON (52,8 EUR).

However, in order to highlight certain specific characteristics, this type of dichotomous classification is frequently addressed in the literature. Thus, the issue of belonging to gender (male / female) has been and is debated in many fields of activity, but even here, in the sociological sphere, the rock effect makes its presence felt being assimilated with the issue of discrimination. Therefore, the male-female duality was approached in most cases from the perspective of discrimination.

In many cases the term gender is replaced by the term sex, although the differences are obvious between the two terms. According to (World Health Organization, 2020), gender refers to "the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society deems appropriate for men and women," and gender are the biological and physiological characteristics

that define men and the women". So for a more holistic view we will consider that the duality "men / women" refers to gender, while "male / female" resides in gender-specific characteristics.

We can outline three major paradigms in the field of management resulting from the perpetuation of stereotypes and discriminatory practice based on gender, presented in table no. 2 as follows:

Table no. 2. Discriminatory paradigms regarding gender affiliation

Paradigm	Signification
<i>the glass ceiling</i>	the invisible limit imposed on a certain category of people to develop
<i>the glass escalator</i>	women are less likely to be promoted in sectors where they are in the majority or are present in the same proportion as men than in sectors where the majority are men
<i>the glass cliff</i>	women are preferred to be elected to leadership positions (to overcome "glass ceiling") in times of crisis when the probability of failure is very high

Source: own processing

The International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation known for the Annual World Economic Forum in Davos, which has interests in establishing gender equality and thus stopping discrimination based on gender, has set an index to track the gender gap. The Global Gender Gap (GGI) was first presented at the 2006 World Economic Forum to capture the extent of gender disparities and track their progress over time. This index shows national gender gaps in economic, educational, health and political criteria.

In table no. 3 we presented in parallel the calculated values of GGI for the years 2020, 2018, 2006, (World Economic Forum, 2020) as well as the level of masculinity as defined by Hofstede in his paper (Hofstede et al, 2005) for 28 states (26 within the European Union and 2 Nordic countries known to be high feminine). The data was processed and a color code was created: red being the highest value and green being the lowest value.

Table no. 3 - Gender Gap Index 2020 rankings vs. Hofstede Masculinity

Rank after GGI		Country	Score (0 to 1)			Hofstede Masculinity
2020	2018		2020	2018	2006	
4	3	Sweden	0,820	0,822	0,813	5
2	2	Norway *	0,842	0,835	0,799	8
11	17	Latvia	0,785	0,758	0,709	9
1	1	Iceland *	0,877	0,859	0,782	10
38	27	Netherlands	0,736	0,746	0,724	14
14	13	Denmark	0,782	0,778	0,746	16
33	24	Lithuania	0,745	0,750	0,708	19
36	11	Slovenia	0,743	0,784	0,674	19
3	4	Finland	0,832	0,820	0,796	26
26	33	Estonia	0,751	0,734	0,694	30
35	2	Portugal	0,744	0,733	0,692	31
49	18	Bulgaria	0,727	0,756	0,687	40
60	59	Croatia	0,720	0,712	0,714	40
55	63	Romania	0,724	0,711	0,680	42
8	29	Spain	0,795	0,746	0,732	42
15	12	France	0,781	0,779	0,652	43
90	91	Malta	0,693	0,685	0,651	47
51	61	Luxembourg	0,725	0,712	0,667	50
27	32	Belgium	0,750	0,738	0,708	54
78	82	Czech Rep.	0,706	0,692	0,671	57
84	78	Greece	0,701	0,697	0,654	57
40	42	Poland	0,736	0,728	0,680	64

10	14	Germany	0,787	0,776	0,753	66
7	9	Ireland	0,798	0,796	0,733	68
76	70	Italy	0,707	0,706	0,646	70
34	53	Austria	0,744	0,718	0,698	79
105	102	Hungary	0,677	0,674	0,670	88
63	83	Slovak Rep.	0,718	0,692	0,675	100

Source: processing after (Hofstede et al, 2005) and (World Economic Forum, 2020)

It can be seen that in countries with low masculinity there is a higher index value that tends to 1 (gender equality in all 4 spheres). Moreover, it can be seen that in the period 2006 - 2020 there is an increase in the value of the index in all cases, which indicates that there are slow changes in the national organizational culture in terms of stereotypes related to gender.

The evolution of the indicator was presented in parallel with the level of masculinity defined by Hofstede to highlight the fact that since the date of his study the values of national cultures have changed. However, we note that this dimension of masculinity/femininity can still guide us on the main direction of organizational cultures promoted at the national level.

### Crisis leadership

In the context of globalization and unprecedented development generated by the technologicalization, informatization and robotization of all economic spheres, we can say that we live in a complex and adaptive environment but volatile and insecure. Thus, management must continuously adapt in order to ensure the necessary leadership in possible crisis situations. Moreover, man-made disasters and terrorism place an increased emphasis on leadership in crisis situations.

This type of leadership is a special one, different from the usual one practiced in organizations, being characterized by spontaneity and communication qualities.

Crisis management theories recommend situational leadership, proving what is most appropriate in such cases. (Graeff, 1983) and (Hersey et al, 1979) argue that task-oriented leadership is best in crisis while (Johnson, 2018) highlights several specific characteristics of people-oriented leadership. However (Hart et al, 1993) consider that often crisis leadership is not the responsibility of a single person but of a small central group.

(Ruben, 2006) defines leadership skills as one's abilities, abilities, skills and knowledge in order to apply healthy leadership. It groups skills into two categories: theoretical (comprehension) and behavioral (skills). It also defines 5 areas of interest in terms of leadership skills: analytical, personal, positional and communication.

These skills are essential in crisis management, being necessary in building a coherent action plan based on the right decisions that will lead to overcoming difficult situations. Both (Betancourt et al, 2017) and (Tubin, 2017) determined that the most important skills in crisis leadership are: realism, emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills and communication skills.

(Johnson, 2018) proposes a model of approach to leadership in times of crisis in 10 steps by applying human factors avoiding technical issues as follows:

- Correct interpretation of information from various sources
- Allocate the necessary time to evaluate the options
- Decentralization of power
- Do not wait for confirmations
- Delegation of tasks and development of strategic capacity
- Using lists to reduce cognitive load
- Flexibility and creativity
- Be clear and concise in the transmission of tasks
- Check your body language
- Know your limits and stressors

It is important that in times of crisis decisions are tempered even if they must be taken without hesitation and on the spot. Hasty decisions can do more harm than good.

Therefore, we can say that crisis situations are tests for a leader so that he is prepared for chaotic situations that can occur both in the economy and in the organization. Crises cannot be prevented and early preparation for these situations is fundamental.

## 5. Conclusions

Sars-Cov-2 virus infection is in full swing among pandemics with a rapid and unexpected evolution, and the measures taken to stop the spread have been the most drastic since the Spanish flu to this day. However, it is noted that the outbreaks have not yet been stabilized, as the pandemic is still in the Community transmission stage, without any prediction of how it will evolve in the future.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is grim both in terms of the number of victims and in terms of the economy. In these uncertain times on all levels, coordination and involvement of all decision-makers is essential in order to prevent a major global economic crisis.

The pandemic context and crisis management theory coupled with the discriminatory characteristics of society in general also produce less observable opportunities.

In the last two decades, increases can be determined in terms of the gender gap, which decreases by about 7% in all areas of interest (education, health, politics and economics). Thus, we can say that stereotypes erode easily and lose their strength. Women are no longer just responsible for household chores, they are becoming involved in the execution process and constantly in decision-making processes. The transformational process is still slow, the calculated percentage being too low to demonstrate profound changes in attitudes or changes in the sphere of inertial thinking.

This context as well as the specific characteristics of crisis management in which discriminatory attitudes in the managerial sphere compete make the coronavirus pandemic an unexpectedly favorable context for the launch of women in top management positions.

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