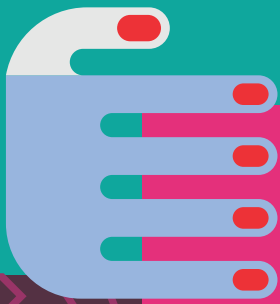





# FEMININE CULTURE

a model of leadership making  
headways in organizations



Leadership is undergoing a paradigm shift. Behind this development is a cultural change predicted, over two decades ago, by the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede. Those companies that adapted accordingly have been coming up on top during the past year.



Chile is near the edge of the world. Sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes mountains, it's known for its poets, landscapes, and wines, among other achievements. But this year, while the rest of the world focused on the Covid-19 pandemic, this South American nation of 19 million people quietly experienced a paradigm shift. For the first time in its history, **during the municipal elections carried out on May 15-16, the number of women vying for political positions surpassed that of men.** Although this was an historic occurrence, it was not necessarily surprising. Across the Atlantic, **women occupy 61% of all seats in the Rwandan Chamber of Deputies** — far surpassing the 18% they occupied back in the 1990s.

For several decades now, we've been seeing increasingly more women in politics and positions of power: from Margaret Thatcher (Great Britain) to Angela Merkel (Germany), Michelle Bachelet (Chile), Theresa May (Gran Bretaña), Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand), Katrín Jakobsdóttir (Iceland), Katerina Sakellaropoulou (Greece), and Mette Frederiksen (Denmark), among others who've made shockwaves in the international political arena.

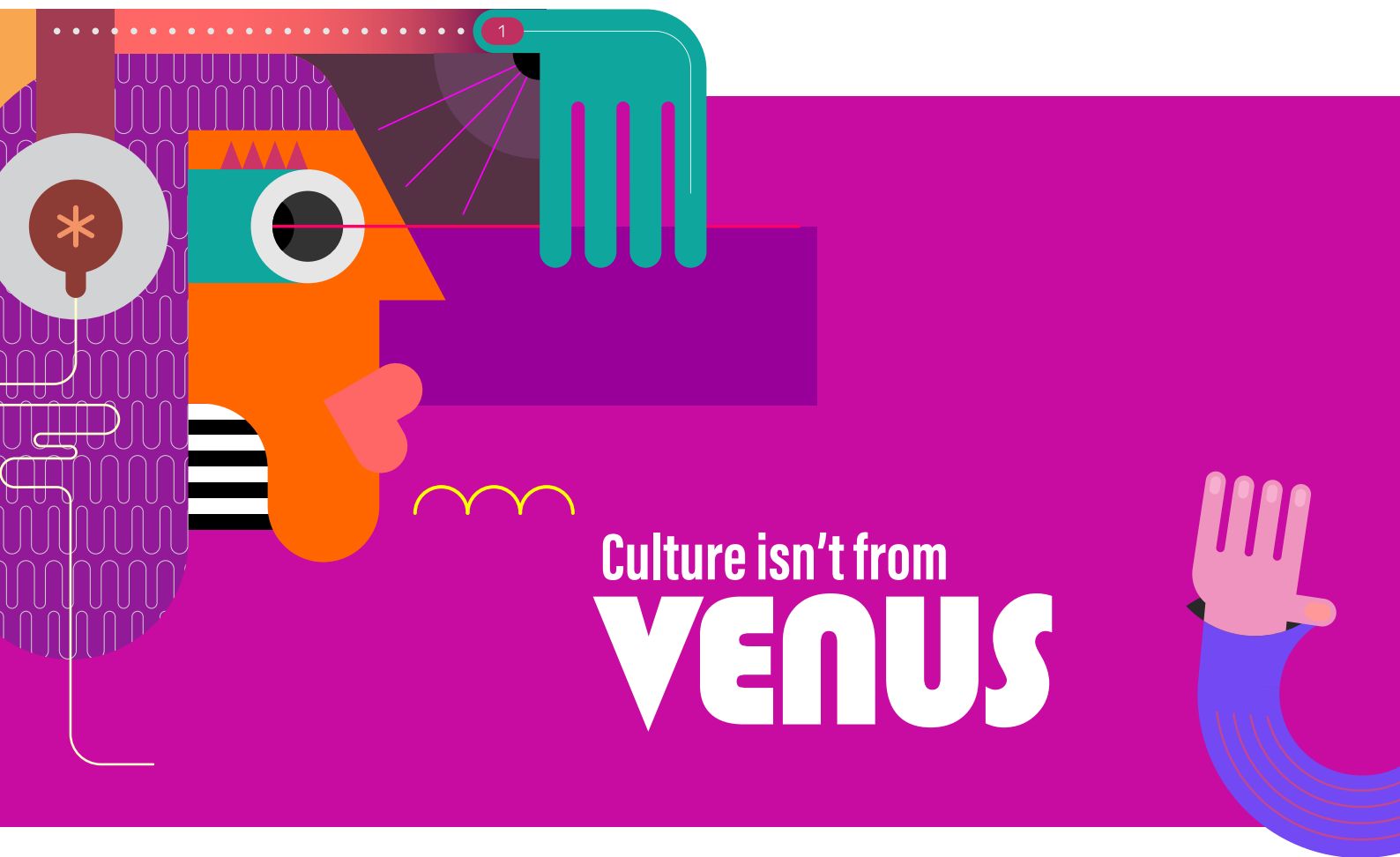
## Today, 22 countries are led by women, according to the most recent Women's Power Index.

According to this Index — developed by the Council on Foreign Relations, a non-profit from the United States —, 13 out of 193 countries also have at least 50% women in their national cabinets, while only 3 countries have at least 50% women in their national congresses.

It could be that female-led management, as it becomes more common, will change how we coordinate people and organizations, and how we think about organizational culture and leadership.

There's no scientific consensus around this topic, but there is reason to suspect the above will turn out to be the case.

Just during the past year, The New York Times, DW, and Fortune have made it a point to praise how women leaders are facing the coronavirus crisis, while the World Economic Forum's blog released a special report on the matter.



Considered by the Wall Street Journal to be one of the 21 most influential thinkers in the world of business, the Dutch social psychologist and writer Geert Hofstede defined six dimensions that define a society's or an organization's culture:

## 1. Power Distance

The degree to which the least powerful members of organizations or institutions accept and expect power to be distributed unequally.

## 2. Individualism

The degree to which people feel independent rather than interdependent on one another as part of a larger whole.

## 3. Uncertainty Avoidance

How much tolerance a society has to uncertainty and ambiguity.

## 4. Long-term Orientation

For a long-term culture, the world is always changing, so we must be prepared for the future. For a short-term culture, the world has always been more or less the same, so the past becomes a moral compass.

## 5. Indulgence

In an indulgent culture, going with your gut is a good thing. Friends are important and life is about living it. In a restrained culture, life is hard and duty is a person's loftiest calling.

## 6. Masculinity vs Femininity

What role does the use of force play in a culture? How much is it used and in what way?

In regard to this last dimension, it would be a mistake to conceive it in literal, simplistic terms, as a battle of the sexes pitting men against women. Hofstede's work is more ambitious. It defines broad behavioral patterns that influence how groups of people act, allowing us to understand the objectives they prioritize in order to improve their living standards and ensure their survival.

According to the above, societies with supposedly male cultural patterns are more assertive and competitive. They tend to focus more on results and individual accomplishments. Meanwhile, societies with an ostensibly female culture are more empathetic. They emphasize interpersonal harmony and communal relationships. In such cultures, **being the best at something is not the end goal.** Instead, the objective is for everyone to be a little bit better off tomorrow than they were yesterday. Each of these cultural patterns, then, determines what priorities guide decision-making at the personal and collective levels. While a society or organization with masculine traits will favor rationality when making decisions, one with feminine traits will adopt a more empathetic, emotional vision.



## A complex ISSUE



Earlier in this article, we mentioned how female leaders in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Taiwan, and New Zealand are being praised for their response to the pandemic in comparison to their male counterparts. And in all this praise, the traits mentioned above repeatedly come into play: resilience, pragmatism, benevolence, faith in collective common sense, mutual assistance, and humility are often mentioned as the keys behind these women's success.

It would be easy — but incorrect — to therefore conclude that women are better leaders than men. The truth is more complicated than that.

It may be that countries led by women are dealing more successfully with the pandemic not because they're led by women but rather because, in these societies, there are more women calling the shots in positions of power. (The election of a female head-of-state, then, would only be a reflection of a broader status quo.)

Greater inclusion and diversity lead to broader perspectives, whether on Covid-19 or any other pressing issue. They enable more complete, all-encompassing solutions, which account for more points of view.

*The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report* from 2020 classifies countries according to their gender parity performance. Those countries that have fought most effectively against the pandemic and are led by women occupy a prominent place on the list. The report also reveals that these same countries have a noteworthy number of women in all political roles.

**We can therefore surmise that more equal societies are also better managed.**

In these countries, power is reinforced by the complementary contributions of diversity.

**In more diverse and inclusive ecosystems, leadership is motivated by supposed “feminine qualities.” Many of these qualities should sound familiar: empathy, resilience, flexibility, compassion, willingness to listen, and collaboration. These traits are different from those associated with the traditional exercise of power, centered on management, supervision, and control.**

It should be mentioned, of course, that these gender traits or qualities reflect social perceptions and stereotypes. Women can adopt masculine management styles and vice versa. Nevertheless, environments with equal gender representation tend to make more solid and informed decisions. Their leadership also tends to endorse supposed feminine values.

However, **these binary distinctions are not absolutes.** As explained in Hofstede’s work, the dimensions that characterize a culture — and, therefore, a society or an organization — must be understood in terms of (greater or lesser) degrees. No single option can be embraced in solitude. And science seems to back this view.



## The scientific APPROACH

**Can these supposed differences between feminine and masculine cultures be explained in scientific terms? What does neuroscience tell us?** As the French neurologist Pierre-Marie Lledo explains, in his book *The brain in the 21st century*, neuroscience allows us to recognize and name the regions and nervous systems involved in mental functions as diverse as language, dreams, memory, and decision-making.

The scientific world has, for many long years, been interested in the differences between how men and women behave. This question has even produced analyses about morphology and male and female brains. There's still no universal consensus, but it's worth reviewing the last twenty years of research on the matter.

In the 1990s, the American psychologist John Gray popularized the topic with his book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. Published in 1992 and focused on romantic relationships, Gray suggests that **men and women are intrinsically different. Harmony across gender lines, then, depends on acknowledging and accepting these differences**

Gray was criticized for simplifying human psychology and individuality through stereotypes. But his book was a hit: it sold over 50 million copies, was translated to over 50 languages, and its author became a renowned public speaker, working for many Fortune 500 companies.

For years, the theories Gray based his book on were supported by science. One significant study, *Intelligence in Men and Women is a Gray and White Matter*, was carried out by researchers from the University of California, Irvine, in 2005. It found that men, on average, have 6.5 times more gray matter than women, while women have 10 times more white matter than men. Gray matter is related to the information processing centers of the brain, while white matter facilitates connections between these centers. The study's authors suggested this might explain why men are believed to excel at pure processing power, while women perform better at integrating information from different regions in the brain. The study also pointed out that the fibers connecting the right and left sides of the brain are 10% thicker in women, who also enjoy wider peripheral vision than men.



# According to the researchers, these apparent differences could affect how men and women make decisions.

**If so, such insights could be utilized by organizations to set up training courses, generate awareness around various decision-making styles, and finetune sales strategies.**

Nevertheless, a recent study directed by the neuroscientist Lise Eliot, from the Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, which was the first to coalesce research in this area into a single mega-synthesis, flatly contradicted the above findings. Instead, it asserted there were hardly any differences between male and female brains. This position had already been gaining ground through the work of British neurobiologist Gina Rippon, as documented in her book *Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female Brain*, published in 2019.

According to Eliot's investigation, men's brains are approximately 11% larger than women's. When differences exist, in terms of structure or lateralization regardless of size, gender explains only 1% of the variation. Magnetic resonance studies have been unable to find significant differences between men and women in terms of verbal, spatial, or emotional processing. Indeed, Eliot highlights that the amygdala — an olive-sized part of the temporal lobe that's crucial for socioemotional behavior — is barely 1% bigger in men than in women.



# TRAITS of feminine culture

Keeping the above in mind, we can still argue, in line with Hofstede, that a society or an organization with strong **female cultural traits** will focus on its emotional impact first and foremost. (Again, though, these traits are not absolutes and may not be directly connected to the presence of a woman in charge.)

Meanwhile, **in a more traditionally masculine society or organization, the focus will be on more logical and rational approaches.** In this sense, and following Hofstede, organizations that adopt a more feminine culture can analyze the impact of their decisions from a broader point of view, one that considers the social and communal effect.

These companies are also prone to analyzing their impact on the preferences and experiences of their clients, consumers, and everyone else who might be affected by their operations.

**A feminine culture is also more receptive to stimuli from its environment and ecosystem – and can discover more alternatives to face a profound crisis or turning point.**

In today's uncertain landscape, **an organization would be better prepared with a feminine – rather than a masculine – mindset.**

In our current corporate world, several examples are proving this hypothesis, including GM, Krug Champagne, Oracle, Hewlett-Packard, Tesla, Netflix, and Yellow Pages. All of these companies endured crises or transformations and ended up redefining their business models. In some cases, they not only redefined their own model, but rewrote the rules of the game in their entire sector. We only need to remember how Netflix spearheaded the streaming era.

Many of these companies, though not all, are led by women. Mary Barra has been chief executive of General Motors since 2014. She sat in the driver's seat to steer the American auto company past the aftershocks of the last financial crisis, moving it into the tech space and towards the development of autonomous vehicles.

The Venezuelan executive Maggie Henríquez went through a similar experience when she became President and CEO of Krug Champagne. She was the first Latina to occupy a role of such prestige in the French champagne industry. In a 2014 interview for Azure, she expressed, "For women, and for Hispanic women like me, the recommendation is to take on opportunities. We have everything that companies look for now in a business leader, we have negotiating skills, family values, tradition, women bring this innately. And that is a huge plus. We have a lot of emotional balance that companies need today."

Other examples include the Israeli-American banker Safra A. Catz, CEO of Oracle; Carol Tomé, CEO of UPS; and Meg Whitman, former CEO of HP and Quibi, and board member of Procter & Gamble and General Motors.

**In moments of great transformation and profound crisis at their respective companies, all of them were able to rewrite the rules of the game with a steady hand – and the backing of feminine cultural traits within their organizations.**

To adopt a feminine culture, however, it's not a prerequisite to actually be a woman.

Disruptive male entrepreneurs have followed in the same footsteps as their female counterparts, including Elon Musk, who transformed the auto industry with Tesla; Reed Hastings, who did likewise with Netflix and the entertainment sector; or David Eckert, who changed classifieds with Yellow Pages.



## A roadmap for **REINTERPRETING** the world



The traits we associate with leadership are changing, in part thanks to the transformative effects of the pandemic. And Hofstede's theory offers insight into why this is happening. This new kind of leadership first arose in the world of politics — and today, it allows us to reinterpret the world, societies, and organizations. It's a leadership style organizations were forced to implement during the past year and a half, because people are demanding this style along with new work models and competitive conditions

Obviously, a woman may be naturally prepared to adopt such a leadership style. However, and more importantly, future leaders, men or women, at every level of an organization, should likewise adopt it. Leadership with feminine traits — as defined by Hofstede — has shown us the way forward in our current, constantly-changing world.

**Thus, if our organizations hope to really take this world by storm, they must have leaders that reflect a feminine culture.**

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**By Alberto Bethke, CEO and funding partner of OLIVIA**