

Interview with Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of Liberia
Washington, D.C.
October 17, 2006

Laura Liswood: Please articulate the traits you have identified that make for a great leader.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: I think one of the greatest traits for women leaders is consistency. There are so many forces with which women have to deal.

Women face particular pressures because they are women. Because they bring to the task a certain dimension, or different dimension of sensitivity—sensitivity that may conflict with what the normal decision ought to be. And being consistent in purpose and objective I think is something that a woman brings to leadership.

Liswood: Women really have to show or exhibit courage in a way perhaps that the men don't, perhaps because of their life stories or in some cases they would come to power after their husband or father had been assassinated. That's the story of many of the leaders. But that the courage to step in front of the crowd, tell the difficult stories, tell the difficult truths, and having people scrutinize this woman so much, took an enormous amount of courage. I wonder if you see that in even your own life experience.

Sirleaf: Oh, absolutely. As a matter of fact, I don't think women get to top leadership positions except when they've already demonstrated courage because along the way there are so many pitfalls and obstacles that would deter you and divert you from the courage of your conviction.

Courage is one of the things that women bring to the job. Let's not forget it's an unequal world, and for women to not only achieve equality but to excel takes an extraordinary amount of being different, of being courageous, committed, dedicated. You might even say sometimes intensive and aggressive.

If it's a woman who's applying all of her talents to bring to bear what's needed to achieve a particular goal, then she's called aggressive, of course. A man is probably called assertive. I think it's a demonstration that a woman's commitment is strong and she has the courage of that conviction and is ready to overcome all the odds or to achieve an objective because she knows exactly what she wants. To get there, it just takes a whole lot of extra effort. To reach the top of a leadership ladder on the part of a woman just says a whole lot for what she's been through.

Liswood: I would say that every one of the women leaders that I've interviewed said that the standards by which they thought they were measured was a different standard than the standard by which the men leaders were measured and the tolerance for mistakes is less.

Sirleaf: I think that's true, and let me tell you in my case when one has demonstrated the ability to overcome the odds, to meet the requirements, then men say, 'she's just one of the boys.' All of a sudden then, you take on masculine characteristics, simply because

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you've been able to make it and to excel. They can't say, 'Wait a minute. She remains a woman. And she's achieved this even though she is a woman.' But that's just the way of the world, not fully accepting that you could be you, that you could be a woman, that you can bring to this task what it takes as a woman and still be equal. That's the fun part, because then one has to laugh and say, 'I've arrived.'

Liswood: Women leaders say that women also bring different people to the table than have historically been in the power seats and that, therefore, they get people who have been out of power into power. Has that occurred with you, and in what way?

Sirleaf: Very much so, and in my particular case—for example, in my foreign travel, when I go to meet groups, or bilateral relationship groups, or international meetings—I take with me, most times, someone who's never had the opportunity to meet groups like that or to be someone who's able not only to listen and share but to have an opinion. This is not someone of your peers; this is not someone who's in a particular upper class. But I bring that person because I want to give them a proper perspective, and I want people to also understand that a lack of education is not a lack of intelligence.

For us, where we have large numbers of our women in the information sector who survive and live by their wits and their ability to overcome the odds at that level, they bring us a certain kind of knowledge and experience.

The ones who participate in these meetings are the usual people. But a woman reaches out beyond that—based upon her experience, based upon her interaction—because chances are women have had much more of an opportunity to interact at all levels of society than men. Because she's in charge of the home, children's groups bring her into contact with the parent/teachers association; that's different groups she interacts with. Market women because you have to do the caring and buying for the home, and so only a woman can bring that to the task, I think.

That's how women get to be women leaders, because they bring a different constituency, a different kind of support. They reach back to that same level of the constituency that has helped to enable them to come to power, enable them to excel in their professions. But the corollary to that then becomes how do you win the historically in-power groups over? How do you get them to understand that you're not putting them out but you're just bringing more in?

I think one place to make sure the in-power group accepts what you do when you go beyond the normal is to establish within them your own competence, your own ability, and gain the respect from them for what you're able to bring to the task as a professional. I think that's important. Once that respect is established, then when you move beyond the norm to which they are accustomed, they then begin to question but to also say that

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there must be something to it; and so there's much more acceptability on their part to give it a try. They may then ask what does this bring. What difference does this bring?

And no longer do they question your motive because you've already established yourself among them. I can play the game a normal way and I can win at that game. I can excel at that game equal to or better than you can that breaks the barriers a little bit. There may be some reluctance and some questions, but at least it's accepted on the basis that you can do it and you know what you're doing. And what you do, you do well. So that helps.

Liswood: I also have this parable belief—I'm actually writing a book on diversity called *The Loudest Duck*. It has a parable on the Elephant and the Mouse. The parable is that if you are an elephant in a room, you feel very entitled, you feel very much that you can speak in your loud voice. You very much have a vision of where you want to go. You're not really concerned about others. And if you're the elephant and the mouse is in the room, how much do you actually need to know about the mouse in the room? Nothing. Conversely, if you're the mouse in the room, how much do you need to know about the elephant? You need to know *everything* about the elephant. So you develop quite a good skill for figuring out what the elephant's move is, whether it's moving to the left or moving to the right, so you develop this sensitivity to the more dominant group, the elephants.

My belief is that to be a great leader, you need to actually have both of those skill sets. Perhaps men have historically had the elephant role. For example, small countries know a lot more about large countries. Large countries don't always know so much about small countries. Similarly, women may know a lot more about men. I'm wondering if you have seen that in your own framing of issues. What do they know about us versus what we know about them?

Sirleaf: For men and women, too, after a while, when one has accumulated a certain amount of power, you can easily miss the fact that there are little things along the way that can really, really topple you, as big as you are, you miss them. I think that's a major challenge for us as women leaders that come to power—we're part of the mouse set, so to speak, and so we appreciate power corrupts.

After a while, an all-powerful person, even a woman, can all of a sudden miss those little things. How do we restore that once we get into power? We're always mindful that there is that little thing that we forgot that could then become a major deterrent to some of the bigger goals that one wants to achieve. I and other women leaders must always be mindful of that. That's why when we talk about them bringing into play the unusual, reaching beyond the power set it is exactly because you don't want to miss the mouse. You have to continue to be inclusive.

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Liswood: What would you think would be the benefits of a group of women leaders together like the Council-35 women, heads of state and government—what could they do in your mind?

Sirleaf: Change the world? Yes, I think collectively, identifying issues or institutions in which they want to bring their collective strength to bear can make a difference. For example, calling for the establishment of an agency within the U.N. system that has the full mandate and the resources to respond to the needs of women is something that women leaders around the world, if they came together, can accomplish. They can say, “this has to happen. This is what we want because it’s going to make a difference. And we want the world to respond to this; we want the world leaders and world institutions to respond.” I think it would happen much quicker than it would otherwise. I could be a single voice calling for aid, but if 35 world women leaders say this is what we think. It would make a difference in the lives of the ordinary women; I think the world would listen. And there would be other such issues out there where women could bring their collective power to bear.

Liswood: As you have led the country for nine months now, have you had people say to you that you’re leading differently than a man would?

Sirleaf: Oh, I think so. In my case it’s just the openness of our society, the freedoms that people now enjoy. People have said to me, “Wow!” Sometimes there is criticism from the newspapers and everybody expects the response to be one of the exercising force and clamping down on them. They criticize me, I criticize them—that’s what democracy is all about. It also comes from the self-confidence of having won the leadership position. It’s not like being catapulted into power or getting to that position just by happenstance. When competing as a woman to reach a leadership position, you lose any fear of being different; you’re so self-confident of what you do, you’ve achieved it on the basis of effort. You can afford to be different; you can afford to respond in ways that are consistent with the things you believe in without having to be reactive to what people think you ought to be. And yet, of course, if you want to win re-election, you have to respond to what people are saying, what they want and what they need. Compromise is a way of politics. No matter how strong in your conviction, no matter how courageous in your actions, at some point compromises are necessary along the way to accommodate the views and the feelings of others. Compromise is politics. If you’re too inflexible, then, of course, all your good intentions could be totally disrupted or undermined.

Liswood: Often the biggest challenge for women is identifying trusted advisors: “Who do I turn to in those moments of ultimate decision? How do I know I can trust my advisors?” Some leaders now are making women 50 percent of their cabinet, which has been an interesting proposition. What about you?

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Sirleaf: One of the shortcomings of having been in the business for a long time and having earned the stripes the hard way is that I need to listen to more advice. I tend to think that I can make the hard decisions, because I've done it that way. But I have to be a bit more accommodating. People have told me that, and I have to admit to that.

Liswood: What about 50 percent of the cabinet being women?

Sirleaf: Well, I wish I could set those targets and achieve it, but I didn't approach it that way. I set certain criteria for the cabinet: qualification and competence, no record of human rights abuses, inclusiveness. And then in those case where there women that met those criteria, then of course, they got a margin of preference. To accomplish my development agenda unless I had a woman in charge of finance could not, unless I had a woman in charge of commerce, unless I had a woman in charge of our police. Women are in strategic positions that will determine that I carry out my agenda.

Liswood: So you would know you had those trusted advisors around you.

Sirleaf: That's right. I picked cabinet positions carefully. Very carefully. Very specifically. Very strategically.

Liswood: Last question. Let's go back to your childhood. What values do you think you learned during childhood that you are now using as a leader?

Sirleaf: There are two things that my parents taught me that have stayed with me and have made a big difference in my life: hard work and honesty.

I remember my mother telling me that the only thing that soap and water doesn't remove from you is sin. And so you can do any kind of work, and you can clean it up. And also that the one thing that endures is if people trust you. Trust will take you above everything else you do. So I have held on to those two lessons. Part of my own success in all the many fields in which I've worked, both at home and abroad, are just those two things. I'm called a workaholic; that comes from being brought up to work—to wash your own clothes, to clean the floors, to make your bed every morning and come back and do your chores even as you study a lesson. And the integrity that I bring to the task.

Liswood: Would your parents be surprised that you are now the President of a country? What would they say?

Sirleaf: They would be surprised because my life has been burned upside down. My early life didn't seem to be moving in that direction. I got married right after high school and had four children before going back to college. And so at that time, I was moving towards being a housewife and an English teacher. So they saw the potential, but I think they would be surprised that I stayed with a goal and saw it through to final success. At the same time they would be pleased.

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Liswood: As all the women of the world are pleased that you're President of Liberia. Thank you very much for your time and for the honor of visiting with us today. We wish you all the best. Thank you.

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