

# LUISS



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## **UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS DO FEMALE LEADERS EMERGE? Two female case studies**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	p. 5
INTRODUCTION.....	p. 6
CHAPTER 1: IRON LADIES: MRS. THATCHER AND MA ELLEN.....	p. 9
1.1 Margaret Thatcher: from her birth to the election as Britain’s Prime Minister in 1979.....	p. 10
1.1.1 Family and schooling in Grantham.....	p. 10
1.1.2 Oxford and the first steps in politics.....	p. 11
1.1.3 Entering the Conservative Party.....	p. 12
1.1.4 Thatcher’s political rises and downfalls.....	p. 13
1.1.5 Becoming Great Britain’s First Female Prime Minister.....	p. 15
1.1.6 Reflections.....	p. 16
1.2 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: from her birth to the election as Liberia’s President in 2005.....	p. 17
1.2.1 Liberia and the early life of Ellen Johnson.....	p. 17
1.2.2 Marriage, violence and exile.....	p. 18
1.2.3 The first years of civil war in Liberia.....	p. 19
1.2.4 Sirleaf’s first run for election and imprisonment.....	p. 20
1.2.5 The end of civil war and Sirleaf’s second run for election.....	p. 21
1.2.6 Liberia’s First Female President.....	p. 22
1.2.7 Reflections.....	p. 23
CHAPTER 2: SCIENTIFIC FRAMEWORK .....	p. 25
2.1 Cultural variables.....	p. 27
2.1.1 Historical Framework.....	p. 27
2.1.2 The family: private and public sphere .....	p. 29
2.1.3 Personal Background .....	p. 32
2.2 Political variables.....	p. 34
2.3 Reflections.....	p. 37

CHAPTER 3: FROM CHRONICLE HISTORY TO SCIENCE: POLITICAL PATHS ANALYZED THROUGH SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH.....p. 39

    3.1 Margaret Thatcher .....p. 40

    3.2 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf .....p. 47

CONCLUSIONS .....p. 53

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....p. 59

ITALIAN SUMMARY .....p. 63

*“I do not know anyone who has got to the top without hard work. That is the recipe. It will not always get you to the top, but should get you pretty near”.*

Margaret Thatcher in Her Own Words, *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2013

*“The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough”.*

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Graduation Speech at Harvard 2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In motivating my thesis request in early June 2018, I wrote to my thesis supervisor: “As a young High School student, despite my interests being spread among a wide array of topics, I knew my long-term project was that of working - one day - for an international organization for the protection and enhancement of women and of their role in society. This has been my goal ever since and being able to develop this work would mean a lot to me. Indeed, it would be the perfect conclusion of three years which have been very significant for my future, but it would also represent the start of a new adventure which hopefully will lead me to reach my goals”. To be able to research on the topic of female empowerment and leadership, allowed me also to conduct an introspective analysis regarding my academic interests and what motivates me to follow this path.

For having given me this opportunity, I want to deeply thank my supervisor, Professor Lorenzo De Sio, and also his teaching assistant, Dr. Aldo Paparo for having followed me throughout this journey and for having given me important suggestions which have surely contributed to ameliorating this work. Furthermore, I want to thank my family, which since I was very young has always endowed me with freedom and responsibility and has taught me the importance of making my opinion to be heard. I am truly grateful to my uncle, Sandro Succi, Professor of Italian and Latin languages, for his corrections and remarks.

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# Introduction

This dissertation and its title were born from the strong will of shedding light on the paths, circumstances, and characteristics that have allowed some women to access the most prominent positions in their respective political worlds in a time when the latter were predominantly male-dominated fields. The research question, which is also the title, namely, “Under what conditions do female leaders emerge?”, is extremely representative of the aim of this work. In fact, through three main chapters, the paper will try to uncover some shared behaviors, similar circumstances, and even peculiarities, and to explain those with the help of quite many pieces of scholarly work. While the first chapter is mainly based on two books which have been defined by the critiques as the most faithful biographies of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Margaret Thatcher, the second one will be focused on presenting the relevant scientific research. Subsequently, the third one will create a new framework of analysis by combining the previous two in order to express its final deductions. The dissertation will reach the conclusion that in different contexts and timeframes, women have had to, and will have to rebuild themselves and their “femininity”, so to fit a certain model of “leader” that voters can accept.

The means and conditions - whether cultural, political, or psychological - that allow a woman to find her way through the “labyrinth” (Klenke, 1997) of life and to reach the peak of political ambition, constitute a largely unexplored field for scholarly research. In fact, leaving out Duverger (1955), Eagly and Carli (2007), and Rowland (1984), only a few other authors within the underlying bibliography can be said to have produced a comprehensive research based on multiple case studies, which aims to uncover the above-mentioned “means and conditions” that bring a woman to have political power. As acknowledged by different scholars in the field (Nkomo & Ngmabi, 2009; Thomas and Adams, 2010; Sernak, 2004), the literature is lacking, and the few works that are present are rather based on a single issue or circumstance rather than on a general phenomenon or tendency. This dissertation does not aim at filling a gap in the already lacking field of women’s empowerment in political science. Indeed, it aims at enriching the already available information by coming up with an original analysis that might provide for a new point of view which will be useful for future research.

In setting the outline of this dissertation, a recurrent question was: what is the most effective strategy to make an analytical work that aims at being as encompassing as possible, but also specific? The answer was to take under examination a few case studies and to set a fair number of variables so to be able to make a comparison under different points of view. However, to make such analytical work as fruitful as possible, the case studies should have also been quite different between each other,

so to allow for an encompassing analysis to be carried out. With this idea in mind, two case studies were chosen: Margaret Thatcher, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. In fact, they represent different continents, cultures, histories, political settings, and time-frames. On one hand, Margaret Thatcher has been the first female Prime Minister of the UK, firstly elected in 1979 in a parliamentary system, during a time in which not many women were allowed to enter Parliament, let alone become Heads of Government. On the other hand, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been the first female Head of State in the history of Liberia and Africa. She was first elected in 2005, in a newly established presidential system which was rehabilitated after two decades of civil war which caused severe damages to the most vulnerable groups of society, women included. Beyond the apparent disparity between these two characters, one other reason helped to make a conscious choice among the possible female leaders worldwide. In fact, even with such high requirements, the combinations of powerful women who possess different characteristics that can be used to propel a fruitful analysis in huge. Yet, female leaders coming from Asia and Latin America have not been considered because, as extensively reported by Jalalzai (2004), in those countries it is frequent to have women accessing power through nepotism and other forms of unfair competition which, if taken under consideration, would invalidate the scope of this dissertation.

As it can be evinced from the “Table of Contents”, this analysis is tripartite, therefore it is built on three central chapters. In fact, after this introduction which aims at briefly laying forward the motivations that propel this work and its structure, there will follow a biographical chapter. In the latter, the personal experiences of Thatcher and Sirleaf are going to be examined and reassembled in order to give more relevance to the details that are fundamental for the analysis. Without any intention to underestimate the accomplishments of the two women, some events had to be left behind to render a clear and concise biographical framework that is indispensable to draw the appropriate conclusion in the third chapter.

The second chapter treats a quite extensive body of scholarly work on a wide array of topics, within which there are those of women empowerment, leadership, gender stereotyping, and voting behavior. Also, for what concerns the scholars whose work is going to be mentioned, this research has aimed at selecting them so to create a range of people who wrote in different historical periods and who came from different cultures and schools of thought. Yet, this has only been done for the sake of precision, in fact, the differences concerning the authors and their views will not be acknowledged throughout the research. This chapter is going to lay forward many variables which have been divided according to two sub-categories which are: cultural and political. The cultural variables have also been sub-categorized into: historical framework, the family in the public and private sphere, and personal background. Instead, the political variables have been addressed through

a holistic approach that does not entail any subdivision. One adjective that is often mentioned in this chapter, but that will be addressed only in the final “Reflections” is that of “feminine”. The concept of femininity is indeed very abstract and yet, also very concrete in the mindset of many, who use it to describe the behavior, habits and way of being of the stereotypical "woman" in a given society. Despite the little attention that this research initially gives to the concept of femininity, it is not necessary to have a sharp eye to note that it is recurrent throughout the whole research. Light will be shed on this regard only in the conclusion, which will try to “connect the dots” and prove how that of femininity is the overarching theme of the dissertation.

The third and last chapter aims at combining the previous two so to create a confrontation between the personal experience of Thatcher and Sirleaf, and scientific knowledge. In this chapter, the biographical information is disassembled and examined in light of what different scholars have written on the subject. In this perspective, it takes the form of a discursive analysis of causes and effects for each one of them. In fact, the chapter will be subdivided into two parts, each one of whom will speak of one of the two characters. Respecting, for what is possible, the chronological order of events, the chapter unravels their stories by using ten variables. Then, below each one of the two subsections, there will be present a table showing the ten variables and their positive or negative relation to the biographical records.

These two tables will be then combined in one in the “Conclusions”, where some deductions will be drawn. As previously mentioned, the aim of this work is not that of uncovering new paths on this rather unattended field, but indeed that of putting forward an original piece of research that might serve to shed light on some aspects that could be pivotal in future developments of the field.



# 1.

## **Iron Ladies: Mrs. Thatcher and Ma Ellen**

Margaret Roberts and Ellen Johnson, better known as Margaret Thatcher and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, at a first glance seem to have very little in common despite the fact that they have both been the first women to be at the head of the government in their respective countries. However, there is more than the eye meets. Two different continents, two different countries, different cultures and values, a different historical moment and two different political visions. Yet, they are both women, and this is the first and most important common factor, which makes the two characters suitable for an in-depth analysis of their personal history, personality and political vision.

In this first chapter, the two female figures will be analyzed from different points of view. From their political affiliation to their career, to their personal lives and experiences, any relevant detail will be highlighted so to give a complete picture of both of them. Mainly through the works of their personal biographers, and with the support of other articles, this chapter will present Margaret Thatcher and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in their entirety. Yet, before starting to discuss the topic of this chapter, one point owes to be made for the sake of clarity. This dissertation has the purpose of analyzing under which conditions female leaders have the opportunity to emerge as political leaders in a setting that should be the less biased possible. Therefore, this analysis is going to concern only those female leaders that became prominent political figures without having familial ties with anybody that could have influenced their rise to the top. In fact, it would be useless to include such elements in this research because they would lead to the creation of a bias. Therefore, the findings and inferences that are going to be presented, can be applied only to past and future cases of women whose political success is not to be considered the outcome of the practicing of nepotism or other unfair means of competition.

## **1.1 Margaret Thatcher: from her birth to the election as Britain's Prime Minister in 1979**

### **1.1.1 Family and schooling in Grantham**

Margaret Roberts was born on 13 October 1925 in Grantham, Lincolnshire. Since her childhood, she received an unusual upbringing. In fact, one of her former co-workers and prominent biographer, Jonathan Aitken (2014), has extensively described Thatcher's character by linking her adult personality to the strict, if not severe, education and lifestyle that she endured as a child in Grantham, which is, according to him, the primary cause of her temperament, drive, and strength. Frugality was imposed on the whole family by Mr Roberts, who could have probably afforded more than he allowed himself and his family to have, but who seemed also obsessed with saving money and looking in perspective at the future (Blundell, 2008). Despite this, and many other impositions that came onto young Margaret Roberts with no possibility of contestation, she admired her father and never disagreed with him. According to the interviews, and also to Mrs Thatcher herself – who sometimes would let a few insights of her childhood show – both Mr and Mrs Roberts were strong-opinionated, strait-laced parents. None of them was submissive towards the other, and their clear-cut division of duties for what concerned the education of their daughters made it possible for each of them to exercise a great influence on the latter. The mother was the chief of the house and apparently, she took her job very seriously, which is the main reason that led her in conflict with her youngest daughter – Margaret – who never learned how to properly be a housewife. However, young Margaret would mainly entertain herself with the company of the father. Mr Alfred Roberts never received a formal education, however, he was a voracious reader, passionate of politics and an expert in conveying strong and powerful messages to the masses due to his roles as a preacher and politician in Grantham (Blundell, 2008). He was respected and listened to, was invited to deliver speeches and was consulted on important political matters.

Probably due to all of the above-mentioned skills and capacities, Alfred Roberts was, at the eyes of his youngest daughter, a real inspiration. Yet, the toughness and strictness of her parents instilled in Margaret Roberts a strength of character that was both unusual and disarming. Already at a young age she held strong opinions and was not scared of remarking them despite who was her interlocutor. She had disagreements and discussions with teachers and peers alike and was never scared of bringing forward her ideas and opinions while fiercely defending them. Her father taught her the basics of discussion, public speaking, and leadership, and Roberts not only mastered these skills and used them throughout her whole life, but gradually improved and sharpened her techniques (Aitken, 2014).

### 1.1.2 Oxford and the first steps in politics

She had always been an outstanding student (Moore, 2013), however, it was exactly when she was nine-years-old that she began her climb to reach the top by entering a prestigious grammar school. In every school she attended, she was diligent in her homework, hard-working, and at the top of her class. Nevertheless, the toughest moment for Ms Roberts as a young and determined student, happened when she decided to apply to Oxford. Despite a few people who gave her a hard time while filling her application, she ended up being admitted, and there she started to be actively involved in political associations within the university and became one of the representatives of the Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA). Her life, as recalled by her biographer, would go by between her studies and her commitment to the association. She was still a brilliant and outstanding student, however, those spent at Oxford were not joyful years for Roberts. In fact, her tough personality and her custom of being a go-getter kept her from developing solid and long-lasting ties with her peers. She worked on her studies and on her politics, but was never integrated with a specific group, nor had she real “friends”, as much as she did not have any at home.

The detachment from the outside world and from her peers led her to have an incomparably sharp mind, but at the same time to have some “handicap” in developing personal ties with others. The apathy she developed has echoed throughout her whole life, in the working field as much as in her personal life. Mrs Thatcher was often accused to work for the interests of the few, disregarding the problems of the lower classes. Even within her own party, as she grew in her position she started to become less conciliatory about disagreements in regard to her own strategies and ideas. However, those whom in the years became particularly close to Thatcher and acquainted with her personality, have reported that she showed a more empathetic and caring side of herself towards the people she worked with. She showed interest and compassion for their problems and their personal lives, a characteristic that she never let reveal when speaking in front of a public (Harris, 2013). The “Iron Lady”, as the people who worked with her confirmed, had a softer heart. However, probably due to her personal success and to the fear of being condemned as a woman who could not handle stressful situations and emotions, she demonstrated to be resilient and not driven by emotions, but rather from a utilitarian mindset.

Strangely enough, at Oxford, Margaret Roberts never studied anything that regarded politics. At university, Thatcher decided to earn a scientific degree with a focus on chemistry. Yet, after years spent studying the sciences, she was sure of becoming a Member of Parliament (MP). As her biographer points out (Aitken, 2014) it was never clear when exactly Thatcher decided that she would have pursued a career in parliament, but as soon as she found her path, she started to tirelessly work

in order to reach her goal. In Oxford, through her active participation in the OUCA, she had already made a name for herself, but her journey started only after having earned the chemistry degree.

### **1.1.3 Entering the Conservative Party**

It did not pass a long time after graduation before Thatcher was noted by some Tory exponent. She was impressively active within the youth groups of the party and her speeches made a great impression particularly on one back-bencher: Alfred Bossom. Her first general election happened in 1950, and from that moment on she rose in the ranks of the Conservatory Party (Aitken, 2014). Her rise was not smooth, however, through a combination of hard work, passion, commitment, and “favorable conditions”, she was able to recover from every downfall, and eventually to get ahead of the party. Yet, the election of 1950 marked the first of Thatcher’s defeats, even though she was still praised by her party and by her adversaries for her speaking techniques and for her campaign. Those have been years of consolidation for Thatcher, a time in which the person that we came to know as Britain’s first female Prime Minister was taking shape and defining her features. In fact, she used that time to show off her skills in public speaking, her fierceness in defending her arguments, and most importantly her position on matters such as economic policy, relationship with European institutions, and labor policies. Moreover, she married Denis Thatcher, another member of the Tory Party who has been an important figure in Margaret’s life, but who also left her alone in many occasions, demonstrating of being incapable to deal with her dedication to politics.

At the age of 26, she was married and had already fought two general elections, losing both in the same constituency, but also managing to highlight her skills and capacities so to be noted by a great number of politicians in her party and within their adversaries. Moreover, she decided to try the bar exams to become a lawyer, so to have a higher degree of influence on political and law matters within Parliament. Thatcher was forced to slow down in 1953, when she discovered she was pregnant and had to abandon politics for some time. Yet, while pregnant, she was able to study for the bar exams, and after having given birth, while she was supposed to be dedicated to motherhood, she achieved a good score on the exam and started her apprenticeship at a famous law firm. Even in this case, she showed an impressive sense of time-management and a strength that was for herself a reason for pride. (Aitken, 2014).

Yet, it is undeniable that Margaret Thatcher’s life since she entered politics was mainly dedicated to the latter than to her family or husband. She faced great obstacles going back to politics after the birth of her children. The political field was, at the time, filled with male chauvinism and

prejudice against women in power. This prejudice did not come only from the men in politics, but also from associations of women who had a large say on institutional matters. Thatcher was often criticized for not being enough dedicated to her family, for being an uncaring mother and wife, and for not raising her own children. Yet, in such a frenetic and electric moment for politics, an expert and fiery character such as that of Mrs Thatcher could not be left in the dark for too long, especially because she knew how to counter-fight her political adversaries. What was previously referred to as “favorable conditions” when speaking of Thatcher’s rise, was exactly pointing to these lucky circumstances that allowed her skills to shine out of the dark hole in which she was confined because she was an ambitious woman. In a less tormented time for Tories, Thatcher would have probably been left out of the business, but she represented a concrete chance to win new seats in Parliament, and they could not risk losing because of the prejudices that were put among her.

It must be underlined how Margaret Thatcher used to give to her job and tasks the utmost importance, despite the role and position she was covering. She would always give her best, prioritizing the political vision of the party to anything else in her life. Ambition used to drive her in all circumstances and she knew very well the price for her success. This drive led her to appear unfriendly and indeed, very much forthright (Harris, 2013). However, she tried to manage this lack of empathy and throughout her political career not only was she awarded more and more relevant roles, but she also grew as a person and politician. The first years in Parliament proved to be very fruitful to Thatcher. She was lucky for having “won” the opportunity to present a bill despite her not-so-relevant position as a back-bencher. She exposed herself and despite the numerous “U-turns” she had to face, – more or less willingly – she made a name for herself and started to be looked at as a jolly for the Conservatives and a real threat for other parties (Aitken, 2014). Mrs Thatcher knew her way around economics and politics, analyzed every bill and found its flaws so to turn every situation in a victory for herself and her party. However, apart from the immediate exposition that characterized her entrance in Parliament, she was still a back-bencher and as such, she did not have a relevant role, nor a saying on important matters.

#### **1.1.4 Thatcher’s political rises and downfalls**

“Only” in 1959, Margaret Thatcher arrived at the front bench. She was “the youngest woman ever appointed to ministerial office” (Aitken, 2014, ch. 6) and was appointed as Minister of Pensions and National Insurance both due to fortunate circumstances and to the skills she gave proof of having

in her field. Unfortunately, the time of the Tories as the first party in Parliament ended a few years later, when they became the opposition party against the labor government guided by Sir Alec Douglas-Home. However, in this new legislature, Mrs Thatcher was given, as a front-bencher, six different portfolios and a great deal of responsibility (Blundell, 2008). She sized her opportunities and created herself others so to shine both as an individual minister in her party, and as a member of the Conservative Party against the Labor one. She was incomparable when it came to debating and turning adversaries in ‘laughing stocks’, and as the opposition party, the Tories gave her many opportunities to use this talent of hers to mock the government and destroy their bill proposals in front of the whole Parliament. She was often praised for her speeches and finally gained much-earned support by even the most skeptical members of her party.

Nevertheless, it must be recalled that, especially in politics, the more one is exposed, the more one is keen to be the target of unlucky waves of discontent. Margaret Thatcher was occupying quite a prominent seat both for her age and for her sex, and no doubt she was an easy subject to blame on the part of both the opposition and the population. One remarkable example has been the period when she was awarded the unfortunate nickname of “Milk Snatcher”. By introducing a bill which aimed at withdrawing free milk from schools due in the first place to lack of consumption, she failed to see the potential for personal denigration and let this event to unhorse her for some time (Aitken, 2014). In fact, Thatcher was attacked by the opposition not as a politician, but as a mother and wife, which meant a huge downfall of support by the public, who at the time was driven by values such as integrity and respect for gender roles within the family. She was made to look like an uncaring mother, and this did not profit her role as a politician. As it is well-known and reported in the history books, Margaret Thatcher not only recovered from this unexpected downturn, but she kept growing and learning, being patient when it was required, and being able to seize an opportunity when she saw one. Unlike other candidates, she demonstrated to be able to carry the often-overwhelming weight of politics, to take a hit when she had to, and then make up for her mistakes. And it was exactly this ability of hers to “stand-up” in times of crisis that brought her to become a candidate for the leadership of the party. In a time of crisis for the Conservative Party as have been the 1970s, Margaret Thatcher raised the moral of her colleagues and demonstrated to have faith in her ideas and in the future of the party itself. When a candidate that she had supported in the previous years, but that was unable to live up to his role, decided to step down, she understood it was her time to step up. Again, a combination of luck and ability drove her forward in her rise within the party.

At that point she had been in politics for quite a few years, she had gained the trust of her colleagues and demonstrated to her opponents that she was a fearsome candidate. Moreover, the overall political setting, which saw an uncertain leadership for the party, a growing hatred for the

*status quo*, and a handful of people remaining as points of reference for the voters, created a degree of momentum for Mrs Thatcher. Her campaign was conducted in a Machiavellian style (Aitken, 2014). Through calculated misinformation and by making everyone think she was not close to getting “enough” votes, her campaign manager was able to turn many politicians in her favor. Surprisingly even for her, in the first ballot, she came to be the first candidate and for the second ballot, which had been fixed to be six days later, many votes were swung in her favor. Partially due to the techniques of her campaign manager, and partially due to the excitement that spread through the population when the possibility of being the first Western country with a female leader became real, in 1974 Margaret Thatcher became the leader of the Conservative Party.

### **1.1.5 Becoming Great Britain’s First Female Prime Minister**

Despite the initial excitement caused by such a strangely new and inexperienced situation of having a woman in power, disenchantment soon hit hard on Thatcher and on her party. She was passed onto a difficult situation, with a fragmented party and a few new faces that could be considered good enough to replace the well-known milestones. She was cautious. This whole combination of unfavorable factors made leadership a far-from-easy job for her. Yet, as previously mentioned, she was able to fall and rise back again, stronger than before, and with new incentives. She had accepted a task that no woman was ever allowed to accomplish, and she knew it. As recalled by her biographer, Margaret Thatcher “was not interested in the possibilities of defeat” (Aitken, 2014, ch.13) and she never thought to give up, but kept fighting for her beliefs and ideas. The final stroke was accomplished through the induction of a motion of “no confidence” for the government in charge – namely the Labor government – and through a safe campaign with no impulsive actions. Her new role brought to Thatcher a great deal of wisdom and caution that she previously did not seem to have quite developed. From an aggressive and passionate speaker, Lady Thatcher turned to use a more rational and controlled language (Rose, 1988). The night before elections, May 3, 1979, she professed to be calm and to know already that she would win. The day after, she went to kiss the hands of the Queen and became Britain’s first female Prime Minister.

### 1.1.6 Reflections

No biography can make justice to the braveness of Margaret Thatcher. Her accomplishments are too often overlooked because today the world is different than it was forty years ago. However, when contextualized in the socio-economic and political setting of that time, her story is nothing short of extraordinary. Already as a child, Thatcher fought to be at the top of the class, and when she reached it, she always managed to enter a more competitive environment. Yet, it is likely that not one person would have bet on herself if not her father. And until when she was nominated Prime Minister, many people were absolutely sure that she was nothing more than a shooting star. Indeed, she turned to be a record-breaker despite all the obstacles and critiques she had to face due to the diverging image of women she was representing. She entered Parliament at a younger age than many of her male peers, in the meanwhile she managed to build a name for herself, to marry and to become a lawyer. Furthermore, in times where women were usually either workers or mothers, she became a mother and a front-bencher just within a few years after having entered Parliament for the first time.

However, it is also true that Margaret Thatcher's success came at a high price. She wanted to look forthright and unbreakable to the people and to her adversaries, but this lack of empathy proved to be her Achille's heel on many occasions both in the private and public life. Furthermore, another blind-spot was her family. Personal attacks on her role as a mother and a wife were both unforeseen and devastating for Thatcher, and according to those who knew her personally, she was aware of having given too little importance to her children and husband. Despite the years that she spent in politics, her family and personal matters seem to have remained for her a taboo and her major weakness. Yet, Margaret Thatcher was raised to be a strong, independent and successful woman. Since her childhood, she was instructed to think for herself and compete to be knowledgeable in any field. She was used to hard work and to keep her feelings and emotions for herself rather than showing them to the public. One could argue that she "had" to be this way because she was competing for nothing less than the charge as a Prime Minister in a field which was well-known for being male-dominated and in which any appearance of femininity – namely, fragility - could have ruined one's career. Thatcher was despised by men and women alike because her presence in politics represented the breaking of an old and unwritten code of behavior that used to drive many societies at the time, and that partially still does. Yet, she was able to convince first the men of the British Conservative Party, and then an entire population, that she could rule, and she did for longer than anybody who came before and after herself.



## **1.2 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: from her birth to the election as Liberia's President in 2005**

### **1.2.1 Liberia and the early life of Ellen Johnson**

Ellen Johnson was born on October 29, 1939, in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. Her personal history has nothing to do with that of Margaret Thatcher, yet, they have been associated multiple times for their accomplishments and personal characteristics. If Thatcher's history was "nothing short of extraordinary", Ellen Johnson's one is barely believable. Since a few days after her birth, she was thought to be one of a kind, in fact, a prophet who visited her parents' house said to them: "*Ma, de pekin wa' na easy oh*" which literally means "This child will be great" (Cooper, 2017, ch.1). Of course, nobody took those words much seriously at the time, but once she became Liberia's first female leader, the same words started to acquire some relevance and the word spread that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was predicted to become a leader. Despite the great future that was waiting for herself, unlike Thatcher's one, Sirleaf's adolescence was not characterized by any peculiar event.

Liberia is an African State on the West Coast, facing the Atlantic Ocean. The State is very small, and it has borders with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast. Its name stems from its own history, in fact, Liberia was the land of freed slaves who were usually the byproduct of interracial rape and therefore used to have a light skin. These slaves, due to their blood ties, were freed *en masse* and sent back to the African continent, so they stopped being a menace for slave-traders in the United States (Scully, 2016). However, the territory of Liberia was already occupied by different ethnic groups that lived in a precarious equilibrium between themselves. The State was made independent at the end of the 19th century and was dominated by the minority of African-Americans coming from the United States and with superior knowledge in matters of politics and administration. Social classes and social status were based on differences in ethnicity and skin-color. What made Ellen Johnson lucky, especially during the two civil wars, was her parents' diversified ethnicities, which made her suitable to be associated both with the ruling class – namely, the light-skinned African-Americans – and with an important tribe of which her grandfather was the chief.

As it happens in the majority of civil wars, during the Liberian conflict ethnic and religious differences were exacerbated and often used to polarize society and create an "us vs. them" environment which favors the procrastination of the conflict (Levy, 2010). In sum, to have connections to two important groups in the country had its own advantages. However, the truth is that Ellen and her family were not part of any of them. Mr Johnson was a lawyer and for a long time provided an income for the whole family. However, when he fell sick the family had to reduce the expenses and give up some of its previous luxuries. Ellen Johnson, up to that point, had attended the

best private and elitist schools in Monrovia. She was passionate and dedicated, yet, after her father stopped working, she had no one paying the tuition fees, and she had to give up her dream of studying in the United States as many other girls of her age could afford to do. What happened next can be defined as a “temporary deviation” from her predicted path, an “off-road” in the predefined itinerary of her future. In fact, instead of going to school as she thought she would have done, she married James “Doc” Sirleaf, who went to school in the United States and then came back to work for the government. By the time she was twenty-two, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was a full-time mum of four, running around the city the whole day to manage the house business and to bring the kids to school (Cooper, 2017). Yet, a few years later she probably understood what she was missing on, and decided to apply, with her husband, for a scholarship to earn a degree in the U.S. When they were both awarded the scholarship, she had to choose between turning her life upside down or continuing to take care of her family and especially of her children, who needed a maternal presence. Finally following the path that was laid before her since she was an infant, she “chose the moon” (Cooper, 2017, ch.1) and decided that even if only for two years rather than four, she would go and earn her associate degree in accounting.

### **1.2.2 Marriage, violence and exile**

Unfortunately, those years did not go as smooth as she was probably hoping. Her husband turned out to be a possessive and violent master that made her life much harder than expected. After graduation, they went back home, and both found a fulfilling job in two different ministries. However, even if they were back in Monrovia, Mr Sirleaf became progressively aggressive and started not only to seriously injure his wife but also to menace her with guns. The more she was successful and happy about her new life and job in Monrovia, the more things would deteriorate at home. Finally, Ellen Sirleaf was able to get a divorce. Her husband, who could have opposed the divorce since he was endowed with authority over his family, did not show up in court but menaced to take away the children from her. A promise that he actually kept. At that point Mrs Sirleaf had been the subject of domestic violence for many years, she endured physical and psychological pain, and yet, she found the courage to earn a degree, leave her children for two years, and finally get a job that allowed her to use her skills and to work passionately, but most importantly to be independent.

Having ended her marriage and finding herself with no children to take care of, Sirleaf steadily focused on her job. She still worked at the Ministry of Treasury and was becoming an important point of reference for her colleagues, other than an expert in economics and administration of public funds.

A pivotal event that year – namely, 1969 – happened when she met a Professor from Harvard, Mr Papanek (Cooper, 2017). He was impressed by her knowledgeability on economic matters and economic policies. She was competent on a wide array of subjects and, throughout the years spent at the Ministry, had developed a critical perspective of the policies of the government, which allowed her to develop better and more sustainable alternatives to the current one. Unlike her male colleagues, who used to spend their time praising the government for its successes, completely overlooking the economic stagnation and gap between upper and lower class in Liberia, she was willing to speak the truth, and Papanek gave her this chance. In fact, he invited her to speak at a conference which he held in Liberia, and she took this opportunity to give a speech which is remembered as the “kleptocracy speech”. Sirleaf used and defined the concept of “kleptocracy” to describe the economic maneuvers of the government, which was perpetrating a policy of increased taxation on middle and lower classes to enrich the upper class. After this speech, she moved out of Liberia on the suggestion of Papanek. She had excessively exposed herself and was probably in danger. Thanks to her *coup de tête*, she gained a one-way ticket to Harvard and once again, facing the choice of staying close to her family and children, or pursuing a greater aim, she “chose the moon”.

### **1.2.3 The first years of civil war in Liberia**

In Harvard they were able to arrange for her to be enrolled in a Master of Public Administration, so she stayed in the U.S. for another two years and became acquainted with human rights movements and the strive for equality of African-Americans. This has been an important moment in her life, and with all the experience and gained knowledge, she decided to go back to Liberia once again, probably hoping to make a space for herself so to actively contribute to putting the country back onto its feet. However, her time in Liberia did not last long. In fact, once again, during a graduation ceremony, she was asked to give an encouraging speech to young students. After that, she was again in trouble and decided to accept an offer from the World Bank while resigning from the Ministry of Finance and implicitly giving up her dream of dragging Liberia out of its own misery. Due to her commitment and experience, Sirleaf grew in her position within the setting of the World Bank, and in 1975 she was in such a position to be able to convince her boss to let her go back to Liberia while still working as a representative of the supranational institution. Unfortunately, this return to Liberia marked the beginning of decades of guerrilla that saw Sirleaf fighting passionately in order to free her country. After President Tubman, the man she had greatly criticized, had died, his vice – namely, Tolbert - took his place. Tolbert exacerbated the already precarious situation by

waging a new tax on people's main product of consumption: rice. One day he appointed Sirleaf as the new Minister of Finance, and the day after he was overthrown by three military officials who set the start for an interminable civil war at which Sirleaf took part for its entirety. In the early period of the war, executions of former officials and traitors became part of the daily routine, and so were the practices of rape and brutalization of women and children (Cooper, 2017). Sirleaf was still safe though, she was part of the government, and even if unwillingly, she was working for those in power and they needed her competences. Only when the new military leader, Samuel Doe, started to pull the rope too hard, demonstrating to be reckless and without true ideals and beliefs, she gave another one of her speeches against the government and was sent away, again.

#### **1.2.4 Sirleaf's first run for election and imprisonment**

Things radically changed in 1984, the year in which Sirleaf, who so far had had a life divided between her prestigious office in the United States and a precarious and dangerous situation in her native country, definitely chose to settle in Liberia. 1984 was the first year after the *coup d'état* in which "free" elections had been allowed. Samuel Doe, the same man who four years earlier killed the former Liberian President and assumed command of the State, was now looking for legitimation. The elections were indeed far from being free, but she decided to participate anyway, by giving her contribution to the creation and propaganda of the Liberian Action Party (LAP) (Scully, 2016). Due to her high commitment and public critiques to the current government, she was put to house arrest with other professors or politicians who were thought of being traitors. The climax of this initial stage of protests was reached when Sirleaf was moved from house arrest to jail. As rendered explicit by her biographer, (Cooper, 2017) in Liberia putting a woman into jail was considered outrageous. Women were endowed with great responsibility, they could endure submission to male figures and even physical and psychological violence, but having them in jail was not socially acceptable, and having a prominent politician such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in jail was too much of an audacious move from Doe. Unwillingly, he gave start to women protests and manifestations throughout the country, but most importantly, the U.S. threatened to lift their financial aid to Liberia if Mrs Sirleaf was not released. Shortly afterwards she found herself freed, but without a party anymore, so instead of running away and going back to her western life, she decided to challenge Doe once more and to run for Senate.

Unknowingly, Doe rendered Sirleaf a hero and symbol of freedom and rebirth. Due to this image, and to the intense campaigning and positive message diffused by the LAP and by herself, she

was the highest vote-getter in the Senate, and the party would have been the first one in the country by number of votes, however, Doe was able to alter the results claiming to have won by 50.9%. Despite the fact that she was awarded a seat in Senate when she was asked to participate in the new legislature, she refused because the elections were fraudulent. This time, not only Doe but also the international community urged her to take her seat so to give to the government a shine of credibility and to settle down the precarious situation in Liberia. Yet, she refused to be the symbol of legitimization for an illegitimate government and this led her to be jailed.

Next, Doe decided to turn the civil conflict into an ethnic one, exacerbating the differences within the Liberian society and giving them a negative connotation. However, to make people happy Doe decided to free Ellen Johnson Sirleaf from prison, this time though, he also gave start to his own downfall. Minutes after being released, Sirleaf, worn-out by prolonged detention, exhausted due to sleep-deprivation, malnourishment and insufficient hygienic conditions, was brought on a stage in front of a “sea of people” (Cooper, 2013, ch.6) and gave a motivational speech to her people, the ones who had fought and protested for her, those who in the past years would go in the streets asking for her release. From her speech that day, one point was clear to everyone: she was back and had no intention to give up. After having been released for the last time, she went temporarily back in the U.S., but was keeping in contact with rebels against Doe’s regime and was even supporting one candidate: Taylor. She was campaigning abroad for him and even encouraged a former U.S- marine originally from Liberia, - namely, Johnson - to reach Taylor and help him with his troops.

### **1.2.5 The end of civil war and Sireaf’s second run for election**

Unfortunately, Johnson proved to be a careless man, and Taylor went beyond any expectation in exacerbating the human and social crisis in Liberia. The civil war that was initiated and perpetrated by Doe, intensified with Taylor in command. Sirleaf was conscious of having backed the wrong man and started campaigning against him from abroad (Cooper, 2017). She had a prominent and influential role in international politics, especially for what concerned Liberia. After all she had been through, her people and the international politicians were careful while listening to what she suggested was better to do. However, her campaign against Taylor was not sufficient for stopping him, and a stream of violence was unleashed onto the population. His aim was that of having an impotent population which would endure any kind of pain and pay any price in order to have a bearable life to live. And in fact, when it came to the elections in 1997, even if Sirleaf threw her hat in the ring and competed against the man who for more than seven years had provided for death, hunger and devastation, the

population voted for the latter, leaving her with a mere 10% (Lyons, 1998). She did not have much support, not even from her family, but most importantly the Liberians saw her as an external actor coming from abroad to try to lead a country of which she did not know anything anymore. Yet, her time was right around the corner. She knew how to play her cards and waited until Taylor came to her. In fact, for him, it was time to rebuild the nation he had destroyed, and in order to do so, he needed the money and international help. Two things that without Sirleaf's help and backup he would have never obtained. She decided not to support him, and the international community - who during the electoral campaign had supported Sirleaf - did not allow any loan nor aid to be awarded to Liberia, securing the end of Taylor's regime.

### **1.2.6 Liberia's First Female President**

Finally, it was only in 2005, after Taylor was defeated and two years of *ad interim* government had passed, that she was allowed to throw her hat on the ring once more and try to become the next Liberian democratically-elected President. Sirleaf was counting on a big percentage of female voters who, after years of abuses and after having lost everything they owned, were ready for a new start with a woman in charge. However, before campaigning for the vote, she had to convince these women to go and register to vote in the first place. The system was not working in her favor, yet, her wide array of supporters started to work for her from within and from without. Her political campaign was much centered on her role as a woman and grandmother, who could use her skills as peace-maker to bring stability within Liberia (Paludi, 2010). Moreover, people were guided through the process of registration and her supporters secured a high turnout.

What followed was probably the greatest proof of Sirleaf's strength, courage, determination, and durability. Her campaign extended throughout the whole country. She decided she would visit many places to talk directly with the people and to reassure them about her ideas for the future, and so she did. She travelled at night, through the mud, through the rain, she slept on the ground and was away from home for weeks (Cooper, 2017). It was clear that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, despite her age and the commitment already demonstrated in the previous years, was not taking any chance of losing this time. Due to this fierceness, during the election period, she earned the nickname of "Iron Lady". Like her homonym a few decades earlier, she was unbreakable, she presented her ideas firmly and clearly. She had a project and the knowledge and experience to make it possible and she was not afraid of proving herself right.

Election day was probably one of the most memorable days in Liberia's history. Hundreds of thousands of people went to vote, and some women became as actively engaged in her political campaign as to bury in the backyard their sons' voter cards, so they could not vote for Sirleaf's political opponent (Cooper, 2017). Despite the debatable fairness of this one and other practices adopted during the election period, it was all done for the good of the nation, and the elections of 2005 in Liberia marked a milestone for progress and development in the country. In fact, for the first time in an African country, something unimaginable was accomplished: a woman became President. "Madame President" as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was called from that day onward, was celebrated by the country and by the full international community that saw in her a new hope for peace and recovery in Liberia. She was more than "the next president". She marked a new era, a change, a shift in the political mindset of the people.

### **1.2.7 Reflections**

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is today the symbol of empowerment and independence of women throughout the whole African continent. Her behavior, her strength, and her passion inspired many women and set an important precedent for claiming equality between men's and women's rights. Yet, it must be acknowledged and highlighted that her path was not easy and that it was all but predictable that she would have been capable of going through all of what she actually endured in the years spent as a politician. Mrs Sirleaf lived in a country whose culture saw women having decisional power for what concerned their spheres of action, but who had also to be physically and psychologically submitted to the will of their husbands. A few women were allowed and could afford to get an education, but even fewer were those who continued to study after having created their own family. Sirleaf's choices as a woman and as a mother have been extensively criticized by her people (Cooper, 2017) and she did not receive the support not even of her own family. However, the latter has been indispensable in taking care and raising her own children which she had to leave for long periods.

Nevertheless, after years spent in politics, and after having passed through many offices in national in international institutions, she was able to master this field and to run for her own. She had to demonstrate of being qualified for the job (Paludi, 2010), to conquer the trust of her people and to work twice as hard as her male opponents. Yet, she was able to live up to her expectations. Throughout the years, fighting for her ideals and beliefs became a constant in Sirleaf's life, and what she endured during the war has no equals. The distance from her relatives, malnourishment, the pain and agony caused by prolonged imprisonment, and the forced sight of abuses and violence over her

fellow dissidents, or even worst, over some innocent boys and girls, must have left scars on her skin and on her soul. The fierceness with which she kept fighting and inspiring the masses should not be underestimated or taken for granted.



## 2.

### Scientific framework

The phenomenon of “women in power” has raised awareness only during the last decades. In fact, one can easily argue that it was only after the Second World War, and after the majority of Western countries have allowed women to vote, that the latter have become the focus of many studies, policies, and of the public interest. For the sake of precision, it must be underlined that this research is not addressing the issue of “Feminism”, which can be dated back even to the 1700s, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Indeed, it aims at addressing the sparkle that lighted up in some universities and research centers during the last century, and that led an increasing number of sociologists, politicians, and political scientists to take under consideration the phenomenon of acquisition of power by women, and to put it under the spotlight. The works that are used to propel the following analysis, which lays at the earth of this dissertation, are therefore relatively recent and offer an in-depth overview of the possible causes and variables that might have brought a substantial number of women in power in the last decades.

The works of authors going from Duverger (1952, 1955) to Moran (2012), and from Rowland (1984) to Ladam et al. (2018), point in different directions and are, sometimes, even contradictory between themselves. The aim of this chapter is that of taking some existing research in order to fetch those parameters that could potentially be causal factors in the rise of women into power and to see whether they are suitable for the two previously presented case studies. In fact, the research will identify some variables that are suitable to both case studies, some that suit just one of them, and some that suite none. Then, it will try to compare the two cases and to give an explanation to the differences encountered, by pointing out to the divergence in the political systems, frameworks, and time-periods that were presented in the previous chapter.

An interesting point where to start from is the division made by Eagly and Carli (2007) for the different stages of access to leadership that women had to face throughout history. In fact, they divided their analysis into three different stages: the concrete wall, the glass ceiling, and the labyrinth. It must be remarked that the above-mentioned analysis, for the sake of its purpose, takes under consideration a time-frame that starts from the XX century. In fact, disregarding those particular cases of countries where the monarchic dynasty would allow women of the royal family to have access to the line of succession so to retain the hold of power, in general women were not allowed to exert decisional power until very recently. For this reason, Eagly and Carli have named the first stage “the

concrete wall”. The wall is intended as a material barrier that would not allow anyone to escape from the current situation in political terms – namely, the impossibility to exert leadership, nor that of voting. This stage does not match any of the two cases presented above. In fact, both Sirleaf and Thatcher were legally able to present their candidature for the elections. The second stage, the “glass ceiling”, could be thought of fitting the case of Margaret Thatcher, who, having entered politics a few decades ago, was considered legally equal to her male peers, but who in the concreteness of facts had to face many impediments. However, according to the parents of this term, namely Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt, who used it for the first time in an article published on the *Wall Street Journal* (1986), the “ceiling” is still to be considered “an absolute barrier” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 4), something which the eye cannot perceive, but which is, at the same time, unbreakable. Therefore, since this dissertation itself is about the study of women who were concretely able to get the hold of power, both the case of Thatcher and that of Sirleaf fall in the category called “the labyrinth”.

The term was coined by Klenke in *Women in Leadership* (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and is aimed at using the metaphor of a labyrinth, to render an image of a difficult path, but not inescapable, that women had to face in order to acquire top-level positions. The labyrinth, however, also highlights how the obstacles that many women have to overcome are not as detectable and straight-forward as in the past. They are hidden, and sometimes unforeseen, such as it happens in a labyrinth, where behind every corner there could be a wall, but where ultimately there exists an exit. Our cases make a perfect match for such a description. In fact, even if in different ways and historical moments, both Sirleaf and Thatcher had to face obstacles that did not stem for the law, nor from unwritten but yet rigid rules of behavior within society, but rather they came from the circumstances, or from the instituted common sense and mindset of the people, and especially of politicians.

The analysis that will follow takes into consideration some of these “dead-end-paths” within the labyrinth and it aims at discovering which characteristics of the female stereotypical role and behavior have proved to create an impediment for women who aim at becoming leaders and how they have overcome all the hindrances they had to face. The following chapter will thus take under consideration a wide range of factors that have been divided into two main streams: cultural factors and political factors. For a matter of clearness, the cultural factors have been divided into historical framework, the family in the public and private spheres, and personal background. On the other hand, the political factors have been considered highly interlinked and for this reason, they are presented in a unified discussion. This chapter’s aim is that of giving a wide but specific scientific framework on which it will be possible to rely to derive some meaningful conclusions in the third chapter by linking the relevant variables to the personal experiences of Thatcher and Sirleaf.

## 2.1 Cultural Variables

### 2.1.1 Historical Framework

An illuminating analysis on the role of women in Western societies in the 20th century is that of Maurice Duverger (1955), explicatively called *The political role of Women*. In this long and detailed analysis, which was commissioned by UNESCO, Duverger aims to uncover how much the *de jure* political right to vote, recently awarded to women, corresponds to a *de facto* political participation, and to what extent one can find a pattern in the ways through which women express their political preferences. In order to reach his goal, he decided to perpetrate his analysis by taking into consideration the role of women in society throughout time. One of the numerous findings of the political scientist is that despite the fact that the “old theory of women’s incapacity, *imbecillitas sexus*,” (Duverger, 1955, p. 125) has been in disuse for a long time, it is still a relevant factor in explaining why women succeed less than men, and why they are not as politically active. In this sense, taking under consideration the fact that this study was published in 1955, Duverger argues that even if at that time many women could anymore be considered illiterate and inferior to men on the education and working grounds, new arguments were found to remark the same principle. In fact, women started to be considered inherently inferior, incapable of reaching the same levels of productivity and efficiency as men. This investigation was conducted among three Western countries and Yugoslavia, and the general tendency was for all the same. Women were “the first to suffer” (Duverger, 1955, p. 125) and the last ones to be taken under consideration by the male-dominated society.

During the mid-1900s, despite the great efforts made by the feminist movement to earn the much wanted *de jure* equality, women were still the weakest point of society and the most vulnerable to external influences and male domination. Their general tendency, except rare cases, was that of spontaneously not entering the political field, and even the mere discussion of political matters seemed to be thought to be far from their competences. Duverger (1955) did not try to hinder the fact that women were less keen to discuss politics, to enter it, and to actively participate in the political life of their community. Indeed, he highlighted this point to propose his thesis, which was that this behavior had been instilled in a woman’s mind for a long-time and could not be eradicated just by passing a handful of laws which promoted equality between genders. Women were first of all wives and mothers, dependent on their fathers or husbands both economically and socially. Their attributes had always been associated with femininity, while a politician was thought to be tough and strong-minded, characteristics that a woman, according to this reasoning and therefore, by reason of her own

nature, could not possess. Following this line of thought, women were confined to a condition of permanent inferiority that would offer almost no escape. For example, going back to some piece of literature previously presented, in England during the mid-1900s there was no material limit, no “wall” nor “glass ceiling”, no law impeding to a woman to reach the same position of her male peers (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, the way out of the “labyrinth” was far from being easy to find and as it is confirmed by historical records, women in power, especially at that time, were a rare event to be witnessed. As observed by Duverger, women were still considered inferior in many fields of social and political life, but most importantly, they were not included and in the majority of cases did not seek inclusion themselves. Equality was expressed by law, but not applied on a daily basis, and in Parliament there was just a handful of women who were usually assigned some marginal portfolios.

On the other hand, in Africa, and especially in Liberia, the condition of women was still confined, but with different reasons laying at the basis of this gender differentiation. In fact, females were not intended to be the *imbecillitas sexus* (Duverger, 1955), nor were they intrinsically inferior. To make sense of the controversial role of women in the Liberian society, one should start from recalling what they had to endure throughout their history. In fact, many Liberians, before being free men and women, had been African-American slaves exploited in cotton fields and factories. The condition of being subject to someone else’s rules and being both psychologically and physically at the mercy of an “owner”, has profoundly shaped the culture and the attitude of those people. In fact, during slavery men and women had to work alongside each other in the crops, and they continued to do it even once they were free, so to increase the income of the family (Sernak, 2004). Because of how history has shaped these societies, the Liberian one, such as many others in Africa, was and still is, very much differently organized from the Western ones. In fact, for example, raising children and leading the house are considered very important roles that demand respect for those who are entitled to them. “A mother is someone to be taken seriously” because she has authority over the house and over her children, whether they should be young or adult (Moran, 2012, p. 58). African women are actually entitled to exert authority and are competent over different areas of daily life, however, men’s and women’s areas of competence are mostly divided and kept apart. As extensively explained by the scholar Oyewumi (1997), gender is very important in African societies and this must not be underestimated. Yet, the female gender is not inevitably and completely subordinated to the other one, but there exist some fields where a woman, even if she is generally subject to the will of her husband, can exert her leadership unconditionally. This unwritten code of behavior makes it normal to see women in positions of power both in the family and working setting, yet these same women are probably constrained by the will of their fathers, brothers and husbands for what concerns the majority of their daily practices. For this reason, many women in hold of power in Africa tend to not

be married so to have complete control over their lives as women and workers (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009).

What follows from this complex context of interdependence and submission, is that women do not usually become dominant actors in male-dominated fields. However, many scholars and theorists argue that the roles of the two genders within the African and especially the Liberian society have been greatly reshaped in the last decades due to the many civil conflicts that the continent has witnessed. In fact, the brutal civil wars that have affected many African countries in the last decades, have forced women to become proactive in providing for their own survival and for that of their children. As analyzed by many scholars, in empowering themselves women have created an opportunity for their own social inclusion and have reshaped their role in a relatively short time (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Therefore, while in England the historical role of women for what concerns their position within society was very much stable and clearly defined and constituted a hindrance for the reshaping of their role in society even after the *de jure* declared equality, colonization and civil war in Liberia greatly contributed to reshaping the gender roles within society.

### **2.1.2 The family: public and private sphere**

For the purpose of this research, when talking about “family” the aim is that of including all of those people, practices, behaviors, and shared beliefs that might constrain a woman to give up her career, or indeed, that might allow her to succeed. To be more specific, the paragraph will use scholarly work concerning the role of a woman within her extended family (Sernak, 2004) – meaning the role she has to perform as a mother, daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law -, how mothers are seen in society, and what are the expectations that a mother should live up to according to society. Usually, while for a male candidate having a family has the positive connotation of making the latter appear as a person who cares, a leader but also a father, for a female candidate it works in the opposite way around. A woman who needs to take care of a family is not trustworthy because she does not have time to dedicate to politics (Aitken, 2014). Even if the two presented situations are very much stereotypical, it is also true that at the basis of any stereotype lays a piece of truth. In fact, for any country that one can look at, statistics will likely show that women are keener to spend time in taking care of the children and in doing the house-work. It comes as no surprise that the majority of the times women are the ones leading the household while their husbands take care of the family’s income and are more active within the societal sphere. Yet, one might not realize what effects this clear-cut division

of roles, which has been perpetrated through the centuries by the majority of countries, has had on a woman's perception of herself and on the others' perception of her abilities. As previously mentioned, to a woman are associated those qualities that are stereotypical of the feminine figure as idealized by writers and artists for centuries.

A woman is a loving figure, a care-taker, a peace-maker, and the weakest member of society. This image paints the latter as an inherently inferior being which cannot accomplish typically masculine tasks such as leading. In fact, not only the men would hardly choose a woman as their leader, but a woman herself would hardly want to be the leader of a community or of an enterprise. Women tend not to seek prominent positions in the working field because they have also to take care of their family and of the house, and these duties would be in conflict with those of a leader (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In fact, many times having a family plays a negative role in a woman's working path. The family helps to perpetrate gender-stereotyping and the inferiority complex which affects the majority of women who aim at moving their first steps into the working field. However, even if the above-mentioned general tendencies can be considered true for the majority of countries worldwide, it is also true that there are many differences according to one's country or religion in the perception of women and in the role that their families play in constraining or enhancing their success.

For example, the European culture, which includes also male attitudes towards women, has been greatly influenced, especially in the previous centuries, by Christian values. Even though today we live in a much more liberal world, it is undeniable that many behaviors, whether intentional or not, are driven by one's education and culture, which stem from traditional and fundamentalist Christian precepts such as that women are made to procreate, that they should be loyal to their husband, and that they should be submitted to the will of the male that at that moment represents a point of reference in their lives (Inglehart, 1981). The Christian values preached in the Bible, and especially in the Old Testament – which contains the most fundamentalist part of the Christian doctrine – have played an important role in shaping gender dynamics within European societies, and this is surely a relevant variable in determining which cultural aspects have played against the emancipation of women in western societies. The patriarchal model offered by the Bible particularly through the characters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was preached by Christian institutions and instilled within the population. This process favored the implicit inclusion of such preachments in the written and oral bodies of laws that lay at the basis of a country's functioning (Walker, 1999). Since this model has been of particular importance for many centuries, our ancestors were able to export it and implement it also onto the new peoples and countries that they conquered and colonized. Especially for African and Latin American countries, this detail assumes a particular relevance because their cultures and behaviors have been strongly influenced by Western beliefs.

However, it is also true that, as previously mentioned, these countries maintained some differences compared to the West. In fact, there are different reasons laying at the basis of the perpetuation of gender roles in African culture. There, men and women are thought of having different “spheres of authority” (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009, p. 62) and they have to act accordingly. Moreover, if on one hand external factors such as poverty and the frequent civil wars exacerbate the difficult situation of the most vulnerable classes, on the other hand, they also empowered each member of a family and of society to take-action so to provide for food and survival. African women were extremely hurt by civil wars and internal conflicts, but they were also empowered and given a voice on an international stage during such times. They were able to step out of their routine, leaving aside the role of mothers, wives, and caretakers, to take control of their own lives and speak up to make their problems and concerns heard by the international community (Adams, 2008).

From what has been said so far on the role of the family in a woman’s life, whether she lives in the West or in Africa, one can conclude that the family is usually an impediment in a woman’s career, not only because having a family is a commitment, but most importantly because the family is seen as an institution which promotes the perpetration of gender roles within itself and within society. Yet, for the sake of truth, one has to take under consideration also the other face of the medal, namely, the determinant role that families have had on allowing some women to follow their dreams and careers by offering them solidity and security. In fact, the roles that women have stereotypically been endowed with, such as care-takers and peace-makers, have been fundamental in promoting women as successful candidates for important positions within the political and other fields. Women with a family of their own are seen as better candidates over their peers who do not have a husband and children, because they are more representative of the stereotypical feminine figure, which in turn represents certain ideals and beliefs. Furthermore, women who do have a family and want to enter politics often need the support of their husband and extended family, which they value of the utmost importance (Clark, 1991).

In conclusion, it can be argued that generally speaking having a family has demonstrated to be an impediment for women trying to build their own career in competitive fields such as that of politics. As previously underlined, within the family the woman experiences the perpetration of the role that has been stereotypically attached to her gender and this often prevents her from exiting her comfort zone. However, being mothers and wives has also proved to be a sign of liability and seriousness for women who entered politics.

### 2.1.3 Personal background

As previously mentioned, this research is focused on women who gained their prominent positions through sacrifices and commitment, and not merely because they had familial ties with some prominent political actors. In fact, if this factor was held true, it would have compromised the entire research by nullifying all other possible variables that we take under consideration as determinants of the success or failure of female candidates in politics. In geographic areas such as Asia and Latin America, but sometimes also in Africa, female leaders were accepted and respected not much for egalitarian principles lying at the basis of such societies, indeed, for the opposite reason. In fact, because a daughter had to be faithful and respectful of her father or husband, she was a better candidate for succession rather than her male siblings or other male figures of the family (Jalalzai, 2004). Daughters and wives who became successors to their fathers and husbands were thought to be acting according to their predecessor's will, while a male successor would have not assured continuity by acting according to his own passions. This explanation offers a rightful justification for many cases of women in power in such countries, but it is not going to be accounted for the scope of this research, which indeed aims to uncover personal characteristics and life experiences that might prove to be fundamental in shaping a female leader's personality.

The literature concerning the characteristics of female candidates for high offices in politics is limited or inexistent. Traces of such topic can be found in various articles which treat other themes and that involuntarily describe the levels of education, knowledge and personal experience of a wide pool of female politicians worldwide. In fact, if for male leaders one can ideally refer to *The Prince* of Machiavelli to look for the characteristic that a leader should have had according to a mindset that holds partially true even today, for females there is no unique piece of literature which contains the same information. One work which has been particularly relevant for highlighting the main characteristics of female leaders in an article published by Farida Jalalzai (2004). She covered not only an extensive range of countries but also the age, levels of education and political experience of female candidates to derive some important conclusions. Still, as explained above, this dissertation won't purposefully consider, in the work of Mrs Jalalzai, those countries in which the mentioned female candidates had familial ties with previous political leaders. That said, by analyzing the remaining figures, the data shows that many of them had a law degree or a degree in economics, which means that in many countries political offices are open to those female candidates who achieved medium and high levels of education. This first requirement closes the doors for entering high political offices for a wide pool of women, for whom, especially in the past decades, was hard to receive an education. Moreover, many of them had accomplished a wide career in politics, covering



different tasks in many offices before being appointed, and they often began their experiences in politics as activists (Ladam, Harden & Windett, 2018). The latter finding must not be underestimated, in fact, as also Jalalzai found that the majority of women have started their career as activists, it entails that this is supposed to be the most efficient way of accessing politics for a woman. However, one might also recall that activists are not remunerated, and many times are exposed to physical danger as have been, for example, the suffragettes. Therefore, if one tries to make an in-depth analysis of these findings, it will reach the conclusion that the majority of women who enter politics have not only to be able to pay for high education but must also be 'at ease' enough to allow themselves not to work while they protest and campaign for their cause. In sum, this research and others prove that a woman's decision-making power is positively related to her "educational attainment, occupation and income" (Alam, 2011, p. 21) and those high positions in politics and other fields are therefore generally restricted to a handful of women who usually came from the higher strata of society and who were allowed, but especially could afford to receive an education and pursue their interests.

Another important finding streaming from research studies concerning the different paths that lead men and women in power is that "the presence of female politicians leads to greater interest in politics" (Ladam, Harden & Windett, 2018, p. 371) among other women. This means that powerful female figures in many cases have been demonstrated to encourage female participation in politics and to motivate other women to seek top-level positions. In fact, according to the researches on this topic, women who 'make it to the top' set a positive standard for others who will feel motivated and encouraged to pursue the same path. Probably, especially young women who see a person towards whom they feel empathetic in a prominent position, see their chances of success to be more concrete than if they had no previous example to relate to. Yet, this path is not as smooth as it might look like from this brief representation. In fact, even if some women were able to set the standard for others to be able to be successful, they also suffered a lot for something that could be thought as a "cognitive dissonance" between their expected role in society, and their actual role. Despite the rising number of women in power, they still represent quite the minority of their category in all countries worldwide. This leads to the fact that a woman who enters politics won't be able to identify herself with the rest of women anymore, but neither would she be able to identify her new position with that of her male colleagues. This status, according to some research, leads women to suffer from "psychological pain" (Clark, 1991, p. 71), which is surely another factor that adds up to the countless reasons for which there are not many women in high positions offices in politics as much as in other fields. In such cases, the fact of losing one's identity, and not belonging anymore to a certain social group, becomes a strong deterrent for the entrance of women in politics as the majority of them would rather maintain

their status and certainties, rather than acquire a high position but not be able to identify anymore with a specific grouping of people.

In conclusion, by analyzing different pieces of literature, it can be argued that there are three characteristics that have shaped the personal background of many female political leaders. The first, and probably the most important is that many of them achieved high standards of education. Secondly, the majority of women, before being awarded a prominent position, spent years militating in politics both as activists and politicians. And thirdly, they were able to rise despite the psychological pressure and sufferance that derives from challenging the *status quo* by politically exposing themselves.

## **2.2 Political Variables**

For the purpose of this research, one fundamental aspect that has to be analyzed is the political setting that lays behind a woman's success in politics. In fact, factors such as the voting system, the political stability of the country, the political program of the candidate and her political party, and the politicization of the population have been found to be relevant in promoting the candidature of female leaders in politics. One element that must be pointed out, is Philip Converse's theory (Converse, 1969) according to which one's politicization "is largely determined by the length of time one has had political privileges, and whether or not - and for how long - those privileges have been interrupted" (Inglehart, 1981, p. 303). Following this theory, a person's political conscience develops through time and experience, as people need to become aware and fond of their political ideas and of the political setting that surrounds them. Moreover, according to Converse, one's political affiliation is also strengthened by life experiences such as being deprived of human, social, and political rights for a certain period of time. Therefore, in those countries which have awarded political rights to women earlier compared to others, we expect to see more women politicians and more women generally involved in political discussion and political action. On the other hand, in those countries which have only recently awarded to women the right to express their opinion at the polls, women might only cover a small percentage of parliamentarians, and many of those who do not want to enter politics probably do not even vote, nor discuss political matters. Indeed, in those countries which were experiencing growth, but which fell into a civil war, or were guided by an undemocratic government, and therefore suddenly lost the previously gained civil and political rights, we expect all people, and in particular women, to be actively engaged in their country's politics (Converse, 1969).

This theory is particularly important not only because it gives an explanation to recent and past trends of women participation in politics – both as politicians and as citizens – but also because it tries to make previsions for the future.

This trend which slowly leads women into prominent positions in politics is partially due to the fact that both men and women have to rebuild their stereotype of a ‘leader’, which is a process that takes time. For centuries, political leaders have been associated with masculine traits such as physical strength, fierceness, strong personality, courage and cruelty, while women were stereotypically thought to be loving and caring characters, introverted and incapable of bearing their emotions, and therefore not trustworthy in situations of danger or when harsh decisions have to be taken (Pilcher, 1995). Yet, especially in the last centuries, this stereotype has been challenged multiple times and the perception of women within society is changing both from the women and from the men side.

A further theory which can be associated with what has been said so far, is the ‘Gender-Affinity Effect’, which has been used by several scholars (Dolan, 2008; King & Matland, 2003; Goodyear-Grent & Croskill, 2003) to explain the circumstances that bring people that belong to a certain group, to vote for a candidate rather than another. In fact, the gender-affinity effect proves that, especially in presidential and semi-presidential systems, which are more personalized than others such as the parliamentary one, female voters tend to vote, within their party, the individual that better represents the social group that is closer to them. Hence, in such circumstances, women will tend to vote for a female candidate because they perceive that a woman will be a better representative for the needs and requests of their social group (Denemark, Ward & Bean, 2012). It follows that ever since women have earned the right to vote and to be voted, they not only gained the confidence to expose themselves publicly both as candidates and voters but also skillfully managed to raise their voices and to gather so to give more relevance to their demands. However, as previously remarked, such a process takes time to be developed because implementing laws that enhance the equality of genders, unfortunately, does not immediately lead to gender equality. Philip Converse’s theory paired with the ‘Gender-Affinity Effect’ makes up for an extensive explanation of how women political candidates gained popularity throughout time. Yet, there are other variables to be taken under consideration, such as the influence that an electoral system has on the candidate that is voted. The more a system is personalized, which is usually the case for presidential and semi-presidential systems (Duverger, 1951), the more the gender-affinity effect will be present. Therefore, following this reasoning, if a woman is elected through one of these political systems it generally means that she was capable of catching her voters by conveying many hot issues within her political program, and to make the majority of people feel empathetic towards herself. On the other hand, in a political system which is

not as much personalized such as the First Past the Post (FPTP), the woman must win the trust of her party and not necessarily of all the voters. In systems which are more party-centered, the voters tend to feel empathetic towards the party itself and not towards an individual in particular (Thomas & Adams, 2010). The stereotypical voter, in this case, is one which remains loyal to a certain party which closely represents his/her own beliefs while representing his/her social strata in the best manner. Being this the mechanism that lays behind the voting affiliation of the majority of people, as much as a female candidate would create concern upon the voters, if the party trusts her, so will do the former.

However, this last reasoning entails some important information that might constrain the behavior of elected female leaders, and that is often overlooked to give more relevance to other variables. In fact, a woman who is elected in a highly personalized system can benefit from the compliance of a wide majority of the public who willingly chose her despite knowing that she is a woman. Such a candidate won't be constrained by the fear of not being respected or trusted because of her gender, because her political campaign itself was built on her person in its whole. She will have more capability of acting to help those people that feel empathetic towards her for whom she is, and not as much for the party she represents. So, for example, she will be able to promote more laws which support gender equality and that enhance the condition of the workers. On the other hand, a woman elected in a system which is more party-centered, must usually act according to her party's policy and focus on those issues that are of the utmost importance for the majority of their voters. Such women might not be able to be loyal to the social category they represent, because the party's direction could be heading somewhere else.

Hence, a woman who becomes Prime Minister might not be able to promote laws to enhance the condition of women and concerning labor, unless those issues are felt by her party and especially by the voters. Yet, another important strain of research in this field concerns a practice that many women who became prominent political figures have been found to adopt. The latter is called 'Gendered Identity' and it entails the creation of one's personal public identity by using one's gender to promote his or her qualities as a leader (Bauer, 2009). In fact, many women have been found to create a gendered identity for themselves to convince the public of their role as potential candidates. The stereotypical feminine roles and characteristics such as being housewives, care-takers, peace-makers, and the feminine capability of enduring physical pain and psychological sufferance have been instrumental in order to create the character of a new leader. Many scholars in this field observed that gender is a "fundamental element" in the creation of one's public identity, and it has extensively been used by many female politicians to reinforce their new role as "breadwinners" (Meisenbach, 2009, p. 4). From simple housewives and child-bearers, women launched themselves in stereotypical

masculine roles, therefore challenging the masculine figure. For this reason, they had to find a compromise that would have made them appealing to the voters' eyes and also that would not completely turn around the gendered roles within society. Hence, the 'gendered identity' played the relevant role of exploiting the stereotypical characteristics of one gender and forcing them into a new field which is politics.

Finally, in the political framework, a few interesting variables have been highlighted. The first one is Converse's theory concerning one's politicization and its correlation with the length of time that the latter has been able to exert political rights and whether he/she was deprived of them of a certain period. Secondly, the Gender-Affinity Effect has been proved fundamental to explain voters' turnouts when there is a female candidate, and thirdly, connecting to the votes and voting system, another variable is given by the theory concerning the correlation between the political system and the political strategy used by female candidates. Ultimately, one fundamental variable is the Gendered-Identity one. These four will be used, with the other ones previously presented, to produce a recapitulative table in the next chapter.

### 2.3 Reflections

In conclusion, this chapter has started by depicting the framework of analysis through which it has tried to uncover some relevant variables that have enhanced or hindered the opportunities of female candidates to reach high political positions. By using the historical timeline as the general setting into which to frame this analysis, the chapter has covered the evolution of the role of women in society in mainly two cultures, which are the Western and the African ones. Moreover, it has used the works of quite a few scholars to depict a wide array of theories that have been considered relevant in giving an explanation to the research question of this dissertation. The variables that were highlighted in the two categories of this chapter, and that are fundamental for the analysis that will follow are ten:

- Duverger's (1955) functional theory stemming from the *imbecillitas sexus* theory
- Positive role of the family
- Negative role of the family
- Level of education
- Activism at the beginning of a woman's political career
- Experiencing of psychological pain and cognitive dissonance

- Affinity with Converse's theory (1969)
- Gender-Affinity Effect (Denemark, Ward & Bean, 2012)
- Correlation between political system and political strategy
- Gendered Identity (Bauer, 2009)

Furthermore, throughout this chapter, one word has been repeated several times without being truly acknowledged. Now, it is time to point it out and see why it is so important. The word concerned is “feminine” and it entails the stereotypical characteristics that a woman should embody and the traits she should have. This word is to be found in the majority of the scholarly work above mentioned and for this reason, it is deemed important to see why it is used so frequently. What emerges from the analysis is that femininity is a mandatory requisite for a woman who exposes herself to the public. She should not subvert her stereotypical image, she should look feminine, have a husband and children, and act according to her character. Yet, this cannot be enough to satisfy the requisites of a woman who aims at being a leader. In fact, what can be read between the lines of this research is that despite women have to look feminine on the outside and maintain their feminine drive, they have to adopt a “masculine” temperament and character. Basically, women shall be “women” on the outside, and “men” on the inside. The balance between such dichotomized personality is of course almost impossible to be found, and for this reason, many women in power have been attacked either for being too “feminine” in their behavior, or for embodying too many masculine characteristics that are not appropriate for a woman (Rose, 1988). Femininity plays a big role in the upbringing, education, culture and political life of all women and apparently, it is also a determinant factor in the public's perception of a woman in power and therefore, for her chances to be successful. This variable will be better analyzed in the two case studies in the following chapter to see how it has impacted the lives of Margaret Thatcher and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the compromise they have found between their femininity and tough temper.

The aim of this second chapter was to bring forward a big share of the relevant literature on this subject and to make an in-depth analysis that goes beyond the mere combination of multiple scholarly works. Yet, so far, such pieces of research have only been presented and reflected upon so to create a complete scientific framework that is going to be extremely important in order to analyze, in the following chapter, what has been said in the first one and make sense of it through scientific lens.

### 3.

## **From chronicle history to science: political paths analyzed through scientific research**

This third and final chapter aims at putting together the information that was covered in the two previous chapters. In fact, if one of them extensively covered the biographies of Margaret Thatcher and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the other one brought forward an extensive body of research on the topic of how women get hold of power in male-dominated fields such as politics, and which variables proved to be significant in hindering or enhancing their chances of success. Following this brief introduction, the biographical information on Thatcher and Sirleaf will be analyzed and interpreted through the scientific knowledge which has been laid forward in chapter 2. To make sense of the analysis that constitutes this chapter, it must be said that the scientific knowledge selected and explained previously, aimed at covering a wide array of variables that could be relevant for the two case studies but that might also not. In fact, the two case studies proved to respond differently to the variables under examination. Hence, the chapter will create a confrontation between what scientific research says it is statistically relevant, and the personal experience of Thatcher and Sirleaf. Furthermore, the chapter will be structured according to chapter 1. In fact, through a comprehensive discourse, for each one of the two case studies, the aim is that of using as much as possible the chronological order of events to touch all the relevant variables and to see whether they worked or not for the case under examination. Starting from Mrs Thatcher, the analysis will move onto Mrs Sirleaf, and then it will draw its conclusions based on the previous analytical outcome.

What is expected is that personal, cultural, and political differences will make it possible to conduct an in-depth analysis that goes beyond the mere glance at the visible disparity between the two, but it also tries to uncover the reasons for this and to explain why sometimes the scientific framework is not in accordance with the case under examination. To make this analysis as clear as possible, at the end of each one of the two sub-chapters – which are called with the name of the two women who provide for the case study – a recapitulative scheme has been provided to better identify all the variables and how they are related to the subject.

### 3.1 Margaret Thatcher

Mrs Thatcher is almost a perfectly suitable case for the previously presented body of research. Probably, this is because many of the works that have been used, were written in the second half of the XIX century, a time during which women in politics were becoming a concrete phenomenon, and Margaret Thatcher herself played a big role in it. Yet, in a few circumstances, it will be pointed out how scientific findings based on statistics and critical reasoning cannot explain her behavior.

Trying to respect as much as possible the chronology of events so to make sense of them while being clear, one should start by speaking of Margaret's education. Interestingly enough, she chose for herself an unconventional education considered the path she was going to pursue. In fact, as expressed by her biographer (Aitken, 2014), she was always very much independent in her studies and since she was a child, she planned for herself her educational journey. From middle school to Oxford, to law-school, she made it all by herself and became knowledgeable on a wide array of subjects. Yet, her first degree was in chemistry and only after having spent a few years in politics, having married and had children, she decided to pursue a law degree. Hence, Margaret was highly educated such as the majority of women who reach prominent positions in politics (Jalalzai, 2004), but she actually acquired the education she needed in order to enter politics not in university but by self-teaching herself for matters of personal interest. In fact, Margaret was initiated at the political world by her father who was an active member in the Grantham community. While growing, she became passionate about economics and law, followed with amusement what happened in politics and eventually entered the Conservatives' youth ranks and made a name for herself. Her knowledgeability, which initially bought her trust and admiration, was all self-taught and yet, incredibly vast. Due to her passion for politics, she entered the political world even before finishing the years in college and after graduation, she continued her rise. Therefore, it can be argued that like many other women (Jalalzai, 2004) Margaret Thatcher could be considered to have received a high education, but unlike the most of them, her scholastic education had nothing to do with the fields of politics, law and economics. Furthermore, even though she was never properly an activist, she began in students' associations, then gained a spot within the party, then was assigned a district and eventually entered Parliament and was assigned to different offices spacing from education, to taxation, to pensions (Aitken, 2014).

From this point of view, Mrs Thatcher fits the model proposed by Ladam, Harden and Windett (2018), who said that women usually commence their political journey as activists and reach the top only after having covered many positions with increasing relevance. Moreover, it can be argued that, as proposed by Converse (1969), in England women were more politicized than in other countries



such as Liberia – as it will be presented later – because they received the right to vote relatively early. Many women in the 1980s had already developed a political conscience and were striving for their equality through social movements and by joining political campaigns. Yet, even though she was comparably in a more favorable position than other women during the same time frame, Thatcher's journey within the party and in Parliament has been far from smooth, but most importantly, it has been a very long one.

As previously remarked, she entered politics very young, just after having finished college, where she also graduated earlier than her peers. Despite her great political career, almost thirty years passed between her first general election and her election as Britain's Prime Minister. Her story is the perfect representation of the previously mentioned Thomas and Adam's theory (2010). According to them, women's capability of getting hold of power depends on many variables, one of whom is the political system of the country concerned. Great Britain uses the FPTP system which is not highly personalized and relies mainly on the charisma of the party and not as much on that of its leader. Following this logic, a woman whose aim is that of becoming the leader of the party has to gain the trust of her male peers in order to be voted. After that, the voters who are loyal to the party will vote the candidate not based on his/her sex but rather based on the ideas and values she/he represents. Accordingly, so it was also for Thatcher, whose real challenge has been that of convincing the Conservative Party, with a strong majority of men within it, that she was a better leader than any of them (Aitken, 2014).

From the beginning until the end, she always encountered skeptical individuals fighting against her leadership, both males and females. Such negative sentiments, which were obviously linked to her gender rather than to her actual capabilities, can be reconnected to the development of the theory of the *imbecillitas sexus* such as expressed by Duverger (1955). Despite the undeniable high standards of education and preparation reached by Mrs Thatcher, nothing could stop the men within her party from proclaiming her inherent unsuitability because of her gender. A striking example can be made with the words of Winston Churchill, who said that “a woman's intrusion into the House of Commons is as embarrassing as if she burst into my bathroom when I had nothing with which to defend myself, not even a sponge.” (Griffin, 2013). With such words, Churchill expressed not only his own thought but a common and shared feeling of men in politics who felt personally attacked and deprived of their sphere of action by women with political leadership. Furthermore, this feeling was not only spread throughout the British political setting but also shared by many politicians within the international community. One of them, namely the former President of France, Jacques Chirac, while referring to Britain's Prime Minister said: “What does she want from me, this housewife? My balls on a plate?” (Hewitt, 2013). The metaphors used in both cases, with explicit

sexual and misogynist language, aimed at belittling the capacities and empowerment of women in politics and make up for a clear example of the majority's mentality at the time.

However, the belief concerning male superiority was not just a masculine priority. In fact, Margaret Thatcher was mostly criticized, especially during the years as a Prime Minister, by women's associations who were engaged in low-key sensitization of the masses. Especially when she had to make tough choices which were not in accordance with the will of the people, she would inevitably end up being stabbed in her weakest spots. As previously mentioned, in this way she gained the epithet of 'Milk Snatcher' (Aitken, 2014) and was depicted as an uncaring mother and an evil politician - a view which can be reconnected to that of "maternal feminism" (Phillips, 1998, p. 375). As reported by those who were close to her in those years, Thatcher did not foresee the impact of her political choices concerning fields which were sensitive especially for women (Aitken, 2014). She was not anymore attacked as a politician, but in her roles as mother and wife, and such critics were probably within the hardest she had to swallow down. Unfortunately, while receiving such comments from male peers would have probably been easier to accept, she was attacked mostly by women who knew that, as much as she was more of a politician than any man in Parliament, she was not as good of a mother. Such attacks by a 'social group' of which she felt a member – namely, women – created what has previously been termed as "cognitive dissonance" and which is attached to the idea of psychological pain expressed by Clark (1991). In fact, in this situation, Margaret did not belong with her male peers of the political world, nor with the women who might as well be mothers and wives just like her. She was unhorsed more than once by these accusations and this situation strongly impacted her life even after the years as Prime Minister.

Probably due to her tough character, to her political choices and to her public denial of feminism, she did not generate what Denmark, Ward and Bean (2012) called the "Gender Affinity Effect". This is a phenomenon that leads women to vote a woman rather than a man because she could be more representatives of the issues that affect their social group, but Mrs Thatcher was not able to turn female vote significantly into her favor (Singh, 2015). Further critiques were moved towards Mrs Thatcher through the years. In fact, she was also accused of not having represented women in Parliament, and of having done nothing towards feminist causes or for the enhancement of women's rights in society (Rowland, 1984). Many still support this thesis, but nobody really questioned themselves with the question: would have it been possible for her to do something on this regard? Margaret Thatcher was a young, brilliant woman who for years fooled the men of the opposition and who was able to gain the full support of her party only after more than thirty years spent working for the latter. She was despised by many and perfectly knew that her success was due to her courage and intelligence (Harris, 2013), but also to a stroke of luck which could have lasted

the blink of an eye. She had to gain the support of the men of her party in order to become their leader, and by acknowledging that such event took place in the 70s, certainly, she could have never done so by proposing laws turned to give more rights to women. After finally being elected, she held her party tight and strong, but her success can be attributed to the fact that she was extremely respectful of its history, traditions and ideals. If she was to propose a feminist agenda, not only her party would have turned against her, but also their voters would have been disappointed by the outcome of the party's choice of Margaret Thatcher as a leader. Imposing feminist priorities on the Conservative's agenda would have probably meant the downfall of the party, if not its implosion. Hence, it can be argued that Mrs Thatcher, even if she wanted to, could have done nothing to promote women's issues from her position, but this does not mean she was against women rights. Her point of view must be analyzed through a holistic approach, in fact, in a historical moment in which women were demanding 'more' because of their sex, Thatcher publicly said that she was not a feminist because she just wanted 'the same' opportunities in light of the fact she was a human, like everybody else, despite gender. She used to think that "if you get anywhere, it is because of your ability. It's not because of your sex." (Borders, 1979), and when asked whether she was "more proud of being the first lady Prime Minister or the first scientist Prime Minister", she replied "Oh, scientist, definitely scientist" (Blundell, 2008, p. 25). But because of such an egalitarian view, she was even included by Rowland (1984) in the 'Queen Been' category of anti-feminists. According to the scholar, the Queen Bee is an anti-feminist because, despite the fact that she has made success for herself in life by having gone ahead of everybody in a males' world, she justifies her success by means of her personal abilities. By thinking in this way, the Queen Bee demonstrates to be very individualistic and implicitly assigns to each person the same weight and means to achieve a certain goal, a view that is in fact discarded by many feminists. The Queen Bees reason according to the logic "if I can, anybody can" and do not sponsor female leadership by setting themselves as an example. Rowland made his categorization in the 80s when feminism was of a different kind. Accordingly, Bagguley (2002) describes feminism during the '70s and '80s as a movement with a visible "public face" (Bagguley, 2002, p. 169) which used to propel its ideas through public protests and strikes. Thatcher never embraced such practices and unlike what Ladam, Harden, and Windett (2018) found concerning women in power, she did not set an example for other women after herself. But what is even stranger, is that Thatcher herself was not initiated to politics by any woman. Following some accounts on her life (Aitken, 2014; Moore, 2013), the only person who guided her onto this path was her father, Alfred Roberts. He was always very present in his daughter's life and seems to have been her only mentor. Hence, not only Margaret Thatcher did not stimulate female presence in Parliament, but she herself was not inspired by a female politician who preceded her.

Speaking of the fatherly influence on Thatcher, one last point that must be remarked in light of the scientific research previously presented is the impact that the family of Margaret Thatcher had on her career. As it can be recalled, the family, according to scientific findings, can have both a positive and a negative role in affecting a woman's political success. Most of the times, the family context favors the perpetration of gender roles especially for what concerns women and their roles as mothers and housewives. Yet, for Thatcher, it is arguable whether this was the case or not. From what her biographer reports (Aitken, 2014), she was thought from her mother and grandmother how to do house-chores, how to sue and to cook and the proper way of leading the house. However, it is undeniable that she received an unconventional type of education from her father, one that for those times would have been more appropriate for a boy than for a girl (Blundell, 2008). She was pushed into the best schools and also sent to college, which was a privilege not many of her peers were allowed to have. Hence, she was not a victim of gender stereotyping when she was a child, but as an adult tried to conform to what society expected from her by getting married and having children. However, she could not spend much time being a mother and a wife, and even if her husband tried to refrain her from doing politics, none of this really took her from her job. Managing the double life of mother and politician was not easy for Thatcher, but it would be inappropriate to say that her family represented a real obstacle for her political success.

On the positive side, being a mother and a wife gave her the right profile to be trusted by her party. In fact, in a historical period in which people were very much attached to religion, culture and values, to be endowed of the utmost trust, a woman should have at least demonstrated of being a faithful representative of such values. Her family became an instrument of trust and respectability, and especially on these characteristics, she built her 'Gendered Identity' (Bauer, 2009, p.198). In fact, a gendered identity is intended as the character that a woman builds for herself to show to the public by positively pointing out her gender characteristics instead of hiding them. In a moment of political turmoil for Britain, she used her identity as a mother, a wife, a caretaker and a representative of the true values of society to gain the trust of the party and of the people. As proved by her quotation: "Perhaps it takes a housewife to see that Britain's national housekeeping is appalling" (Campbell, 1987, p. 234), and by many others of her speeches such as those given during the 1979 political campaign, she really championed such a strategy. As stated by the journalist Michael Cockerell in a TV interview on April 27, 1979: "On the campaign trail, there have been two very distinct Margaret Thatcher. One of them is 'Our Maggie', the housewife's friend. The other is the crusading Iron Maiden [...]" (Thatcher, 1979). Such a character helped Margaret to look appealing both to the men and to the women of the country because each category felt empathetic towards one of her multiple personalities. Hence, Margaret's family did not have as much of a bad impact on her career. Indeed,

she even turned it into a point of strength for her political leadership by pointing out the caring side of herself that was previously not as visible to the public.

In conclusion, the best way to recap the above analysis might be that of creating a chart with the name of the variables used, and to see whether Margaret's path has gone in conformity with scientific research. The variables identified are ten, namely: education, activism at the beginning of political career, political system in conformity with political strategy, *imbecillitas sexus*, the experiencing of psychological pain and cognitive dissonance, positive role of the family, negative role of the family, the use of a gendered identity, affinity with Converse's theory, and the presence of "Gender Affinity". The chart is divided into three lines, the first one identifies the variable taken under consideration, the second one called "findings" aims at briefly restating what was found, and the third one called "conformity with scientific research" want a 'yes or no' answer based on whether the findings were or not in conformity with the scientific research.

Table 1- Summary on the findings concerning Margaret Thatcher on selected dimensions suggested by scientific research to be relevant in cases of female leadership

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Activism at beginning of political career</b>	<b>Political system in accordance with political strategy</b>	<b><i>Imbecillitas sexus</i></b>	<b>Experienced psychological pain</b>	<b>Positive role of the family</b>	<b>Negative role of the family</b>	<b>Use of Gendered identity</b>	<b>Affinity with Converse's theory (politicization)</b>	<b>Gender Affinity</b>
<b>Findings</b>	Chemistry and later law degree, but had a strong self-taught knowledge	Active in the youth ranks of the party	Political strategy in conformity with FPTP system: Political leadership after having won over the party	Considered inherently inferior because of her gender	Attacked on her role of mother and wife	Used as an instrument to show liability and seriousness	As a child her family was supportive, As an adult her family did not obstacle her	Used her role as a woman to promote her character as a care-taker	Women received the vote in 1928 → were politically aware	Did not move women's vote in her favor
<b>Conformity with scientific Research (yes or no)</b>	Yes (not completely in conformity)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no

### 3.2 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Mrs Sirleaf was born not many years after Mrs Thatcher, and as it is easy to foresee, if the second half of the XX century was not an easy time for women in Europe, in Africa their condition was similar or worse. Through the example of Mrs Thatcher, this research highlighted the way in which western society used to - and partially still does - treat matters of gender equality, and it extensively covered the evolution of the condition of women within society especially by using the work of Duverger (1955). Yet, the “functional theory” created by Duverger on the basis of the old argument of the *imbecillitas sexus* (Duverger, 1955, p. 125) in this case must be revised due to the different culture and needs of society in Liberia. An important detail that shall be remarked to make sense of this analysis, is that the Liberian culture does not consign women to a position of inferiority, indeed, it sees them as belonging to specific “spheres of authority” that are different from the manly ones (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Such differentiation leads men to acknowledge that women do have a certain sphere of competence, but that they are also subordinated to their authority in other matters. One sentence that is often reported in Sirleaf’s biography, is that it was a diffused belief that “women were for raping, not for killing” (Cooper, 2017, p. 88). This implicit rule of society hides a deeper meaning, which is that men and women have to act and to be treated according to different rules, and such rules acknowledge that women can have authority in the house, but also that their bodies are not their own properties as far as they are not abused to death. Here, the patriarchal system created by religious institutions and imposed among the population as an absolute dogma had been shaped and adapted throughout years of slavery, colonization, and self-rule in order to fit a much more variegated and multicultural society. In fact, Liberia was born from the admixture of different tribes with the preponderant presence of African-American freed slaves. As argued by Oyewumi (1997), in Liberia the concept of “citizenship” and one’s role within society are much more attached to the latter’s kinship or personal experience rather than to gender. For example, the roles of mother and grandmother were given the utmost importance and for this reason, women were not considered to be consigned to a position of inherent inferiority (Moran, 2012). Furthermore, surprisingly, years of conflict opened up new opportunities for the weakest members of society to gather and renegotiate their role. Women were especially determined in taking part in the new political order and imposed themselves in the whole continent as a new phenomenon which was rapidly rising (Adams, 2008).

For the above-mentioned reasons, Sirleaf had a chance to impose herself as a valid and worthy alternative for political leadership. Liberia uses a presidential political system which sees the President charged as “Head of the State” and “Head of Government”. In such a framework, Sirleaf managed to personalize her political campaign so to use her popularity and knowledge to sponsor her

own character. As remarked in chapter 1, those of 2005 were the second presidential elections for Mrs Sirleaf. After her first political run, where she gained second place with a mere 10%, she spent years in the forefront of the opposition, trying to build the trust and respectability that she was going to use in 2005. Going back to Thomas and Adams (2010) thesis concerning the influence that the political system has on a woman's capability of becoming a prominent member of the government, in their work it is highlighted that for a woman it is much easier to become a political leader in a parliamentary system rather than in semi-presidential and presidential ones (Thomas and Adams, 2010; Jalalzai, 2004). In fact, there is quite a substantial difference between convincing a confined number of colleagues within a party and competing as an individual candidate for the presidential elections. Yet, one explanation that is provided to explain the success of Sirleaf, is that women tend to place greater emphasis on their gender characteristics if they know that "the electorate is dissatisfied" with the current situation (Thomas and Adams, 2010, p. 109).

It is needless to say that at that point in time, Liberia had just gone through two civil wars, it had faced years of brutal atrocities, and had to fight corrupted and blind governments that watched the halving of the population and the disintegration of Monrovia from their comfortable seats in the presidential mansion. Sirleaf's campaign in 2005 revolved around topics that were of much interest for the population and pointed out the mistakes made by previous administrations by making it a matter of gender. In fact, it can be argued that Sirleaf used "gender discrimination" the other way around to promote a peaceful, liable, non-corrupted, and genuine government with a woman as a leader and guarantor of such principles (Adams, 2008). Accordingly, Sirleaf smartly combined her fame as a renowned expert in economics and institutional matters, the respect that society owed her as a mother and grandmother (Haddad & Schweinle, 2010), and the characteristics that are stereotypically attributed to the feminine gender such as having affinity with peace-making and integrity. Hence, through the "Gendered Identity" (Bauer, 2009) she was able to convince her people that she was the right candidate to drag Liberia out of its own misery, that she was to bring change because she was a woman and because, unlike those who preceded her, she had lived and experienced the horrors of the civil wars. However, she also received substantial help from women associations that were born throughout and after the conflict. The latter wanted to turn the political instability in their favor and saw in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf the perfect candidate to promote a feminist agenda in parallel with the rebuilding of the State.

Unlike what happened in the case of Thatcher, the creation of a gendered identity brought about the phenomenon of "gender affinity" as described by Denmark, Ward and Bean (2012). In fact, as it is extensively reported in her biography (Cooper, 2017), ahead of the presidential elections Sirleaf conducted a tour de force in order to reach as many villages as possible in the whole country



of Liberia so to sensitize women to the importance of voting and of being represented in the government. The effort of Sirleaf concretely materialized in widespread support which was expressed through the vote. Statistics show that in 2005 “literate females had the highest turnout of any group in the Liberian electorate” (Bauer, 2009, p. 194) and during election day many women went as far as lending their children to other women allowing them to skip the voting line and to secure their vote for Ellen Sirleaf. Nevertheless, Liberia by 2005 had gone through quite many significant and tough years that had as a positive effect that of creating new opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups. Besides, while England during the 1980s was a strongly conservative country, attached to its values and traditions which stemmed from a deep-rooted religious belief, Liberia represents a completely different case. In 2005, the latter had just undergone two civil wars and the majority of families were missing one or more members. Those who were still alive had been brainwashed - especially young boys – or were extremely traumatized and represented more of a handicap than a resource (Cooper, 2017).

In sum, the older generations had undergone so much pain that needed some psychological help, while the younger generations, which were born and raised through the civil wars, needed to be re-educated. This precarious situation does not allow society to be selective on who can do what, based on gender. Anyone who was still capable of working both physically and mentally needed to be employed in the reconstruction of the State and of the country and in this way many women’s associations gained the upper hand and imposed themselves as resourceful organisms. These events are perfectly explained also by Converse’s theory (1969) which was also partially confirmed by Inglehart (1981). In a simplistic manner, according to Converse, one’s level of politicization depends on the “length of time” (1969, p. 164) that they have had political rights, and on whether they were deprived of such rights for a defined amount of time. Thus, by 2005 women in Liberia should have been as politically active as women in Italy because they were awarded the right to vote the same year, namely 1946. Yet, while Italian women came to live their political rights rather in a passive manner, men and women in Liberia were deprived of the right to vote and to have free and fair elections for almost a decade. Correspondingly, this kind of context stimulated women to gather and use their rights in the most effective manner, and for the specific case of Liberia, this was done with the intention to acquire a proactive role in the reshaping of the policies of the country.

Going back to Sirleaf, one further striking difference with Thatcher is the absence of the phenomenon that Clark (1991) calls “psychological pain”, linked to what in this research was identified as “cognitive dissonance”. In fact, the cognitive dissonance would generate psychological pain as it entails the disidentification of the individual with one group, and the missed identification of the former with the group she is trying to enter. To be more precise, a woman who entered politics

such as Thatcher, needed to lose part of her femininity to give prominence to more “masculine” traits of her personality, a process that would render her unable to identify with other women in society who embody the stereotypical kind of woman. On the other hand, she would be unable to identify with other politicians because the political caste is usually composed of misogynist men who can hardly imagine a woman in Parliament. Yet, this was not the case for Sirleaf and to explain this phenomenon, two variables can be identified. The first one is the cultural openness of Liberia. In fact, in the recounts of Sirleaf’s journey (Cooper, 2017; Bauer, 2009) no great discrimination against her as a woman is to be found. Unlike many women who walked the same path before and after her, Sirleaf entered politics smoothly and her gender did not really represent an obstacle for her political rise. The second factor is the way in which she structured her political campaign. Sirleaf put great importance on the role that women should have had in post-conflict Liberia, but she also emphasized the need for honesty and integrity and took a stance against the practices used by her predecessors. In this way, she demonstrated to be empathetic towards different issues and to have mastery of the means to achieve her goals.

Another paragon that can be made with Thatcher to point out a further difference between the two, is on the role that Sirleaf’s family had on her political rise. She was commenced to the scholastic world by her own parents who were educated people who wanted to give to their children the best instruction possible. However, a common path for women in Liberia is that of getting educated up until they get married and have children (Cooper, 2017). In Liberia, a wife should have not only dedicated herself to her family but should have also endured the abuses of her spouse in case he liked to do so. As previously reported, “women were for raping” and this was a wide-spread belief. Therefore, for example, having an abusive husband would not be a valid justification for asking for a divorce in court, especially if the husband proved to be against this decision (Cooper, 2017). Sirleaf went personally through this process and despite the fact that she finally obtained a divorce, she was also taken away her children. As it is made clear in her biography, she had to divorce because not only her husband was becoming violent, but he could also not accept her to have a career of her own. Once she gained her freedom, Sirleaf spent years tirelessly working in Liberia and in the US, but when it came to putting forward her candidature to the presidency, her whole family tried to discourage her from doing it. Fighting for her dreams had probably become a daily routine for Sirleaf, but in this sense, it can be argued that her family – her husband, parents and siblings - played a negative role for what concerns her political career. Their attempts to unhorse her, despite the valid reasons that could have motivated such attempts, impacted seriously the life of Ellen Sirleaf (Cooper, 2017) and could have led her to give up with politics.

On the other hand, though, it must be acknowledged that becoming a politician in Liberia, especially for a woman, had its own risks. Sirleaf had already taken a huge risk by trying to challenge the status quo. Moreover, as a mother of four, could have never entered politics unless somebody else would take care of them, especially when they were young. Fortunately, her family and family-in-law provided for the children, so she was able to pursue her career. In this perspective, the family of Sirleaf had a positive role. Furthermore, as it was the case for Thatcher, the fact that she had a family and children made Sirleaf look empathetic for her voters. In fact, especially in Liberia, the epithets of “mother” and “grandmother” entail a certain degree of respectability and it was also because of this that she was looked up to by the majority of the people.

Finally, one last remark must be made. Sirleaf, like the majority of women politicians according to Jalalzai (2004), received an extensive education that was not only taught in school but that she pursued also as a matter of personal interest. In fact, Sirleaf can be said to be outstanding in that, by having just an associate degree, she was requested by a Harvard professor to become a formal master student in the most prestigious university in the world. Through her studies, she became an expert in economics, but she also spent several years working for ministries in Liberia and then for supranational organizations such as the World Bank. As it has been found by Jalalzai (2004) and later confirmed also by Ladam, Harden, and Windett (2018), the majority of women, within whom is included also Sirleaf, spent many years in politics before actually gaining a prominent position. In fact, Sirleaf not only worked for a wide array of organization covering different roles, but she also worked in more than one governmental office and run for elections as a presidential candidate twice.

In conclusion, the experiences of Thatcher and Sirleaf differed in many ways but have also similar patterns that are highlighted by some of the scientific researches included in this dissertation. The scheme underneath is used to briefly analyze all the variables previously presented for the case of Thatcher, and their correspondence with this case study. However, they will be thoroughly analyzed in the conclusions.

Table 2- Summary on the findings concerning Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on selected dimensions suggested by scientific research to be relevant in cases of female leadership

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Activism at beginning of political career</b>	<b>Political system</b>	<b><i>Imbecillitas sexus</i></b>	<b>Experienced psychological pain and cognitive dissonance</b>	<b>Positive role of the family</b>	<b>Negative role of the family</b>	<b>Use of Gendered identity</b>	<b>Affinity with Converse's theory (politicization)</b>	<b>Gender Affinity</b>
<b>Findings</b>	Associate degree in accounting + master degree in public administration at Harvard	Was never an activist. Started working for government after getting her first degree	Political strategy in conformity with Presidential system: very personalized	In Africa women are not considered inherently inferior, but as being entitle to different tasks	She was not discriminated because of her gender	The family played a huge role in taking care of her children	Did not support her career; abused from husband	Used her role as a woman to promote her "feminine political persona"	Women were deprived of their political rights and actively engaged in protesting	Did a huge campaign to sensitize women to the importance of voting
<b>Conformity with scientific research (yes or no)</b>	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

## Conclusions

This dissertation started with a simple research question, which was: Under what conditions do female leaders emerge? Yet, as expected, this question proved to entail more than one answer. By using just two case studies, this research has never aimed to portray a complete picture of all the variables and their different combinations, which might affect a woman's chances of becoming a leader. Indeed, its only intent was that of creating a framework which aspires to be as inclusive as possible, so to delineate some general tendencies that can be found to be true in a variety of different cases. Despite the fact that it was expected to find some differentiations amongst the two, the research did not provide speculations regarding on which grounds the latter would have emerged. However, already with the first pieces of literature that were analyzed while researching, it was clear that the strongest dividing line was that which concerns cultural differences. In fact, even if all the variables were given the same importance, it is true that differentiations based on cultural grounds have been found in the majority of the works which lay in the bibliography. This means that the culture of a certain society – above personal attitudes and political systems - can be identified as the preponderant factor influencing a woman's capability of becoming a prominent figure in politics. However, there are many facets that owe to be analyzed, and for this purpose *Table 3* will serve as a recapitulative scheme to make a final comparison between the two case studies and to identify some general tendencies and discrepancies.

Table 3- Comparison between the conformity of each one of the two case-studies on selected dimensions suggested by scientific research to be relevant in cases of female leadership

CASE-STUDY	VARIABLES										
	Education	Activism at beginning of political career	Political system in conf. with political strategy	Experienced psychological pain and cognitive dissonance	Use of Gendered Identity	Gender Affinity	Imbec. sexus	Affinity with Converse's Theory on the phenomenon of politicization	Positive role of the family	Negative role of the family	
	M. T.	Yes (not completely)	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no
E. J. S.	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	

On the education front both Thatcher and Sirleaf respect that standard that seems to be - as already demonstrated by Jalalzai (2004) in her extensive research which acknowledged 44 female political leaders - the preponderant one among women. In fact, it is undeniable that the levels of education of Thatcher and Sirleaf go well beyond those achieved by the majority of women who were born in the same settings as theirs. Furthermore, the master degrees achieved respectively from Oxford and Harvard must be linked to numerous years of working experience which have preceded their political rise. In fact, it is interesting how both Thatcher and Sirleaf entered politics in their twenties but became Prime Minister and President quite a few decades afterwards. Yet, it is also true that while Thatcher had to militate in the youth ranks of the party for a few years, Sirleaf was awarded a job in the ministry as soon as she gained her associate's degree. This difference is probably imputable to the fact that while Liberia in the 1960s was still a country where a few people could be considered competent and able to administer a political portfolio and to develop efficient economic policies, the UK had a much developed and solidly hierarchical multiparty system. However, the fact remains that at the age of 25, Thatcher was already participating in her first election in the district to which she was assigned. Thus, it can be argued that obtaining high levels of education has allowed

Thatcher and Sirleaf to cross the threshold of a world that, in all probability, would otherwise have been inaccessible to both.

The third variable taken under examination concerns an inference made by Thomas and Adams (2010) on the incorporation of gender in political propaganda, used as a political strategy to take advantage of some opportunities which vary according to the political context. To be more specific, despite the fact that “plurality-majority single-member-district systems” (Reynolds, 1999, p. 555) such as the FPTP of the British’s Parliament and the two-round system (Liberia’s President) are considered to be the least favorable for the election of women, Thomas and Adams suggested that in Liberia, Sirleaf was able to succeed because the country’s political system is “weak and highly personalized” (p. 114). Hence, Sirleaf was able to create her “feminine political persona” (Haddad & Schweinle, 2010, p. 106) and used her gender as a leverage to promote change in light of the fact that she is a woman, and as such, she is innately more adequate to take care of people when they are in need. On the other hand, Britain has a strong party system which despite being moderately personalized, draws its strength from people’s sense of party affiliation rather than from one’s preference for the leader of the party. What follows is that while Sirleaf correctly promoted her femininity and highlighted the change she was going to represent in the name of her gender and of her feminist ideas, Thatcher had to stick to the party’s ideology and programme, and could not much deviate from that.

Already the circumstance of being a woman in a men’s world gave Thatcher some thoughts. The reason behind the latter can be difficult to understand and must be read from a sociological point of view while keeping in mind that our society is based on an extensive network of social groups to which people feel “affiliated” (Freeman, 1992) for different reasons that can go from their ethnicity to their interests or experience. Going back to Thatcher’s experience, after having entered politics she lost the ties with any social group she was willing to be part of and did not develop any others. She lost the “affiliation” to the group of women which corresponded to the stereotypical image of mothers and wives in British society, which started to despise her. But she was also never included in the group of male politicians within Parliament. This perpetual exclusion caused Thatcher to experience psychological pain which in turn was propelled by a kind of “cognitive dissonance” between the woman that she was supposed to be, and the person that she was. According to Clark (1991), many women who undertake the political path do experience psychological pain, especially when society is not ready to grant them the same fluidity of identity of which men can benefit. Yet, this was not the case for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. In fact, Sirleaf was not under attack because of her gender and even when she did not win elections, the defeat was not attributable to the distrust of the people towards women in power, but rather to the strong preference of the people for her political opponent

(Cooper, 2017). The fact that Sirleaf was never a “lone player” is also linked to the concepts of Gendered Identity and Gender-Affinity Effect. Despite the fact that probably in Liberia the caste of politicians left after two decades of civil war was not as homogenous and closed as the British one in the 1970s, Sirleaf smoothly became one of them, but most importantly was never excluded by feminist movements and female groups in civil society which indeed, embraced her. Thanks to a thorough examination, it was highlighted how Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was able to create a gendered identity for herself which in turn generated the gender-affinity effect by swinging the votes of many women in her favor. The exploitation of her femininity and gender characteristics strongly profited Sirleaf (Thomas & Adams, 2010). Differently, Thatcher was not able to stir up the same causal process. It is true that she also created a much softer gendered identity for herself especially for what concerns the campaign for the national elections of 1979, but despite her effort, she was not able to turn the female vote particularly in her favor (Singh, 2015) and therefore to generate the gender-affinity effect.

However, adding up to the causes of the skepticism that was born over the Thatcher phenomenon, there must be considered the strong dissuasive campaign against her. The latter was at first fueled within the Conservative party to not have her elected, and then by the opposition during the campaign before national elections. The main aim was that of dissuading people from voting Thatcher in name of her unsuitability for the task. In fact, as specified by Duverger (1955), to consider women the *imbecillitas sexus* was already outdated in the 1950s. It was considered anachronistic and would have not raised much consensus. For this reason, a new argumentation was created to explain why women such as Margret Thatcher should have stayed out of politics. The argument, which had as its main pillar the inherent unsuitability of women, was used in this research to draw an important distinction with other cultures, particularly with the African one. In fact, especially through the work of Nkomo and Ngambi (2009), this research shed light on the differential consideration that this culture reserves to women. Namely, their partial inferiority and subjugation due to the essential roles they play both for their family and for society. In fact, especially due to the many conflicts which have afflicted the continent for many decades during the last century, but also due to the scarcity of resources and the precariousness of work, women were endowed with great responsibility and detained complete power in many circumstances which usually involved the care-taking of children or the household. On such grounds, it can be argued that the African culture offers an interesting dichotomy concerning this topic. In fact, a woman might be abused and tortured due to the deficiency of laws which protect her rights, but at the same time it can also be normal to see her rising in a position of power, even in politics, due to her competence and suitability to cover certain tasks (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009, p. 62).



Furthermore, another variable that served to explain the rise of Thatcher and Sirleaf stems from the theory proposed by Converse (1969) concerning the politicization of individuals in a given society. In fact, Thatcher's rise can be justified in light of the fact that having received the right to vote quite early, women have been empowered for a length of time sufficient to render them politicized and autonomous. Even if the percentage of women in politics was not comparable with the manly one, women in the UK had been proactive since the 19th century in manifesting and protesting for their rights. According to Converse, this kind of intrinsic culture can provide a justification for the unexpected rise of women in politics in countries which granted them political rights earlier than others. However, Converse's theory provides an explanation also for the high level of politicization of women in countries that actually awarded them political rights quite late, one of which is Liberia. In fact, women in Liberia were allowed to vote for the first time in 1946, yet, during and after the civil war they showed incredible resilience and publicly demonstrated to support their favorite candidate. Such unexpected high levels of politicization can be explained in light of the fact that these women were deprived of their civil, human, and political rights for almost two decades. This sort of deprivation, as explained by Converse, brings people to actively engage with politics to change their condition of inferiority, and this was exactly the tactic adopted by Liberian women.

Finally, two variables concerning the topic of "family influence", owe to be discussed. As previously deducted from the biographical information of Thatcher and Sirleaf, they were both close to their natal family but also built one of their own while taking care of their political careers. However, while for Thatcher the family performed more of a supporting role, for Sirleaf the same cannot be said. Ellen Sirleaf had to strive in order to get a higher education and had to fight against her family when it was time for her to run for presidential elections (Cooper, 2017). For her, family represented both an obstacle and indispensable support, but this might be attributed to the fact that entering politics represented for a woman in Liberia a concrete risk, especially during and right after the civil conflict. Yet, what is important to be remarked is that even in this context, having a family of their own represented, at the eyes of the public, a sign of liability and trust which surely played in favor of the two candidates (Haddad & Schweinle, 2010). Their feminine presence and the stereotypical characteristics of caretakers and peace-makers (Bauer, 2009) were confirmed by their role as mothers and wives, which implicitly turned on a mechanism of people's subconscious that made them look liable and suitable for the role of leader.

In conclusion, this research has tried to uncover, with the extensive use of scholarly work, some of the variables that can be considered to affect a woman's chances to enter politics. Within all the relevant literature, ten variables have been presented as the most important ones, yet, no common thread between these was offered. In fact, it was only while writing this dissertation that a word started

to pop-up with an increasing frequency, so as much so that it was impossible not to make inferences about it. The word under concern is “femininity”, a concept that surely entails more than the eye meets. To be feminine means to be emotional, prone to being irrational and hysterical, often conceited, and irresponsible (Rose, 1988), but as it is deducible from one’s experience with the common vision of society, it entails rules also on how to dress-up, behave, speak, and treat others. The concept of femininity is intrinsic within all the variables previously presented, but it is hard to understand whether it is represented positively or negatively. For example, portraying themselves as feminine has profited both Thatcher and Sirleaf in creating their gendered identity because it is entailed within the feminine stereotype that a woman shall be a mother and a wife before anything else. Yet, when we speak about education, Thatcher and Sirleaf had to overcome their femininity to push themselves in typically masculine fields such as the law and economics ones, because otherwise, it was going to be almost impossible to obtain prominent positions in politics (Jalalzai, 2004). This dichotomy can easily lead to making conjectures about how women in power should live their femininity, and what transpires is that both Thatcher and Sirleaf have had to preserve their femininity as a *façade* in order to represent what society needed to see, but they have also learned how to be “masculine” in character so to stand the comparison with male peers.

In short, what this research can state with certainty is that despite the cultural and political differences, and despite the personal characteristics that make a person more or less fit to play the role of a politician, to access a sector predominantly dominated by men like it is politics, many women have had to sacrifice a part of themselves and bend to the dictates of a society dominated by a sexist and discriminatory perspective. However, it is true that Margaret Thatcher, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and many others have managed to find a balance in the dichotomy of their personalities and to come out of that "labyrinth" (Klenke, 1997) which is defined by Eagly and Carli (2007) as the last stage of access to leadership for women throughout history. The recent trends regarding the growing number of women heads of state and government, give way to think that in finding an escape from the labyrinth, these women have contributed substantially to tarnish and break down the walls, so as to pave the way for the new generations (Ladam, Harden & Windett, 2018). Therefore, there is no real answer to the research question, or rather, the answer may vary over time and depend on the place. It is true that some variables were found to be in accordance with both case studies, but that is not sufficient to prove a general tendency on this regard. What is certain is that there are many factors that can influence the phenomenon under examination both positively and negatively, but as long as our masculinized vision of leader does not change, any woman who tries to access power will have to adapt to be no longer herself, but the version of herself that people want to see.

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## SINTESI DEL CONTENUTO

### L'idea e la ricerca

Questo elaborato ed il suo titolo sono nati per far luce sui percorsi, le circostanze e le caratteristiche che hanno portato alcune donne a ricoprire posizioni importanti nei loro rispettivi mondi politici in un periodo in cui questi ultimi erano prevalentemente campi a predominanza maschile. La domanda di ricerca, che è anche il titolo, ovvero: "In quali condizioni le donne sono riuscite ad emergere?", intende concentrare l'attenzione sull'obiettivo di questo elaborato. Infatti, attraverso tre capitoli principali, il documento cerca di condurre un'analisi comparativa per individuare analogie e peculiarità dei soggetti che prende in esame, e di spiegarli alla luce delle numerose ricerche scientifiche che sono state analizzate per elaborare questo saggio nella maniera più originale e concreta possibile. I mezzi e le condizioni - siano essi culturali, politici o psicologici - che permettono a una donna di farsi strada attraverso il "labirinto" (Klenke, 1997) della vita e di raggiungere l'obiettivo più alto dell'ambizione politica, costituiscono un campo largamente inesplorato per la ricerca accademica. Infatti, tralasciando Duverger (1955), Eagly e Carli (2007) e Rowland (1984), solo di pochi altri autori all'interno della bibliografia studiata si può dire che abbiano prodotto una ricerca comparata basata su molteplici casi, che miri a scoprire "mezzi e condizioni", già menzionati, che portano una donna al vertice del potere politico. Come riconosciuto da diversi studiosi nel campo (Nkomo & Ngmabi, 2009; Thomas & Adams, 2010; Sernak, 2004), la letteratura è carente, e le poche opere presenti sono basate su una singola questione o circostanza, piuttosto che su un fenomeno o una tendenza generali. Questo elaborato non mira, certamente, a colmare una lacuna nel campo di ricerca già carente dell'"empowerment" delle donne nella scienza politica. Infatti, più modestamente, si propone di arricchire le informazioni già rese disponibili dai ricercatori politici, con la speranza di creare un'analisi originale che metta in luce aspetti inediti di questo ambito di ricerca.

Nel definire lo scheletro di questo saggio, una domanda ricorrente è stata: qual è la strategia più efficace per condurre un'analisi che ha l'obiettivo di essere più comprensiva possibile, ma al contempo anche specifica? La risposta è stata quella di prendere in esame un piccolo ma esemplare numero di "case studies" e di utilizzare un buon numero di variabili in modo da poter effettuare un confronto sotto diversi punti di vista. Nondimeno, per rendere il lavoro analitico il più fruttuoso possibile, anche i casi sotto esame sono stati scelti in modo tale che fossero molto diversi tra loro, così da consentire un confronto basato su significative diversità, e poche analogie. Per questo motivo, tra le numerose possibilità, sono state scelte Margaret Thatcher e Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

## **I “Case Studies”: Margaret Thatcher e Elle Johnson Sirleaf**

Margaret Thatcher è stata la prima donna Primo Ministro del Regno Unito, eletta per la prima volta nel 1979 in un sistema parlamentare, durante un periodo in cui a molte donne non è stato permesso di entrare in parlamento, per non parlare di diventare capi del governo. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf è stata la prima donna capo di stato nella storia della Liberia e dell'Africa, è stata eletta per la prima volta nel 2005, in un sistema politico presidenziale che era stato appena riabilitato dopo due decenni di guerra civile che ha causato gravi danni ai gruppi più vulnerabili della società, specialmente alle donne. Oltre alle oggettive ed evidenti differenze determinate in origine dal contesto in cui si è sviluppata la loro esperienza, un'altra ragione ha contribuito a fare una scrematura nel processo di selezione di due donne con un alto profilo politico. In verità, le combinazioni di donne con profili simili sono molteplici. Tuttavia, le leader femminili provenienti dall'Asia e dall'America Latina non sono state prese in considerazione perché, come ampiamente riferito da Farida Jalalzai (2004), in questi paesi è frequente che le donne accedano al potere attraverso la pratica del nepotismo e di altre forme di concorrenza sleale che, se prese in considerazione, invaliderebbe lo scopo di questa tesi.

### **La struttura dello studio**

Come si può evincere da quanto detto in precedenza, quest'analisi è tripartita e si articola, cioè, essenzialmente nei tre capitoli centrali. Nel primo capitolo, le biografie di Thatcher e Sirleaf vengono smontate e ricomposte per dare maggiore rilevanza ai dettagli e agli eventi ritenuti fondamentali per svolgere l'indagine. Senza alcuna intenzione di voler sottovalutare le difficoltà e le sfide vinte da queste due donne, alcuni avvenimenti sono stati messi in secondo piano per rendere un quadro biografico chiaro e conciso, in quanto esso costituisce un elemento indispensabile per la scrittura del terzo capitolo. Il secondo capitolo tratta un *corpus* piuttosto ampio di studi accademici su una vasta gamma di argomenti, tra i quali anche “empowerment” delle donne, leadership femminile, stereotipi di genere e modelli comportamentali riferiti ai processi di votazione. Anche per quanto riguarda gli studiosi il cui lavoro viene menzionato, questa ricerca ha mirato a selezionarli in modo da creare un quadro di persone che abbiano scritto in diversi periodi storici e che provengano da culture e scuole di pensiero diverse. Una puntualizzazione è necessaria: questo tipo di lavoro è stato condotto soltanto per voler essere coerenti nella metodologia di ricerca e analisi utilizzata. Infatti, i criteri adottati per quanto riguarda la selezione dei ricercatori, non vengono considerati nel derivare le conclusioni di questo elaborato e non vi viene data alcuna rilevanza. Inoltre, questo capitolo presenta molte variabili relative alla vita della Thatcher e Sirleaf che sono state divise in base a due sottocategorie: culturali e politiche. I fattori culturali sono stati successivamente categorizzati in: *historical framework* (quadro storico), *family in the public and private spheres* (la famiglia nella sfera pubblica e privata),



e “*background*” personale. I fattori politici, invece, sono stati affrontati attraverso un approccio olistico che non comporta alcuna suddivisione.

Un aggettivo che viene spesso menzionato in questo secondo capitolo, ma che sarà discusso solo nelle “riflessioni” finali, è quello di “*femininity*” (femminile). Il concetto di femminilità è davvero molto astratto e tuttavia altrettanto concreto nella mentalità di molte persone che lo usano per descrivere il comportamento, le abitudini ed il modo di essere della donna nell’immaginario di una determinata società. Nonostante questa ricerca dia, inizialmente, poca attenzione al concetto di femminilità, è inevitabile notare che la parola ricorre frequentemente in ogni capitolo. Tuttavia, il concetto di femminilità viene analizzato solo nella conclusione, che prova a dimostrare come quest’ultimo sia il tema dominante all’interno dell’intera ricerca. Data la vastità delle informazioni fornite, alla fine del primo capitolo e di ognuna delle due sezioni del secondo, è stato introdotto un paragrafo sia riflessivo che riassuntivo chiamato “*Reflections*”, il quale sarà utile al lettore per rivedere le informazioni principali del capitolo o della sezione soprastante. Il terzo ed ultimo capitolo combina i due precedenti in modo da creare un confronto tra le esperienze personali della Thatcher e della Sirleaf, e la conoscenza scientifica derivante dai numerosi saggi scritti da scienziati e ricercatori esperti. In questo capitolo, per valutare se vi sia corrispondenza tra le informazioni scientifiche ed i due case studies, le informazioni biografiche vengono schedate ed esaminate alla luce di ciò che diversi studiosi hanno scritto sull'argomento.

### **Variabili e Tabelle**

Il terzo capitolo costituisce la parte analitica di questo elaborato: è suddiviso in due parti, e ognuna di queste analizza di uno dei due personaggi attraverso la ricerca scientifica selezionata. Cercando di rispettare, per quanto possibile, l’ordine cronologico degli eventi, le due biografie vengono studiate utilizzando le dieci variabili seguenti:

- “Teoria funzionale” di Duverger (1955)
- Ruolo positivo della famiglia
- Ruolo negativo della famiglia
- Livello d’istruzione
- Attivismo politico all’inizio della carriera
- Aver subito danni psicologici e dissonanze cognitive)
- Affinità con la teoria di Converse sulla politicizzazione degli individui in una determinata società (1969)
- Effetto di “affinità di genere” (Denemark, Ward & Bean, 2012)

- Correlazione tra il sistema politico e la strategia politica utilizzata dal candidato
- Uso dell' "identità di genere" (Bauer, 2009)

Quindi, sotto ciascuna delle due sottosezioni è presente una tabella che mostra le dieci variabili e la loro relazione positiva o negativa con i record biografici. Ogni tabella corrisponde a ciascuna delle due personalità sotto analisi, ed è composta da dieci colonne in cui vengono elencate le variabili, e da due righe principali. Nella prima riga viene fatto un breve riassunto dell'episodio biografico ricollegabile ad una determinata variabile, mentre nella seconda riga è inserita la modalità di una variabile dicotomica (si/no) per valutare la conformità del suddetto episodio con i dati scientifici. Queste due tabelle ("Table 1" e "Table 2") vengono quindi riunite nelle "Conclusioni", dove le righe finali delle due tabelle vengono messe a confronto l'una con l'altra per avere uno schema riassuntivo delle analogie e delle discrepanze tra i due casi. Il diagramma che viene a crearsi unendo le due tabelle è il seguente:

*Tabella 3- Confronto tra la conformità di ogni case-study con le variabili suggerite da diverse ricerche scientifiche*

CASE-STUDY	VARIABILI									
	Educa- zione	Attivismo politico prima di essere elette	Sistema politico conforme alla strategia politica	subito danni moralì per via del persegui- mento dei propri interessi politici	Uso della "Gendered Identity" (identità di genere)	Gender Affinity (Affinità di genere)	Validità dell' <i>Imbecillitas</i> <i>sexus</i>	Affinità con la Teoria di Converse sulla politiciz- zazione	Ruolo positivo della famiglia	Ruolo negativo della famiglia
	M. T.	Si (parziale)	Si	Si	Si	Si	no	Si	Si	Si
E. S.	Si	no	Si	no	Si	Si	no	Si	Si	Si

Come è possibile notare dallo schema, vi sono tanti punti in comune quanti in disaccordo: nelle conclusioni si cerca di dare una spiegazione ad analogie e divergenze utilizzando fattori culturali, storici, politici ed individuali.

## **Il confronto**

Per esempio, sul fronte dell'istruzione, sia la Thatcher che la Sirleaf rispettano lo standard che sembra essere - come già dimostrato da Jalalzai (2004) - quello preponderante tra le donne che hanno raggiunto posizioni di rilievo nell'ambiente politico. Inoltre, è interessante ricordare come, mentre la Thatcher ha dovuto militare nei ranghi giovanili del partito per alcuni anni<sup>1</sup>, Ellen Sirleaf ha ottenuto un lavoro nel ministero non appena conseguita la laurea breve in contabilità<sup>2</sup>. Questa differenza è probabilmente dovuta al fatto che mentre la Liberia negli anni '60 era ancora un paese in cui poche persone potevano essere considerate competenti e in grado di amministrare un Paese e di formulare politiche economiche e sociali, il Regno Unito aveva un sistema multipartitico molto sviluppato e rigidamente gerarchico.

La terza variabile presa in esame riguarda una teoria proposta da Thomas e Adams (2010) sull'incorporazione del sesso del candidato nella sua propaganda politica, utilizzata come strategia politica per sfruttare alcune opportunità che variano a seconda del contesto politico. Per essere più precisi, sebbene i sistemi elettorali che prevedono distretti con collegi uninominali (Reynolds, 1999, p. 555) come il FPTP (First-Past-The-Post) del Parlamento britannico e il sistema a "due round" (sistema elettorale utilizzato per eleggere il Presidente della Liberia) siano considerati i meno adatti a promuovere l'elezione di candidati donna, Thomas e Adams hanno suggerito che in Liberia, la Sirleaf ha avuto successo perché il sistema politico del Paese è "debole e altamente personalizzato" (p. 114). Pertanto, Sirleaf è stata in grado di usare la sua identità di genere come leva per promuovere il cambiamento in virtù delle doti che vengono stereotipicamente affiliate al suo genere. Al contrario, la Gran Bretagna ha un forte sistema partitico che, nonostante sia moderatamente personalizzato, trae la sua forza dal senso di affiliazione ad un determinato partito, piuttosto che dall'affinità con il suo leader. Quello che ne consegue è che mentre Sirleaf promuoveva la sua femminilità e parlava di cambiamento proponendo un'agenda femminista, la Thatcher doveva attenersi all'ideologia e al programma del partito, e non poteva discostarsene molto.

Questo doversi attenere alle politiche di partito ha impedito alla Thatcher di poter appoggiare tematiche che stavano a cuore alle donne ed ai gruppi più vulnerabili della società, che avevano

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<sup>1</sup>Negli anni di Oxford è entrata a far parte della Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA) (Aitken, 2014)

<sup>2</sup>Two-year long Associate Degree in Accounting

probabilmente visto in lei il volto del cambiamento. La perpetua esclusione della Thatcher da quei “social groups” (Freeman, 1992) di cui avrebbe dovuto idealmente far parte, come la casta politica e i gruppi di donne emancipate, ha fatto sì che sperimentasse un dolore psicologico a sua volta provocato da una sorta di "dissonanza cognitiva" tra la donna che avrebbe dovuto essere e la persona che era. Contrariamente alle aspettative, come si può evincere dalla Tabella 3, questo fenomeno non si è verificato nel caso di Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Lei stessa è riuscita infatti a trasformare il suo essere donna in un vero e proprio “asset” con il quale convincere ed attirare voti. Il fatto che Sirleaf abbia generato così tanto supporto è anche legato ai concetti di Gendered Identity (identità di genere) e Gender-Affinity Effect (effetto di affinità di genere). Grazie ad una ricerca approfondita, è stato evidenziato come Ellen Johnson Sirleaf sia stata in grado di creare, per sé stessa, un'identità di genere che a sua volta ha generato l'effetto di affinità di genere facendo registrare così non solo un'altissima percentuale di votanti, ma anche una grande fiducia in lei da parte dell'elettorato femminile. Al contrario, la Thatcher non è stata in grado di suscitare lo stesso effetto. Nonostante anche lei sia riuscita a crearsi un'identità di genere, non è stata poi in grado di sfruttare il voto femminile a suo vantaggio (Singh, 2015) e quindi a generare l'effetto di affinità di genere.

Tuttavia, sommando le cause dello scetticismo nato sul fenomeno Thatcher, bisogna considerare la forte campagna dissuasiva contro di lei. Questo scetticismo è stato inizialmente alimentato all'interno del partito conservatore per non averla eletta, e poi dall'opposizione durante la campagna elettorale per le elezioni nazionali. L'obiettivo principale era quello di dissuadere le persone dal votare Thatcher in nome della sua inadeguatezza per il compito. Infatti, come specificato da Duverger (1955), sin dagli anni '50 definire le donne *imbecillitas sexus* era considerato anacronistico. Per questo motivo, per argomentare la tesi per cui le donne come Margaret Thatcher avrebbero dovuto rimanere fuori dalla politica, è stata creata una nuova spiegazione basata sulle doti innate delle donne che le vedono più adatte a ricoprire alcuni ruoli. La cultura africana invece, in questo riguardo adotta una visione differente, e soprattutto attraverso il lavoro di Nkomo e Ngambi (2009), si è potuto far luce sulla considerazione differenziale che questa cultura riserva alle donne. Vale a dire, la loro parziale inferiorità dovuta ai ruoli essenziali che svolgono sia per la loro famiglia che per la società. Soprattutto a causa dei numerosi conflitti che hanno afflitto il continente per molti decenni, ma anche a causa della scarsità di risorse e della precarietà del lavoro, le donne sono state dotate di grandi responsabilità e detengono potere decisionale assoluto in molti ambiti della loro quotidianità.

Un'ulteriore variabile che è servita a spiegare l'ascesa di Thatcher e Sirleaf deriva dalla teoria proposta da Converse (1969) riguardante la politicizzazione degli individui in una data società. In effetti, l'ascesa di Thatcher può essere giustificata alla luce del fatto che essendo il Regno Unito uno

dei primi paesi ad aver concesso il diritto di voto alle donne, già negli anni '70 molte di esse erano politicamente informate e responsabili. Anche se la percentuale di donne in politica non era paragonabile a quella maschile, le donne nel Regno Unito erano state proattive sin dal 19° secolo nel manifestare e protestare per i loro diritti. Secondo Converse, questo tipo di cultura intrinseca può fornire una giustificazione per l'aumento inaspettato delle donne in politica in paesi che hanno concesso loro diritti politici prima di altri. La teoria di Converse, peraltro, fornisce una spiegazione anche per l'alto livello di politicizzazione delle donne nei paesi che in realtà hanno concesso i diritti politici in maniera tardiva, uno dei quali è, appunto, la Liberia. Le donne in Liberia furono autorizzate a votare per la prima volta nel 1946, tuttavia, durante e dopo la guerra civile (1989-1997; 1999-2003), si sono mostrate resilienti nel protestare per ciò che ritenevano fosse giusto. Tali inattesi, alti, livelli di politicizzazione in una società che può essere definita “arretrata”, possono essere spiegati alla luce del fatto che, dopo aver da poco guadagnato i loro diritti politici, queste donne ne sono state private per quasi due decenni, tornando ad una condizione molto inferiore a quella da cui erano partite prima di ottenerli. Questa sorta di privazione, come spiegato da Converse, porta un nucleo di persone ad impegnarsi attivamente in politica.

Infine, le ultime due variabili riguardano il ruolo che la famiglia ha avuto nella crescita politica di Thatcher e Sirleaf. Mentre per la Thatcher la famiglia deteneva principalmente un ruolo di supporto, per Sirleaf lo stesso non si può dire. Ellen Sirleaf ha dovuto lottare per ottenere un'istruzione superiore e ha dovuto combattere contro la sua famiglia quando è stato il momento di candidarsi alle elezioni presidenziali (Cooper, 2017). Per lei, la famiglia rappresentava sia un supporto indispensabile che un ostacolo. Tuttavia, ciò che è importante notare è che anche in questo contesto, avere una propria famiglia rappresentava, agli occhi del pubblico, un segno di responsabilità e fiducia che sicuramente giocava a favore delle due candidate. La loro presenza femminile e le loro stereotipiche caratteristiche sulle quali il pubblico faceva affidamento (Bauer, 2009), sono state messe in risalto dal loro ruolo di mogli, madri, e guardiane della famiglia e di tutti i valori sacri della società.

### **La “femininity”**

In conclusione, questa ricerca ha cercato di captare, all'interno di una vasta gamma di ricerche scientifiche, alcune delle variabili che giocano un ruolo fondamentale nell'influenzare le possibilità di una donna di avere successo in politica. All'interno di tutta la letteratura pertinente, dieci variabili sono state preselezionate come le più importanti, tuttavia non è stato evidenziato nessun filo conduttore tra queste. Infatti, è stato solo durante la stesura, che una parola ha iniziato a comparire frequentemente, tanto che è stato impossibile non produrre congetture al riguardo. La parola in questione è "femminilità". Essere femminile significa essere emotivi, inclini ad essere irrazionali e

isterici, spesso presuntuosi ed irresponsabili (Rose, 1988), ma come è deducibile dalla nostra esperienza individuale con le norme della società in cui viviamo, implica anche regole su come vestirsi, comportarsi, parlare e trattare gli altri. Il concetto di femminilità è intrinseco in tutte le variabili precedentemente presentate, ma è difficile capire se sia rappresentato positivamente o negativamente. Ad esempio, ritrarre sé stesse come rappresentanti dello stereotipo di femminilità ha giovato sia alla Thatcher che alla Sirleaf nel creare la loro identità di genere. Tuttavia, quando parliamo di istruzione, Thatcher e Sirleaf hanno dovuto superare la loro femminilità per spingersi in campi tipicamente maschili come quelli del diritto e dell'economia, perché altrimenti sarebbe stato quasi impossibile per loro ottenere posizioni di rilievo in politica (Jalalzai, 2004). Questa dicotomia può facilmente portare al creare congetture su come le donne al potere dovrebbero vivere la loro femminilità, e ciò che traspare è che sia Thatcher che Sirleaf hanno dovuto preservare la loro femminilità come facciata per rappresentare ciò che la società aveva bisogno di vedere, ma hanno anche imparato come essere "maschili" nel carattere, così da reggere il paragone con i colleghi.

## **Conclusioni**

In breve, ciò che questa ricerca può affermare con certezza è che nonostante le differenze culturali e politiche, e nonostante le caratteristiche personali rendano una persona più o meno adatta a svolgere il ruolo di politico, per accedere ad un settore prevalentemente dominato da uomini come la politica, molte donne hanno dovuto sacrificare una parte di sé stesse e piegarsi ai *dictat* di una società dominata da un'ottica sessista e discriminatoria. Ad ogni modo, è vero che Margaret Thatcher, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf e molte altre sono riuscite a trovare un equilibrio nella dicotomia della loro persona e ad uscire da quel "labirinto" (Klenke, 1997) che viene definito da Eagly e Carli (2007) come l'ultimo stage di accesso alla leadership per le donne nel corso della storia. I recenti trend riguardanti il crescente numero di donne capo di stato e di governo danno modo di pensare che nel trovare una via di fuga dal labirinto, queste donne abbiano contribuito in maniera sostanziale a scalfirne ed abbatte i muri, così da spianare la strada per le nuove generazioni (Ladam, Harden & Windett, 2018). Pertanto, non vi è una vera risposta alla domanda di ricerca, o meglio, la risposta può variare nel corso del tempo e a seconda del luogo. Alcune variabili si sono dimostrate più generalizzate di altre che magari venivano confermate da uno solo dei case study, ma questo non è sufficiente per definirle essenziali nel determinare il successo di una donna in ambito politico. Quello che è certo è che vi sono numerosi fattori che possono influenzare questo fenomeno in maniera positiva e negativa, ma finché non cambierà la nostra visione mascolinizzata di leader, qualunque donna che provi ad accedere al potere dovrà adattarsi ad essere non più sé stessa, ma la versione di sé stessa che la società vuole vedere.