

## A Man's World? Leadership and Participation in International Affairs

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On February 16, 2019, McKinsey & Company and Women Political Leaders co-hosted a high-level, exclusive roundtable entitled “A Man’s World? Leadership and Participation in International Affairs.”

Across the world, the notion of the "strongman leader" is gaining popularity. Politicians are winning elections based on the promise of strong and decisive leadership, often in stark contrast to the slow and cumbersome decision-making of democratic political systems based on checks and balances. In this context, “leadership” is increasingly becoming more and more about showing strength rather than about creating consensus through compromise.

The question of how leadership should be defined, what type of leadership is needed, and what role women play in today’s international environment was at the center of the co-hosted debate.

The speakers at the event were:

- João Gomes Cravinho, Minister of National Defence, Portugal
- Catherine de Bolle, Executive Director, Europol
- Jacquelline Fuller, Vice President, Google
- Richard Sezibera, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Rwanda.

The discussion revolved around four perspectives:

- **Low participation of women in defense and security is not a luxury we can afford**  
Participants rejected the view that the desirability of greater gender parity in defence and policing is simply driven by ‘fairness’ or altruism. Instead, low participation of women in this sector is seen as a luxury we cannot afford. This stems from the fact that complex geo-political defence issues require a high degree of cognitive diversity in order to be properly tackled. In addition, swathes of women who feel put off joining such a male-dominated industry represented untapped potential to panelists, as they possess qualifications and attributes equal to their male counterparts that may never be benefitted from. “Being a feminist has become the rational thing to do”, one participant pointed out. Rwanda was discussed as a case in point, where increased female participation became necessary after the horrific civil war primarily decimated the men of the country. While barriers to gender parity in Rwanda remain, its dramatic transformation into a female-led society was inspiring.
- **Enough talking – now we need concrete action**  
Many participants agreed that it’s long past the time for action – proof of the benefits of female participation has been deliberated, and unconscious biases

have been sufficiently researched to initiate change. Examples were given of law enforcement agencies that had changed recruiting standards (e.g., regarding the required height, which discriminates against women). At the UN level, resolution 1325 and its upcoming 20-year anniversary were identified as an opportunity to push for greater commitment of member states to involve women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. It was agreed that women and men should work in close collaboration to formulate tangible action plans for how to increase female participation in leadership roles, not just in defense and security, but also in society at large.

- **Let's fight the stereotypes**

The pursuit of equality between men and women, many discussants believed, comes hand in hand with eroding negative stereotypes that surround women. One panelist pointed to how children are fed a narrative of traditional gender roles, in cartoons and films for example, as a starting point for these perceptions. At the other end of the spectrum, discussants noted that certain leadership styles should not be attributed 'male' or 'female' qualities. Instead, they should be assessed for what they are, and how they fit with what is needed. It was felt that this is undermined by the fact that women in leadership roles were unwilling to display authority at the risk of being branded negatively, in a way that men are not.

- **Incremental change is not enough – the system needs to change**

The challenges facing defense and security are broad when it comes to gender parity. In particular, participants noted the lack women pursuing certain subject areas during their education, the lack of female leadership in the private and public sectors, and the lack of appreciation of diversity as source of energy. Participants agreed that incremental change is not enough – that systemic changes will be necessary to advance gender parity in the sector.