Thousands of people had packed themselves into the soaring atrium of the National Building Museum. It was June 2008, and Hillary Clinton had come to deliver her concession speech as Democratic primary candidate. Although Clinton was speaking to a domestic audience, women throughout the world have struggled to overcome the same barriers she spoke to:

This was not the party I had planned . . . Although we weren’t able to shatter that highest, hardest, glass ceiling this time, thanks to you it’s got about 18 million cracks in it, and the light is shining through like never before, filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time. (Guardian 2008)

Eight years later, Secretary Clinton is once again vying to burst through that glass ceiling. Although less than a decade has passed, Americans seem to have gotten used to the idea that a woman could occupy the highest office in government.

Mark P. Lagon is a Centennial Fellow and distinguished senior scholar, at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, and former U.S. Ambassador-At-Large to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Rebecca P. Hughes is a candidate for the Master of Science in Foreign Service degree at Georgetown University.
Although the world has made significant strides in reducing gender inequality, women continue to lag far behind in terms of political empowerment. This is a problem not only for women but for humankind as well. We’ve “come a long way, baby” in the United States and around the world. Or have we?

Despite being one of the most free and pluralistic democracies in the world, American women have struggled profoundly to attain political equality. In the United States, it took women 144 years to win the right to vote and 232 years to win a presidential primary. Although our next Commander in Chief may very well be a woman, women make up only 19.4 percent of Congress. Yet American women are not the only women woefully underrepresented in their national governments. Around the world women are outnumbered in legislatures 4 to 1, and as of January 2015, there were only 18 women world leaders, including 12 female heads of government and 11 elected female heads of state (Kent 2015; UN Women 2015).

Although the world has made significant strides in reducing gender inequality, women continue to lag far behind in terms of political empowerment. This is a problem not only for women but for humankind as well. Research suggests that women’s political representation is positively correlated with a nation’s ability to incorporate women into its formal economy and boost its gross domestic product (GDP; World Economic Forum 2014; McKinsey Global Institute 2015). Furthermore, women leaders help ensure that governments offer equal justice not only to women but to other marginalized groups as well.

Women’s involvement in politics is indicative of a healthy democracy—one that strives to represent all of its citizens. It is worth exploring whether they offer special added value as change makers, extending democracy.
democracy. A handful of varied, particular, but highly suggestive cases reveal some of the key ways in which nations stand to benefit from increased women’s political representation.

Rwanda

One of the most universally compelling arguments for gender equality is the positive impact it will have on the economy. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that closing the gap in workforce participation between men and women would boost the world’s GDP by nearly 12 percent by 2030 (Economist 2014). A 2015 McKinsey Global Institute study suggests women’s equality would add $12 trillion to world GDP by 2025 (McKinsey Global Institute 2015). Nations around the world are beginning to realize that to remain competitive and continue growing they must integrate women into the formal economy.

How can nations encourage women’s economic participation? Research shows that women’s economic participation is positively correlated with women’s political representation. Although modernization theory would suggest that increased economic participation leads to increased political representation, some, such as Ana Revenga and Sudhir Shetty (2012) of the World Bank, rightly propose that political empowerment may precede or advance economic integration. They argue that women leaders inherently understand not only fairness but women’s potential to transform an economy, and thus advance legislation and policy that encourages their participation in the formal economy.

Rwanda powerfully illustrates women’s potential to transform an economy. Although President Paul Kagame has proven to be a strongman willing to go to brutal lengths to maintain his power, he has also explicitly linked women’s political representation to Rwanda’s capacity for growth. “Increased participation of women in politics,” he asserted, is “necessary for improved social, economic, and political conditions of their families and the entire country” (Powley 2006). This awareness has prompted Kagame to facilitate a critical mass of women in the government and to promote women to key cabinet positions. Although Kagame squashes political opponents and civil society dissent, the government he leads has worked to dismantle the barriers that prevent women from entering the economy.

Rwanda’s 1994 genocide decimated the nation, and in its aftermath necessity demanded women’s leadership. Although the genocide took its toll on all segments of the population, killing squads targeted adult men in particular, prompting many men to flee the country. After the
genocide, many of the remaining men were imprisoned for their part in the atrocities. The result was a gender imbalance in postgenocide Rwanda, with women making up 70 percent of the country’s adult population. Prior to the genocide, Rwandan women only held between 10 and 15 percent of the seats in their nation’s parliament. However, in the aftermath of the genocide, the country needed to be rebuilt. And women were the only ones left to do it.

Young women, such as Aloisea Inyumba and Domitilla Mukantaganzwa, took on important roles. As the Minister of Gender and Family Promotion, Inyumba designed an adoption program to place the hundreds of thousands of orphans in homes regardless of their ethnic identity. Mukantaganzwa took on the problem of Rwanda’s overcrowded prisons, which were stuffed with more than 600,000 suspects accused of war crimes. To expedite the trials of relatively low-level cases, Rwandans drew on the gacaca community-based process, a local tradition for mediating disputes. Although the process is traditionally male-led, Mukantaganzwa served as the head of the National Service of Gacaca Jurisdictions for more than a decade. By 2012, nearly two million people had been tried by these courts.

In rebuilding their country, Rwandan women proved that they were more than capable. Thus, even as the gender proportions began to rebalance, women continued to lead. In 2003, Rwanda adopted a new constitution that stipulated that women must hold at least 30 percent of the offices throughout the government (Chap. 2, Art. 9.4). Far beyond that floor, in 2008 female representation rose to 56 percent, and Rwanda became the first country in the world to have a female majority in its parliament. As of June 2016, it is one out of only two countries worldwide in which women’s political representation is higher than men’s. (Bolivia, with 53.1% of its parliament comprised of women, is the other country, lagging behind Rwanda by 10%.)

Since the genocide, Rwanda has developed itself into a regional economic powerhouse. Its GDP grows by roughly 8 percent per year, making it the ninth fastest growing economy in the world, and from 2006 to 2011 it raised one million people out of poverty. Many credit this rapid development to the government’s awareness that increasing women’s participation in the formal economy was essential for growth.

Rwandan women now have access to credit, and are permitted to inherit property and share their family assets. Plans to promote development ensure the inclusion of Rwandan women and girls. Rwandan women are also now key players in the nation’s economy. Rwanda is
one of only four countries with a higher representation of women in the labor force than men (World Economic Forum 2015, 52), and it has the best wage equality for similar work of anywhere in the world (World Economic Forum 2015, 28, 306).

However, though his country has reaped enormous benefits from increased women’s participation, Kagame’s single-minded pursuit of stability through economic growth has been marred by his will to clamp down on civil liberties, control policy making and civil society tightly, and stifle any attempts to speak out against his regime. Kagame is a favorite of international donors, who chose to ignore these repressive measures in their admiration of positive steps on gender equality and growth. Enhanced gender equality must not excuse other violations of civil liberties.

**Is Kagame correct in his assumption that women in power will maintain the status quo? Or will the very women he has promoted eventually lead to his downfall and greater democracy?**

In short, Kagame has promoted women’s political leadership in an effort to advance Rwanda’s economy, as a means of appealing to a large domestic constituency and donors, and because he does not view women as threat to his regime. Yet does women’s potential go beyond promoting economic growth? Is Kagame correct in his assumption that women in power will maintain the status quo? Or will the very women he has promoted eventually lead to his downfall and greater democracy?

**Iceland**

The experience of the Nordic countries and Iceland would seem to support the idea that women political leaders reduce the gender gap by promoting national policies that address the specific socioeconomic and political challenges facing women. On June 29, 1980, Iceland elected Vigdis Finnbogadottir as its first female president. Although traditionally the position of president had been largely ceremonial, Finnbogadottir contributed to its transformation, and she was a respected head of state both domestically and internationally.

Although Icelanders embraced their first female president, at the time, women made up only 5 percent of Iceland’s parliamentarians. Perhaps it was Finnbogadottir’s presence that highlighted the absence
of women in Iceland’s government and encouraged Iceland’s women’s groups to increase their political representation. In 1983, the Women’s Alliance was formed, as an explicitly feminist party that aimed to end gender inequality. The party placed issues such as wage equality, rape, incest, and domestic violence at the center of its platform. It also worked to advance legislation that was specifically designed to protect women and children. In their first election, they won 7 percent of the vote, and by 1987, they held six of the sixty-three seats in the legislature.

The Women’s Alliance cautioned against maximalist privatization of national banks and other institutions during its heyday from 1998 until 2002. In 1999, the party fractured, and its members were absorbed by two umbrella parties, both of which adopted gender quotas for party lists and all elected bodies within the party. When the financial crash of 2008 hit, some Icelanders remembered the entreaties of the Women’s Alliance, and even called for their values to replace what they perceived as the temperament that led to the collapse of their economy. As Iceland’s men vacated their leadership positions, Iceland’s women replaced them.

Today women make up 41 percent of Iceland’s parliamentarians, and politicians routinely embrace and advocate for feminism. In 2003, Iceland’s female parliamentarians performed Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* for a packed theater in Reykjavik. Yet Iceland’s parliamentarians go beyond merely drawing attention to gender inequality. They have also methodically passed legislation designed to close the gender gap.

In 2009, Iceland adopted the so-called Nordic Model (first successful in reducing sex trafficking in Sweden), which criminalizes the demand for prostitution, and decriminalizes and provides social services to prostituted people. Similarly, Iceland has banned strip clubs. And, to assist survivors of domestic violence, Iceland has stipulated that the abuser must leave the home and find lodging elsewhere. The larger representation of women in the government also coincided with passage of family leave policies for both mothers and fathers and child care priced according to parents’ wages. These policies have contributed to Iceland’s ability to significantly reduce its gender gap, as reflected in the World Economic Forum’s (2015) *Global Gender Gap Report*, which for four consecutive years has ranked Iceland as the world’s number one nation in terms of gender equality.

As the case of Iceland highlights, women legislators tend to initiate and promote proposals and bills that they see to advance the interest of women. However, does increasing women’s representation benefit other
minority groups, who also have historically been underrepresented among legislators?

Israel

Women, like all other populations, possess multiple identities. As half the world’s population, women are members of every ethnic group, religion, and socioeconomic class. Thus, women regularly face not only sexism but also racism, and a variety of other forms of prejudice and discrimination against minorities and disadvantaged groups they belong to. What implications does this have for increased representation of women in politics? If their own experience with sexism and various forms of discrimination has sensitized women to the needs of marginalized groups, then women may possess, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, “a broader theory of sympathy and humanism” (Coates 2016). This capacity for empathy and enhanced ability to recognize the needs of others may enable women in positions of political power to craft coalitions, policies, and agreements that address not only their needs but the needs of others as well.

“Empathetic” might not have been the first word that comes to mind when describing Tzipi Livni, Israel’s former Foreign Minister and current Knesset member. Livni was raised in the newborn state of Israel by parents who were fierce Zionists and guerrilla fighters who engaged in attacks targeting civilians in an effort to pressure the British out of Mandate Palestine. As a teenager, she took part in demonstrations against peace plans that required Israel to give up land to the Palestinians and she later joined the Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency. She has served in Israel’s Knesset since 1999, and has held more cabinet positions than any other women in Israel’s history. As a Knesset member, she has been outspoken against terror attacks, condemned the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement, and attempted to justify the controversial Operation Cast Lead to the world.

Nevertheless, despite her nationalistic background, she is now one of Israel’s leading advocates for a two-state solution. Although she had grown up with the “understanding that the whole land of Israel was [her] heritage” (Cohen 2007), as a young adult she began to wonder how a whole Israel could remain a Jewish democracy without relegating Arabs to second-class citizens. In the end, she decided that it could not. The only way to “preserve the dream of Israel” and “respect others” was to give up land.

While Livni does not necessarily display overwhelming sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians, she does demonstrate an ability to
understand and address their concerns. She observed in 2007, “Just as Israel was established for the Jewish people and gave refuge to them from European and Arab states, so a Palestinian state would be the homeland of the Palestinian people, those who live in the territories and those who left in 1948” (Cohen 2007). Although Livni asserts that there can be no “right of return” for the Palestinians, she is able to identify with their longing for a homeland. Furthermore, she has displayed a willingness to sacrifice land to ensure that the Palestinian state can become a reality.

Livni broke from her background, helped form the Kadima Party with Ariel Sharon, and showed an ability to look at Jewish and Palestinian people’s needs holistically and back a stable two-state solution. It is worth noting that Sharon’s male successor, Ehud Olmert, drowned in corruption, while Livni attempted to navigate further coalitions and party affiliations to advocate for that solution, and serve as Minister of Justice.

Throughout history, women have often advocated for others. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were staunch abolitionists, Corretta Scott King was outspoken against homophobia, and Angela Merkel is currently one of the world’s leading advocates for refugees. So should one characterize Livni as a rights-based “advocate” for the Palestinian people? Probably not. She developed a larger vision for the health and stability of Israel’s democracy by creating a neighboring Palestinian state at peace with it. Her political evolution suggests that women may offer governments a vision and capacity to build consensus, compromise, and create policies and agreements that take the pluralistic needs of others into consideration. Perhaps increased women’s political representation and leadership will lead to more inclusionary policies and hence more durably stable and prosperous societies.

Conclusion

Last year the #MoreWomen Campaign asked, “What would the world’s decision-making forums look like without men?” (De Casparis 2015). The online campaign airbrushed men out of the photographs so that only women remained. The results are shocking: Hillary Clinton, alone in the Situation Room on the day of the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound, a handful of female MPs scattered throughout the cavernous House of Commons, three women surrounded by empty chairs at a reception for G20 leaders. If you Photoshop the men out of
the rooms where the world’s most important decisions are being made, the rooms appear nearly empty.

So what would a world with more female leaders look like? The truth is that we do not know, because such a place has never been. In fact, our current reality is so far from a matriarchy that such a notional regime is a common premise in science fiction books. As with any other unknown, people’s imaginings of what a female-led world could look like span the extremes—a dystopian society that would merely flip existing power structures and oppress men, or a world untouched by violence and war. Yet, collectively, women are neither monsters nor angels.

Women are not miracle workers who will solve all the world’s problems if only given the opportunity. However, research and experience point to women’s ability to transform economies, boost the world’s GDP, close the gender gap, build consensus, and identify and address the needs of others. This half of the world’s population, if empowered politically and economically, has the potential to create change not just for females but other disadvantaged groups, and societies as a whole.

Paul Kagame believes that women’s political empowerment is linked to their economic empowerment, and thus his country’s potential for growth. Yet, women’s political empowerment appears to also contribute to the promotion of equality and broadening and deepening of democracy’s global reach. In development and foreign policy, prioritizing women’s empowerment is undoubtedly a just goal in and of itself. It is worth testing in practice whether the payoff is even larger.

Acknowledgment
The authors wish to thank colleagues at Freedom House for advice.

Note
1. See UN Women (2016).

References


