

## Women's Place, Revisited

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The election on Sunday of Michelle Bachelet as Chile's president completes a three-continent long jump for women in politics. Ms. Bachelet is the first woman elected president in Latin America who is not the widow of a political strongman. On Monday, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was inaugurated as president of Liberia, she became Africa's first woman to be elected president. And with Angela Merkel's election as chancellor of Germany, a woman now leads Western Europe's most populous nation.

Ms. Bachelet, a socialist, an agnostic and a single mother, won the presidency of Chile, Latin America's most socially conservative country, with the help of a compelling personal story. She is the daughter of an air force general who died in prison during Gen. Augusto Pinochet's rule after months of torture, and she herself was imprisoned and tortured. When she was named defense minister in the current government, she was put in charge of a military still very much shaped by Mr. Pinochet. She brought an unpretentious style to the post, and won a reputation for toughness without rancor.

These new chief executives are not the first women to lead major democracies. Margaret Thatcher of Britain and Indira Gandhi of India were vastly powerful politicians and global ideological icons as well. Golda Meir was the inspirational leader of Israel, a nation surrounded by hostile Arab neighbors that refused to concede its right to exist.

But the women's successes in Liberia, Chile and Germany are being celebrated in part because this kind of achievement is still rare. In most countries, women have yet to achieve the critical mass at the lower levels of government that will be necessary if their ascension is to be seen as part of the normal course of politics.

The recent elections are important because they stand in stark contrast with the other route women have taken to power: picking up the standard of a murdered father or husband. Most of those dynastic women have brought few qualifications to the job and have been dreadful leaders. Mrs. Gandhi was an exception. She won office as the daughter of the independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru, but transcended her status as a dynastic successor as a powerful -- sometimes too powerful -- leader.

The women who are now leading nations are the most independent and accomplished group of female leaders ever collected -- with the possible exception of when Elizabeth I dined alone.