


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Mother of the Nation: Negotiating Women Leaders' Credibility in a Health Crisis

Anja Vranic<sup>1</sup>  and Sine Nørholm Just<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway and

<sup>2</sup>Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark

**Corresponding author:** Anja Vranic; Email: [anja.vranic@media.uio.no](mailto:anja.vranic@media.uio.no)

(Received 08 July 2024; revised 21 November 2024; accepted 02 February 2025)

## Abstract

Women political leaders, research shows, have been able to use stereotypically feminine traits to their advantage in their response to the pandemic, thus overcoming usual double binds of performing femininity and political leadership. But what, more precisely, accounts for women politicians' successful performance of pandemic leadership? In this paper, we argue that public perceptions of women leaders' credibility are negotiated through news media and further mediated by specific events and broader cultural contexts. Using a mixed methodology of media readings and focus group interviews, we show how prime ministers Erna Solberg of Norway and Mette Frederiksen of Denmark both performed a persona of the “mother of the nation,” but only Solberg succeeded in doing so authentically, leading to the public's celebration of her credibility while Frederiksen was chided for being inauthentic and strategic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women took up central roles of political leadership, health expertise, and grassroot coordination (Vital Strategies 2021), thus contributing significantly to all areas of pandemic response. International news media were quick to note that countries led by women saw fewer fatalities and better overall public health, leading to widespread praise of women leaders for successfully managing the pandemic (Bear and Agner 2021). Spurred by the media attention, research on women's pandemic leadership has reached disparate conclusions. Some argue that the apparent success is due to underlying sociocultural, political, and/or economic factors that enable women to become leaders in the first place, such as being “high-capacity countries” with transparent

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Women, Gender, and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

laws, impartial public administration, high trust in government, and high gender equality. In this framing, the correlation between women's leadership and a country's pandemic response is spurious (Piscopo 2020). Others suggest that the different rhetorical strategies used by women and men in political leadership roles (Dada et al. 2021) as well as the proactive policy responses adopted by women leaders do facilitate the women's successful pandemic leadership (Garikipati and Kambhampati 2021). This latter group of studies indicates that "gendered strategies" may, at least partially, explain the outcome of the pandemic (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023).

Research shows how pandemic communication strategies, generally, and the negotiation of credibility, more specifically, have influenced pandemic outcomes in different national contexts (see inter alia, Berg et al. 2021; Gamerding, Just, and Lantz 2023; Offerdal, Just, and Ihlen 2021), just as the interrelation of communication strategies and gendered performances has been discussed (for an overview, see Casey, Childs, and Huq 2022). As Johnson and Williams (2020) as well as Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och (2023) argue, given its character as a health crisis – an area traditionally associated with stereotypically feminine values and traits (empathy, warmth, and so on) – the pandemic relates to, and perhaps calls for, women's leadership.

While women leaders usually face a double bind in which their credibility either as leaders or women is challenged (Campbell 1998), we build on the suggestion that the pandemic health crisis offers unique potential for women leaders to boost their credibility as leaders by *activating* (as opposed to *downplaying*) feminine traits (Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och 2023; Johnson and Williams 2020). Thus, the rhetorical situation (Bjørkdahl et al. 2021; Ihlen, Tole-dano, and Just 2021) of the pandemic may be configured in such a way that women heads of state can draw strategically on feminine traits, communicatively performing a more traditional feminine gender role than what is normally associated with political leadership (Johnson and Williams 2020). Arguably, by taking advantage of this opportunity to enact a persona that could be labelled as "mother of the nation," they may be able to increase their credibility as national leaders in a health crisis. We seek to substantiate this argument by engaging in qualitative research in two Nordic countries that were led by women during the pandemic.

The two countries, Norway and Denmark, employed similar pandemic responses (such as implementing hard lockdowns very early on) and both came out of the pandemic successfully, even compared to many other high-capacity countries (Flam and Skans 2022). Leaders in both countries used appeals to solidarity when soliciting public support for the pandemic response, essentially asking individual citizens to make efforts for the entire community (Bjørkdahl et al. 2021). When observing these similarities, an interesting difference also emerges: the Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative Party) and Denmark's Mette Frederiksen (Social Democratic Party) had quite different public reputations during the pandemic. The similarities in their general political and rhetorical strategies notwithstanding, the context of reception was somehow different, leading to different perceptions of the leaders' credibility. In this article, we explore the gendered relationships between rhetorical strategy and political credibility in terms of the sociocultural contexts of the two

countries, beginning with differences and similarities regarding public understandings of gender equality.

Observing that both leaders rhetorically perform the persona of “mother of the nation,” we explore how the credibility of this performance is negotiated by citizens in their reception of the two PMs’ mediated health crisis leadership. Our research questions are:

*RQ1: How is the “mother of the nation” persona performed and perceived in each of the cases of PMs Erna Solberg in Norway and Mette Frederiksen in Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

*RQ2: How does mediated negotiation of the PMs’ “mother of the nation” personas relate to public perception of their credibility as national leaders during a health crisis?*

Our empirical material consists mainly of focus group interviews in which the credibility of the two PMs is discussed, but we anchor the analysis of this material in an introduction to the two national contexts as well as an analysis of iconic images of Solberg’s and Frederiksen’s public performances of the “mother of the nation” persona. We aim to explore conceptually how the performance of such a persona interplays with the credibility of women leaders in a health crisis. Thus, we contribute to existing research on political leaders’ gendered pandemic communication by exploring the negotiation – i.e., the performance and reception – of the rhetorical persona of the “mother of the nation.”

In what follows, we first establish our theoretical framework for understanding gendered perceptions of political performance, homing in on performances of “motherhood.” This is followed by a literature review of women leaders’ utilization of feminine traits during the COVID-19 pandemic, which leads us to posit rhetorical credibility as key to public perceptions of these leaders’ gendered performances. We then move on to introducing our methods of data collection and analysis, followed by an overview of the different views of gender equality that prevail in Norway and Denmark, which guides our analysis. Based on this, we conduct a descriptive analysis of iconic images of the two PMs as well as an analysis of their perceived credibility as negotiated by focus group participants. Finally, we discuss our findings, arguing that the negotiation of women leaders’ credibility is a complex process, involving the leaders themselves, the citizens, news (and social) media, situational constraints (e.g., the pandemic), and sociocultural conditions (e.g., national perceptions of gender equality). Throughout, we take advantage of the fact that Norway’s and Denmark’s pandemic strategies are generally agreed to have been successful, which enables us to focus on the rhetorical dimensions of the political success. We do not mean to imply that communication accounts fully for the outcomes but restrict our study to the negotiation of gendered political performance.

### **Performing Political Motherhood**

To interpret the PMs’ rhetorical performances of personas of “mother of the nation,” we begin from Judith Butler’s ([1990] 2006) concept of gender

performativity. For Butler ([1990] 2006, XV), the concept of gender performativity is not “a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” Thus, the gendered body serves as an instrument through which cultural meanings are expressed. As a feminist poststructuralist theorist, Butler ([1990] 2006, 195) disregards any “truth” about sex and understands gender as an act, arguing “that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’, but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.”

Within the feminist poststructuralist frame, we draw on Campbell’s (1998) exposé of the “discursive performance of femininity” that is “enacted and performed bodily;” for a woman to be an agent, or assume the role of a rhetor, Campbell (1998, 2) argues, “she must ‘cite’ or ‘enact’ cultural norms of femininity,” which are traditionally anchored in the private rather than the public sphere and inherently constrain women rhetors. One may enact femininity rhetorically by applying strategies associated with women, such as adopting a personal or self-disclosing tone – signifying intimacy, domesticity, and nurture – and assuming a feminine persona by appropriating emotional appeals to motherhood, domestic metaphors, and personal narratives (Campbell 1998). These feminine traits have traditionally been contrasted with masculine traits such as competence, assertiveness, and acting as a leader, which, Jamieson (1995) argues, has meant that women can be either feminine or competent. Thus, the notion of a “woman leader” becomes an oxymoron, the constraints of which actual women leaders must negotiate. Within this frame of discursive performance, we understand the persona of “mother of the nation,” not as a result of the PMs’ “womanhood” (or, indeed, “motherhood”) but as an effect of their embodied rhetoric; they are, potentially, perceived as “mothers of the nation” by their audiences because of how they perform gender in text and image, using their bodies and words as rhetorical devices. This raises the issue of what the rhetorical performance of “motherhood” entails politically.

In so-called Western societies, the persona of the “good mother” has traditionally been defined as the fulltime, stay-at-home, White, and middle-class mother who is completely fulfilled by her domestic pursuits (Boris 1994). The emergence of alternative motherhood ideologies (Johnston and Swanson 2006) notwithstanding, “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996) persists as the overriding conceptualization of motherhood. In a similar vein, Mackenzie (2021, 418) identifies a “child-centric motherhood” discourse in which mothers position themselves “entirely in relation to their children, as devoted, loving parents, to the exclusion of other potential subject positions.” These mother-centric parenting ideals continue to be quite powerful in Western societies, “where dominant discourses position women as ‘natural’ carers and therefore the parent most needed by their children” (Mackenzie 2017, 297–298). This motherhood ideology is a counterweight to the selfish, get-ahead logics of society in general (Hays 1996). Whereas the “good mother” is constructed as selfless, naturally nurturing, hard-working (for the benefit of her children), and successful in the private sphere, the “good professional” is constructed as promoting the self, lacking nurturing qualities, and fulfilling their own potential in the public

sphere, leading to what Johnston and Swanson (2009) term the selfish/selfless double bind for women.

Transferring this tension into the political sphere, Ferree (2006) argues that women's political activities challenge the traditional distinction between "private" and "public" – a "separation of spheres" that assigns women domestic roles, those of support and nurture, which are the opposite of political leadership. As Ferree (2006, 95) explains:

While ideology is not reality, and certainly not all women are wives and mothers or define themselves in terms of these roles, the association is politically potent. Women's presence evokes this association, but also challenges its exclusionary and demeaning political interpretation. Whether they embrace or reject motherhood, politically active women undermine assignment of all women to "their place."

Here, the theory of role congruity, referring to the level of (in)consistency between the norms that accompany two social roles occupied by one person, offers a strong explanation. In the case of women leaders, it suggests that the prejudice they experience is caused by the contradicting social norms and expectations that are attached to the role of a leader and the role of a woman (Eagly and Karau 2002). When occupying two roles that carry contradicting expectations, one is always at risk of failing to do one – or both – of the social roles "correctly."

Exploring how women politicians negotiate their role conflicts, Deason, Greenlee, and Langner (2014) coin the concept of "politicized motherhood," which denotes the emphasis that is put on women politicians' maternal role. They argue that it can, on the one hand, present challenges for women because the traditional image of at-home womanhood has historically been seen as incompatible with political leadership. On the other hand, politicized motherhood may provide an advantage for women, as motherhood is associated with personal warmth – a highly desirable characteristic for a political leader. Where traditionally feminine traits have been seen as counterproductive to political leadership, motherhood "may give women a socially acceptable space in which to present themselves as 'tough'" (Greenlee, Deason, and Langner 2017, 197). This, however, is not a necessary outcome but a rhetorical challenge: the performance of the "right" mixture of "feminine care" and "masculine toughness."

Historically, rhetorical appeals to motherhood have successfully resolved the challenge, and these appeals were common in, for instance, the rhetoric of women reformers. One example is Mary Harris Jones, who helped found the Social Democratic Party and the International Workers of the World (industrial labor's most radical wing) in the early 1800s in the US. She answered only to "Mother" and called the miners she represented her "children" or her "boys" (Tonn 1996). Tonn (1996) claims that the maternal role was a particularly apt rhetorical strategy for women labor union agitators, as mothering and agitation share two essential dimensions: nurturing and militancy. In the case of conservative US politicians such as Sarah Palin, Schreiber (2016) identifies a similar

strategic frame of “feminine toughness.” At the height of her political success, Palin was praised for being full of “grace” and “femininity,” and her references to motherhood, coupled with her conservative policy goals, boosted her as a tough political candidate who was, essentially, successful because she performed “toughness” with “charm.”

Rhetorical performances of the mother persona are also associated with heads of state, such as the former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has famously been referred to as “mother” (Suder 2021), as in “mother of all problems” (Puglierin 2020) and “mother of Syrian refugees” (Oltermann 2015). Simpson (2019, 314) points out that when Barack Obama advocated for immigration reform, no one called him “Papa Obama,” but in the case of Merkel, she “has been subsumed into the category of the maternal,” as if motherhood is the only way in which we can make sense of a woman as a credible head of state. This is not to say that there are no “fathers of the nation;” to the contrary, “founding fathers” abound, but their role is typically different, “siring” the nation rather than “nurturing” it.

The negotiation of performance and perception leads to an assessment of the actor’s authenticity – the symbolic, mediated, and interactional process, which involves political actors, their opponents, and the news media in the assessment of the “truth and realism” of the political leader’s image (Parry-Giles 2014, 11). Political authenticity can therefore be understood as a social construction, created and negotiated through complex communication processes involving politicians, media, and citizens (Luebke 2021). In what follows, we center *perceived* authenticity, focusing on how audiences negotiate mediated images of politicians. Audiences are not simply passive observers of performed and mediated authenticity but active participants in processes of meaning formation who observe and assess based on their own pre-existing attitudes, where they rely on, for instance, political cues such as party affiliation to make judgements about politicians (Luebke 2021).

For women political leaders who seek to perform the motherhood persona, perceived authenticity – of the political leader’s own performance and the media’s portrayal – is key to their rhetorical success. In the case of Palin, for instance, the “hockey mom” persona seems to come across authentically, as she is consistently praised for seeking political office for the “right” reasons, namely, not to gain power and authority but to help people (Schreiber 2016). As Schreiber (2016) notes, conservative women politicians may have an advantage in this regard, since offering a more “feminized” account (i.e., wanting to help people) aligns their quest for office with traditional notions of gender and mothering. If performed authentically, then, a motherhood persona opens a rhetorical space in which women politicians can successfully negotiate gendered expectations of their performance of leadership in relation to situational constraints like national context and party affiliation. In the following section, we review literature on how feminine traits were utilized by women leaders in the communicative handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus establishing the pandemic rhetorical situation and setting the stage for our contribution to the extant literature.

## COVID-19 and Feminine Rhetorical Style

Studying the use of feminine rhetorical style during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dada et al. (2021) find that speeches by women leaders cover a range of social issues (including substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health), but center the personal dimension of these issues (positing them at the level of families rather than the state). In accordance with established norms for the discursive performance of femininity (Campbell 1998), women pandemic leaders have also been found to use a more empathetic and compassionate speech style than men in similar roles (Dada et al. 2021; Johnson and Williams 2020; Voina and Stoica 2023). For instance, Power and Crosthwaite (2022) examine speech style in the crisis response of PMs in Australia and New Zealand in texts published on their websites. They find that Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand) used a more personal style in her messaging than Scott Morrison (Australia). Similarly, Voina and Stoica (2023) analyze Ardern's Facebook communication in the initial phase of the pandemic, finding that her messaging was embedded in attitudes and values that are specific to ethics of care.

As Johnson and Williams (2020) show, the link between care and femininity offers unique opportunities for women leaders' pandemic response as they may gain political sway by performing women's traditional roles as caretakers – as epitomized by the role of motherhood. “The pandemic,” they argue, “has undermined the traditional divide between the (feminine) private sphere of the home and the (masculine) public sphere of politics [...] that has traditionally disadvantaged women leaders, allowing them to leverage women's role in the home to their advantage in the political sphere.” (Johnson and Williams 2020, 945) However, the specific rhetorical circumstances and the broader contextual preconditions for such leveraging remain unclear. The specific character of the pandemic contrasts with, for instance, a military crisis, which, Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och (2023) argue, elicits agentic skills associated with a masculine communication style of ‘direction-giving language’, assertiveness, and competition. As these authors conclude, congruence between social expectations and social roles in relation to the issue at hand is paramount to citizens' perceptions of (all) politicians' credibility.

Moving to the national context of Norway, Arora, Debesay, and Eslen-Ziya (2022) find that Erna Solberg's Facebook posts during the initial phase of the pandemic consisted of a persuasive narrative made up of themes displaying empathetic leadership, such as promoting responsibility and togetherness (invoking the culturally pervasive responsibility of “dugnad,” a jointly performed, unpaid, and voluntary effort/work for a community). This suggests that Solberg deployed strategies pertaining to the feminine rhetorical style in her advocacy of the Norwegian pandemic strategy, but how was her persona as “mother of the nation” established, more specifically? And how does that performance compare with other national leaders' invocation of the motherhood persona? More importantly, how is the performance received and negotiated? To answer these questions, we draw on the concept of credibility, which we operationalize analytically below. Before turning to our analytical approach, we present our methods of data collection.

## Method

To explore the performance and perception of the PMs as “mother of the nation” in Norway and Denmark, respectively, we conducted a two-part study. First, we established the contexts in which their motherhood personas are performed, illustrating the public circulation of the personas through iconic images, which are embodied performances that illicit emotional responses and, potentially, establish connections to social and cultural symbols (Krogstad 2015). The visual analysis was conducted using the semiotic concepts of denotation and connotation; the former being what the image depicts in its literal form and the latter what ideas, values, and cultural associations are communicated through what is depicted (Hansen and Machin 2019, 169–170). This first, descriptive analysis provides cultural and rhetorical contexts for the public perceptions of the two PMs. It includes establishing the “text” to be read (i.e., the image) and the elements of its context, which McGee (1990, 283) argues “are so important to the ‘text’ that one cannot discover, or even discuss, the *meaning* of ‘text’ without reference to them.” For this part of the analysis, therefore, we made use of our embedment in the national contexts of Norway and Denmark, respectively, and began the analysis of the PMs’ rhetorical performances even as we were assembling the text-context relationship from media fragments.

However, this descriptive analysis was not developed in isolation from the second part of our study; to the contrary, the emerging themes of the analysis of audiences’ perceptions prompted us to search for media representations and contextual explanations. Thus, the first part of the study is, generally, designed to offer context for the second, enabling us to discuss how focus group participants negotiate their perceptions of the PMs’ mediated performances. Accordingly, we offer a description of contextual differences, which explains variations in Norwegian and Danish (perceptions of) gender equality, followed by an analysis of iconic images of Solberg’s and Frederiksen’s respective performances of motherhood, which is informed by and establishes the specific context for negotiations of their authenticity.

Second – and this is the central part of our study – we used focus group interviews to explore how the performance of motherhood interplays with public perceptions of the two women politicians. Here, we employ the concept of credibility to unpack the relationships between performances and perceptions. Inspired by the classical rhetorical concept of *ethos*, defined as the evaluation of the communicator by the audience at a particular time, in response to a particular problem, and in constant negotiation (Offerdal, Just, and Ihlen 2021), we assess whether and how the performances and perceptions of the PMs’ personas are aligned. Thus, the concept of credibility, as inspired by *ethos*, enables us to understand how the participants in our study evaluated the characters of the two PMs.

We conducted focus group interviews because they correspond to the way that opinions are produced and exchanged in everyday life (Flick 2018, 256). In media and communication research, focus group interviews enable researchers to observe how audiences make sense of mediated communication through conversation and interaction in a manner that is close to how we form opinions



and understandings spontaneously in everyday life (Hansen and Machin 2019, 223). Through focus group interviews, then, we were able to gain in-depth insights into individual citizens' socially formed perceptions of the political leaders' performance. Specifically, we conducted three focus group interviews in each country in May-June 2022, using a research agency, Opinion. The interviews were conducted in each country's respective language, and all translations of quotes are our own. Each group consisted of six-eight participants, who were selected based on diversity, including age, gender, profession, ethnicity, and so on. They were divided into three age-based groups, denoted "youngest" (18-30 years), "middle" (31-55 years), and "oldest" (56-70 years). Each group was asked to reflect on the health authorities' handling of the pandemic and the credibility of their representatives, followed by more explicit and direct questions regarding the performances of Solberg and Frederiksen (each group was asked to reflect on their PM only).

Following the focus group interviews, Opinion provided us with transcripts of the six sessions, which were coded qualitatively by the first author using a stepwise-deductive inductive (SDI) approach as described by Tjora (2019). An essential premise for the SDI approach is an inductive curiosity, where the researcher uses the data material for identifying interesting themes, questions, and concepts. By using an inductive approach, often termed "open coding" in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), the researcher reduces the influence of expectations and theories. By deploying the SDI model, we were able to let the data material speak for itself. It was during this phase that the PMs' feminine traits materialized in and as the "mother of the nation" persona, which we then located in media representations in order to analyze the negotiation of credibility across performances, circulations, and perceptions. The data material was analyzed in line with each country's rhetorical situation – the different contexts of gender and politics, as presented in our first analytical section below.

In sum, by using a mixed-method approach consisting of an image analysis as well as focus group interviews, we were able to draw lines of comparison between the PMs' performances and the public's perceptions of their authenticity. We do not attempt to claim causality but show coherence and consistency – or lack thereof – in the ways in which the PMs perform and are portrayed and how their personas come across to the focus group participants.

### Contextual Differences

Today, gender equality in political leadership is quite high in the Nordic countries – largely explained by policies to ensure a certain gender balance in decision-making and by voluntary gender quotas within some political parties, particularly in Norway (Teigen and Skjeie 2017). Although the Scandinavian region is not a feminist "nirvana," its gender equality credentials are extraordinary compared to most other regions of the world (Holst 2018). Both Norway and Denmark fall into the category of "women-friendly societies," with welfare systems providing parental leave, day care services, and so on, which have for decades enabled women to take equal part in work life and other spheres of society, including political activities (Hernes 1987).

However, whereas Norway is the second most gender equal country in the world, Denmark has consistently performed less well, securing a spot no higher than 23rd in the World Economic Forum's (2023) gender equality index. This is, perhaps, explainable by differences in the countries' cultural approaches to gender equality, generally, and to feminism, more specifically. In Norway, feminism is a widely accepted perspective with a distinct history of "social feminism" (Holst 2018). Unlike Norwegian feminism's strong emphasis on political participation and representation that favors shared values and community ideals, in Denmark there is, as Holst (2018) shows, a more liberal approach that resonates with Anglo-American feminism, characterized by individuals' right to non-interference, freedom of choice, and private autonomy. This materializes as a more critical approach to political interventions as, for instance, seen in strong resistance to gender quotas.

The Danish public discourse on the topic is also characterized by a "modern" argument, positing gender equality as a "closed case;" understood as either achieved or "gone too far" (Dahlerup 2018). This makes Denmark susceptible to backlash, as indicated in a poll published in *The Guardian*, where more than 25,000 people of 23 major countries were asked about their attitudes towards gender and equal rights. The poll found that Denmark is one of the least feminist countries in the developed world and showed that just one out of six Danes would label themselves as feminists. Surprisingly, more Danish women prefer to be wolf-whistled than called a feminist (Orange and Duncan 2019). In light of these surprising findings, it may be less surprising that studies show Danish news media remain rather stereotypical in their gendered representations of politics and politicians (Askanius and Hartley 2019; Jørndrup 2021).

Despite Norway's high gender equality and generally more open approach towards feminism – including its long history of "social" feminism – the media landscape resembles the Danish situation, as Norwegian news media reproduce stereotypical gender differences. As to the portrayal of politicians specifically, Rogstad (2013) found that personal coverage is far more common for women politicians than men, and that while the latter are described in rather gender-neutral terms, women politicians are gendered in more dramatic and polarized ways, either as very feminine or very masculine. Similarly, Frækhaug (2014) found that women politicians on covers of newspapers are portrayed either as gentle and soft within an "intimacy frame" or as tough and hard within a "battle frame." Based on the observation of these contextual preconditions, we explore the different national receptions of similar rhetorical strategies, as performed by Solberg and Frederiksen, respectively. To do so, we first explore the two PMs' mediated performances of motherhood, then turn to the focus groups' perceptions of the credibility of these mediated performances.

## Performing Motherhood

### *Erna Solberg*

Erna Solberg, leader of the Norwegian Conservative Party, first became Prime Minister in 2013 and was serving her second term when the pandemic hit. She is

Norway's second woman PM, following Gro Harlem Brundtland, who led three Labour Party governments between 1981 and 1996. The Solberg government interchanged between a majority and minority government and ended its second term in 2021, shortly before the pandemic measures were lifted for good.

Brundtland, Norway's first woman PM, has famously been called "mother of the nation," a term that has stuck to her even in recent times. In 2023, as Brundtland was making a political "comeback," one newspaper wrote that "mother of the nation Gro Harlem Brundtland (84) has been elected to Oslo city council" (Svendsen and Lilleås 2023). And in a documentary series from 2017 titled "When we ran the country" about Norway's six most recent prime ministers, Brundtland's episode is called "The story of a mother of the nation" (whereas Solberg's episode is entitled "The builder of the future"). Preceding her prime ministership, Solberg had been labelled "Iron Erna" due to her tough stance on immigration (Arora, Debesay, and Eslen-Ziya 2022). The iron metaphor, which was famously used to label Great Britain's first woman PM Margaret Thatcher, "reeks of gender stereotyping with its implicit assumption that a lady is too weak to lead, unless she is made of unexpectedly strong stuff" (Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala 2020, 160). However, leading up to her prime ministership, Solberg started to show a softer side by caring for voters' health, jobs, and schools (Arora, Debesay, and Eslen-Ziya 2022), traditionally more feminine topics (Jamieson 1995).

The trajectory of a tougher persona being replaced by a softer is not unknown for women politicians. Hillary Clinton is, perhaps, the most disputed woman politician of all time. Caught in numerous double binds (Jamieson 1995; Parry-Giles 2014), Clinton was initially described by the media as "hard," "aggressive," and "too tough" (Jamieson 1995, 37–38). Jamieson (1995) argues that what is positive for one gender, is negative for another, meaning that Clinton's toughness was perceived negatively. Following the critique, Clinton adopted a more feminine persona, encompassing a softer speech style, behavior, and appearance. The more feminine version of Clinton may have helped turn public opinion in her favor, but it did not solve the old dilemma that by appearing feminine, she risked being perceived as incompetent (Jamieson 1995, 50). One of several instances, the so-called "New Hampshire tears" episode, is highly exemplary of this double bind. During a meeting in a coffee shop leading up to the presidential election of 2008, Hillary Clinton's "voice had softened, taking a never-before-heard quality of slightly mournful tenderness" (Hertzberg 2008). The media frenzy that followed labelled her as an "icy control queen" who "welled up with emotion" (Goldenberg and Adams 2008) and thus framed her display of emotion as strategic and inauthentic. Goren (2018, 115) explains this as a double bind in which women politicians must navigate between being feminine and unfeminine simultaneously; they must "keep their emotions calm and measured since this is another facet of their authentic selves that must hew to gendered standards so as not to descend into stereotypes."

Turning back to Solberg, when she began performing a more feminine persona, the term "mother of the nation" became associated with her in the news media – although never quite to the same extent as with Brundtland. Simultaneously, Solberg started to position herself as a motherly, homey, and "of the people" type of person. Googling "at Erna Solberg's home" (in Norwegian)

leads to a large image collection of Solberg performing motherhood, being simple and homey, as well as a long list of interviews and news reports where she invites journalists into her home, which appears to be very ordinary, a bit busy, a bit stuffy, a home in which people actually live.

One much-discussed piece about Solberg, an interview in one of Norway's biggest newspapers *Dagbladet's* feature magazine *Magasinet* leading up to the parliamentary election in 2013, shows her and her husband Sindre Finnes in their home in Bergen. The interview led to a debate regarding the intention behind the images (Krogstad 2015). Solberg is pictured barefoot preparing food in her kitchen – reproducing a longstanding conservative trope of a woman being barefoot (and often pregnant) in the kitchen as a way of putting women in “their place” (Greene 2022). The kitchen is modest and messy: there are dishes, bottles, and food wrappers scattered around the counter, and in the background, there is an iron resting on an ironing board and shelves overflowing with board games, more bottles, and gadgets. The images caused a stir, as they portray values contrary to those of the Conservative Party (i.e., not showing a clean and “upper-class posh” home) (Krogstad 2015). They were interpreted as Solberg's strategic attempt to be perceived as “of the people” in order to appeal to a broader electorate, although Solberg herself claimed to be surprised that the public thought it was a conscious media strategy (Krogstad 2015).

Closer to the pandemic, in 2018, Solberg did a picture series in a story in Norway's biggest tabloid newspaper *VG Pluss* titled “Join Erna in her kitchen: Here is her prayer for Christmas” (Fjellanger 2021, see Figure 1). Although she herself is dressed more formally on this occasion (perhaps, due to the Christmas celebrations), Solberg's home is still messy, chaotic, and down to earth, and she is



**Figure 1.** Erna Solberg in her kitchen. Photo: Hallgeir Vågernes/VG (Fjellanger 2021).

pictured in the kitchen serving food. These images have been recirculated during the pandemic, such as in a news story in VG in 2021 about Solberg in quarantine. As their recirculation indicates, the images continue to be iconic of Solberg's persona and how she performs and is portrayed in media. What is particularly notable is that Solberg's motherly persona is enacted in collaboration between her own performance and the media/journalist's portrayal, indicating an overlap between how she wants to present herself and how the media represents her.

Both images discussed above connote that, despite being the prime minister and the leader of the Conservative Party, Solberg lives in a regular home, has an ordinary kitchen, and an ordinary life. In the more recent image, she acts like the "typical" mother during the busy Christmas season – preparing Christmas food for her family in a chaotic kitchen, essentially being portrayed in the at-home, feminine "sphere." As Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2020, 146) point out, women leaders' bodies are discussed much more in public than men's and often to the women's disadvantage. Thus, they argue, Solberg's physique as a "big woman" could have been a challenge if she were a political leader in a country prone to harsh tabloid media coverage. However, in the more benign context of the Norwegian media landscape, we believe that the portrayal of Solberg's body works in her favor; she is often portrayed as "cute," "clumsy," and "endearing." Arguably, Solberg is becoming the embodiment of the mother of the nation in a Norwegian cultural context.

In April 2020, shortly after the pandemic broke out, one commentator suggested that Solberg could become a mother of the nation and lead the country successfully through the crisis (Nykvist 2020). It is common for citizens to increase support for their political leaders during an acute crisis (Knudsen, Nordø, and Iversen 2023), but Solberg maintained remarkably high credibility ratings throughout the pandemic, even following a misdemeanor that sparked a national debate. In February 2021, during restrictions on how many people were allowed to gather (a maximum of ten), Solberg celebrated her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday with a total of 13 people. Although she was criticized for this, leading to her statement of "I should have known better" (Remen and Kalajdzic 2021), she also received public support, such as in the opinion piece titled "A mistake must be forgiven, even though it is done by our prime minister" (Helle 2021). Her popularity did wear off slightly in the spring of 2021, not simply because of the birthday party incident but also because of "pandemic fatigue" and "government fatigue" (Avisa Nordland 2021). Nevertheless, Solberg's credibility remained high, and when national elections led to a change in government in October 2021, the result was attributed to broader political shifts, which were not directly linked to the public perception of the now former PM (Avisa Nordland 2021). In the case of Solberg's motherhood persona, there is consistency between her own performance and how she is staged and perceived by the media and the public – a coherence that works to reinforce her authenticity and overall credibility, as will be detailed in the second part of the analysis.

### **Mette Frederiksen**

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 2019, Mette Frederiksen became the second Danish woman prime minister. Like the first woman to head the Danish government, Helle

Thorning-Schmidt, who was PM from 2011–2015, Frederiksen is a social democrat. And, as is usual in Denmark, Frederiksen’s governments have been minority governments or coalitions. Thus, her first government, which was in power during the pandemic (from June 2019 to December 2022), consisted only of her own party, whereas the second and current (as of Spring 2025) government is a coalition “across the middle” of Danish politics, joining forces with the Liberal Party and “the Moderates,” a newly formed center-right party.

Commentators had used the phrase “mother of the nation” in relation to Frederiksen prior to the pandemic. Notably, Frederiksen used her first new year’s speech (held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020) to perform the role of “the children’s prime minister,” an epithet she and her team had also used during the election campaign of 2019. With this move, as one prominent commentator put it, Frederiksen sought to appear as an “inclusive mother of the nation who first and foremost protects the most vulnerable children of Denmark” (Mogensen 2020a). During the election and in the first months of her incumbency, Frederiksen had not only positioned herself as “mother” to the children of Denmark, but also as “homey” and “of the people” in other respects. For instance, she posted pictures of her homemade lunch on Instagram, showing how she brought along open sandwiches of pate or fish on ryebread, which is traditional and basic food that most Danes have eaten throughout their lives during lunch breaks at school and work.

From the onset of Frederiksen’s incumbency, these social media posts became a source of often humorous, but also increasingly critical commentary. A year into the pandemic, in February 2021, for instance, one such post was coupled with critique of the pandemic strategy, as a commentator argued it showed Frederiksen was taking neither the situation nor the citizens seriously (Hultén 2021). A caricature that accompanied this comment linked the critique directly to the role of the mother with the caption saying: “Mom’s eating mackerel just like Mr. and Mrs. liver pate [a Danish idiom for ‘ordinary people’]” (Figure 2). The image indicates that Frederiksen uses the persona to assert her power by

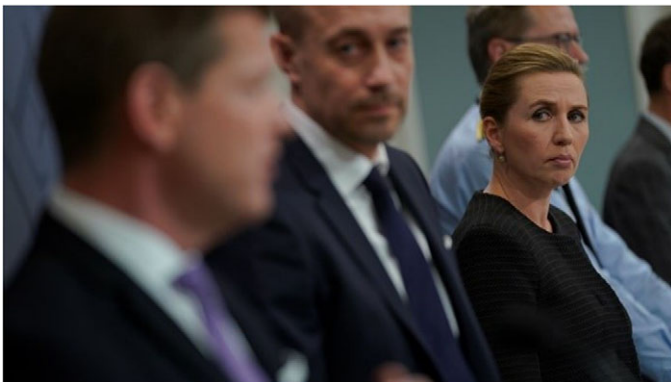


**Figure 2.** Caricature of Mette Frederiksen’s Instagram post. Drawing: Rasmus Sand Høyer (Hultén 2021).

positioning the minister of health in the background and with a subdued expression. While this particular cartoon was published in a right-leaning newspaper, it is iconic of the Danish media's critical representation of Frederiksen's performance of the homey mother role. Thus, the sentiment that Frederiksen's performance of political motherhood was an inadequate and insincere response to the pandemic became more and more pronounced in Danish public debate throughout the pandemic (Analyse & Tal 2021).

The point here is that Frederiksen was not perceived as acting as a “nice” and “homey” mother during the pandemic, but rather was recognized for resolutely putting herself in charge of safeguarding the nation. Thus, she famously took responsibility for the harsh measures of lockdown as well as the broader pandemic strategy. When the first lockdown was announced on March 11, 2020, she said: “I would also like to say to the entire Danish population that we are in unknown territory in this situation. We haven't tried it before. Will we make mistakes? Yes, we will. Will I make mistakes as prime minister? Yes, I will” (Frederiksen 2020). This willingness to take the responsibility for acting in a difficult situation was appealing to many, and Frederiksen's approval ratings soared in the first phase of the pandemic, reaching a stunning 79 percent in April 2020 (Eller and Just 2023).

As already indicated, however, the image of the motherly protector did not maintain its credibility throughout the pandemic. Rather, commentators increasingly associated Frederiksen with a position of power, casting her as an authoritarian figure with a populist appeal rather than a sincere and benevolent guardian of public interest. At best, and early in the pandemic, the “mother of the nation” was framed as an adequate role for the “corona-commander-in-chief” (Mogensen 2020b). This understanding found visual representation in a number of pictures from the press meetings that quickly became pivotal sources of information on pandemic developments (as was also the case in many other countries). Here, photographers used the visual constraints of the situation (a number of people standing in line behind pulpits and addressing an audience of journalists), to focus on Frederiksen even when she was not in the foreground of the picture (Figure 3). We take the proliferation of this imagery to indicate the



**Figure 3.** Mette Frederiksen during a press conference. Photo: Martin Sylvest/Ritzau Scanpix (Outzen 2020).

media's perception of Frederiksen's position of power, as it suggests that even when other actors are speaking, she is the one to be reckoned with.

As the pandemic wore on, the critique of Frederiksen became increasingly harsh, culminating in accusations of being scrupulously power hungry, not least in relation to what has become known as "the mink scandal" – the decision to cull all Danish mink, which has been deemed unconstitutional and as of Spring 2025 continues to trouble Frederiksen and her current government (Fuusager and Molin 2024). Frederiksen has explicitly called out the gendered public reactions to her handling of the risk of COVID-19 mutations in mink, arguing that a man would not have been as harshly criticized for the same actions (Redaktionen@radio4.dk 2022). We will return to this point in our final discussion but let us indicate here that Frederiksen's claim became the subject of heated debate, with some media commentators supporting the argument while others denied that gender could influence the public perception of political action (Drivsholm 2022; Søe 2022).

Unlike the consistency found in Solberg's performance and the mediated representation of her as a mother of the nation, there is a lack of correspondence in Frederiksen's case. She performs – or attempts to perform – in a motherly manner, as exemplified by her social media posts and the epithet of the children's prime minister. However, this performance is not reflected in the media's representation of her. Rather, it is made fun of (Figure 2) or replaced with a more authoritative persona (Figure 3). This lack of consistency hampers Frederiksen's authentic performance of her public persona and negatively affects the public's perception of her credibility, as will be detailed in the analysis of the perceived credibility of the two PMs to which we now turn.

### Perceived Credibility

Interestingly, both PMs are directly referred to as "mother" or "mother of the nation" in our focus group material, Frederiksen repeatedly while Solberg only once. However, the manner in which the metaphor is used differs significantly. In Solberg's case, it is used to bolster her credibility, in the sense that she is deemed to perform motherhood authentically. For Frederiksen, the reference is used to discredit her, as focus group participants deem that her performance of motherhood is strategic rather than sincere. We divide the analysis into stereotypically male traits (competence and toughness) and stereotypically female traits (empathy, nurture, and warmth), showing how the focus group participants negotiate the PMs' credibility in relation to their performance of these traits.

### Competence and Toughness

Overall, both Solberg and Frederiksen are perceived as competent leaders. Interestingly, when shown an official picture of Solberg taken from the Norwegian Parliament's website, the initial response in the oldest group was "mother of the nation" (Filip), followed by descriptions of her as having "extreme work capacity" (Filip) and "tremendous power of execution" (Henriette), being able to



“take a hit” (Jan), and that she is a “tough lady” (Ole). There is rather strong agreement about Solberg’s abilities as a political leader. All three groups express the sentiment that political differences notwithstanding, one must recognize her competency. One participant said: “She definitely appears as a competent and steady politician. Speaking entirely objectively, she is good at what she does” (Rebekka, youngest group). Others expressed similar opinions: “She was very competent, I think, the whole way. Except for that one mistake [the birthday party]” (Silje, middle group). “She has been a part of the game for a long time. Very experienced” (Trond, middle group). “Competent enough to lead and competent enough to listen to those who are competent within health and epidemics” (Caroline, middle group). Solberg is also described as “adaptable” (Ole, oldest group), having done a “good job” (Silje, middle group), and as being “very steady. Consistent.” (Rebekka, youngest group) “She wasn’t wobbly in a sense. I agree with the word consistent” (Sissel, youngest group). And comparing Solberg’s competence with her successor, who was the PM when the focus groups were conducted, one participant in the youngest group said: “She had more control over her politicians than our dear Prime Minister who doesn’t have any on his. He seems much less secure than Solberg” (Noah). In our material, Solberg’s competence as a political leader is never questioned but unanimously recognized and praised.

As with Solberg, Frederiksen is perceived as a competent leader. The participants agreed that she has the abilities needed to lead the country and that she has displayed these abilities, particularly in the beginning of the pandemic. Jesper (youngest group) said: “She has been a leading figure, someone who one has been able to follow. Particularly in the beginning, when everything was uncertain.” Similarly, Trine (middle group) said: “I think that she is a leader. I believe she showed that. She was incredibly skilled to begin with.” A view that was corroborated by others in the same group: “And also professional, I think. Definitely” (Lasse) as well as “action-oriented and forward-looking” (Thomas).

Denmark was one step ahead of Norway with its pandemic measures and one of the first European countries to implement harsh lockdowns (Olagnier and Mogensen 2020). Frederiksen’s swift actions receive praise in our material. In the middle group, Lasse said: “She appears as if she has a certain power to enforce what she stands for. Professional and credible. They are connected.” Similarly, Trine (middle group) said:

When she stepped out on those podiums, she exuded that she was sure about what she was saying. I wouldn’t say credible. But sure of herself. ‘This is how it is. For good or for bad.’ But she seemed sure of what she was saying. She didn’t fumble. She exuded a certainty.

Also, she added: “There is also some power in her. She doesn’t have the easiest role. And yet she just has a fighting spirit.”

Still, the participants did not think that Frederiksen is credible, leaving her out when asked to rank actors according to their credibility. When the moderator asked: “So, Mette Frederiksen is action-oriented. Then why isn’t she on your list of credible [health authority representatives]?”, the answer was: “Because of the

mink case. Because she broke the Constitution” (Lasse, youngest group). This recurs throughout the focus groups, Frederiksen is strong, but she is not credible; the mink case being the specific reason given, but the verdict also resounding more generally.

Both Solberg and Frederiksen, then, are believed to possess the traits of competence, assertiveness, and toughness that have traditionally been associated with a male political leadership style. In the next part of the analysis, we show how these masculine traits work for women leaders when coupled with feminine traits, as in the case of Solberg, who is perceived as authentically performing the role of the good mother. Conversely, the masculine traits are penalized when lacking the combination with feminine ones, as with Frederiksen, whose performance is seen as inauthentic, positioning her, instead, as the bad mother.

### ***Empathy, Nurture, and Warmth***

“She is just wonderful,” said Silje (middle group) when Solberg’s picture popped up on the moderator’s screen. When asked who they have at the top of the list of credible health authority representatives during the pandemic, one participant said: “I have Erna Solberg because she made me feel safe when she spoke. I felt that she included everyone and thought that everything is going to be fine when I saw her speaking on the screen” (Mina, youngest group). This participant elaborated: “[Solberg] seems safe and kind, but I don’t vote for the Conservative Party either. I just mean her as a person, I liked her. Independent of her party in a way.” Trine in the same group similarly expressed: “I think that she is quite warm. She sort of tried to talk to everyone. I actually got a good impression.” A participant in the middle group, Karina, also highlighted being made to feel safe:

I think [Solberg] has done a very good job with information, maybe particularly in the beginning. I actually like that she was humane, that she almost forgot and was about to shake hands [with the Minister of Health during a press conference]. I like that a bit, I don’t actually think she was so bad. It got somewhat worse towards the end of her prime minister term, maybe, but, particularly during the first phase, I experienced her as a good and safe leader.

The moderator asked what made Solberg feel safe, since it was mentioned several times, and Mina (youngest group) answered: “She speaks clearly, and I feel that she includes people.” As for being inclusive, Solberg’s press conferences for children – which were aired through the Norwegian national broadcaster *NRK* a few days into the initial lockdown in March 2020 – were also brought up:

I think what they [Solberg’s team] did – maybe especially the press conferences aimed at children in the beginning – was important. I watched those with my children, and informing the group that maybe can’t understand why they were hit so hard – because they were hit the hardest of us all – that gave me a really good feeling. (Karina, middle group)

Concern for children as a motive for public policy efforts is a typical example of performing femininity and motherhood (Campbell 1998). In the statement above, the participant – herself a mother – was moved by the speech, indicating that Solberg’s discursive performance of femininity was successful – and worked to build credibility for her character.

Although most of the participants agreed that Solberg was an empathetic and warm prime minister who had the best intentions at heart, a few participants voiced political strategies/gain as a motive behind some of Solberg’s actions. While discussing the Minister of Health at the time Sissel (youngest group) said: “Bent Høie was sort of a bit of everyone’s, while [Erna Solberg] was much more a representative of her own party.” Another participant in the youngest group, Rikard, expressed it as such:

It’s difficult to not get a political view into this, but I was a bit irritated by the fact that she got so popular since she seemed so steady. I remember there were some discussions about students or receivers of social welfare allowances or something like that who had gotten less purchasing power during the pandemic. And she replied that, “But they probably couldn’t afford to buy that before the pandemic either.”

Solberg’s political motives seem to have been particularly clear to the oldest group when she was leaving office in October 2021 and “handing over” the handling of the pandemic to her successor:

I think the final opening [following a lockdown] that Erna had before she left office, it wasn’t very smart. I think it was kind of political.

*Agreement in the room.*

Nina: “Here you go, successor.”

Filip: “We’re opening up and taking credit for that, and then you guys can clean up, if needed.”

Jan: I agree, that was very clear. Because right after, [the virus] flared right back up.

Moderator: So, it was about political interest?

Filip: A little.

Moderator: Or was it about taking care of people who were sick and tired of the measures?

Pernille: Mental health? No, I think it was political.

*A lot of “yes” in the room.*

Filip: Yes, exactly that.  
A lot of “yes” again.

Pernille: Because it was the next government that had to take the burden of that anyway.

In the Norwegian case, despite the criticism of political strategies as the motivation behind certain actions, there was a fundamental understanding that this is how the political system operates without direct impact on the credibility of Solberg as a political leader.

Solberg’s character is perceived as authentic overall: “One can see that she has goodness in her” (Silje, middle group), “she looks like a nice lady” (Mina, youngest group), and “I like that she was self-deprecating. She doesn’t take herself too seriously. This has to do with sympathy. It doesn’t give me more or less trust per se. I think she has shown that she can handle the storm” (Karina, middle group). Filip (oldest group) seemed quite sure of Solberg’s authenticity:

I felt that the predecessors [Solberg and her government] managed to put politics aside a lot more [than the current government]. “Now it’s about solidarity, now we must stand together for the good of the people, we can do this.” But now, I feel there’s starting to be a lot more politics in it. Criticizing the predecessor and that, I think that was unnecessary.

A bit later, he added: “I think she was very little political in that period. She sort of took a different role that worked. She didn’t try to gain anything based on what they did, politically speaking.” Another participant in this group, Henriette, concurred, tying credibility directly to an alignment between speech and action: “She says it as it is, and she does what she said.”

The replies by the Danish participants, when asked how they perceive Mette Frederiksen, are very different from those by the Norwegian participants about Erna Solberg. The initial responses about Frederiksen include the following descriptions: “Smooth, decisive” (Thomas, middle group), “Controlling, dominant” (Trine, middle group), and “Bossy. It’s her role to be the boss. She badgers the others. That doesn’t give credibility” (Gabriel, middle group). During a discussion about how Frederiksen interacts with her ministers, the following description emerges: “Mother has spoken. So, little father, can you [do so and so]?” (Trine, middle group). In the oldest group, when asked to describe Frederiksen’s role during the pandemic, the initial reply was: “She has controlled the whole thing. No matter what” (Anders). And when asked to describe her, Jonas in the same group replied:

[She is p]ower hungry. It is remarkable that 30 percent of the employees [in the government administration] have left their jobs in 2021. It says something about what type of spirit exists and how much “mother” sits and rules on top.

When asked specifically about the Minister of Health at the time, Magnus Heunicke, the same participant said: “He is Mette Frederiksen’s puppet.” The

perception of Frederiksen as an authoritative figure who rules over everyone is quite pervasive in our material. She is evaluated as a selfish character and perceived as promoting her own interests, lacking in mothering qualities, and fulfilling her own goals in the public sphere, being the “good” professional but “bad” mother (Johnston and Swanson 2009).

As to her embodied performance, Frederiksen was described as “very monotonous” (Richard, youngest group), as “not the most uplifting” (Jesper, youngest group), and “one has to wait and see whether good news is coming out of her mouth or bad news, because she has the same face each time” (Aisha, youngest group). She comes off as lacking in warmth and charm; in other words, the opposite of Sarah Palin’s success based on toughness coupled with feminine charm (Schreiber 2016). Consequently, Frederiksen’s performances of empathy and care are perceived as inauthentic. As Aisha (youngest group) explained in this interaction with the moderator:

She used a lot of ethos, if you can say that. She tried very hard to say that she had compassion for people and that lockdown was implemented because of the most vulnerable. But for me, gradually, the more she repeated that – that it was for the vulnerable – the more it became a hollow word. Is this really what you believe? Gradually she became just a puppet.

Moderator: So, your perception of her changed over time? Because she repeated it?

Aisha: She repeated, we must take care of the most vulnerable, I know it is hard for everyone that Christmas is under lockdown, but we must take care of the vulnerable, but we must take care of the vulnerable. And I just thought, OK...

Frederiksen comes off as strategic to most of the participants in our study, such as in the following discussion in the middle group, which points directly to the iconic image from the press conferences:

Gabriel: I don’t like her way of being. If you ask me if I think the government did well, then yeah, I think they did very well overall. There wasn’t much else to do. [...] But that “father of the nation” way of being, that irritated me to no end.

Moderator: What is a “father of the nation?”

Gabriel: When she has to be popular, she speaks Ålborg [the town that Frederiksen is from] dialect, doesn’t she. And her hands in those pictures, they were folded exactly the same way every time. And her in the background as the great father of the nation and the other little ones in front. [...] It’s rehearsed. It’s strategy, strategy, strategy. She doesn’t seem natural. You know that thought has been given to every single appearance. Every tiny thing. It’s a mixture of seeming convincing communicatively – saying the

same thing every time, which there can be some sense in – but also to win politically.

Linda: I guess that's also what makes her so untrustworthy. Because it was a bit of acting.

Similarly, Anders (oldest group) said: "She is very self-aware. Including her appearance. She has changed herself. Or, her stylist has. She looks *totally* different now ever since she took office as PM. She looks much better. More authoritarian." During a discussion in the middle group, comparing Frederiksen to the then Director General of the Danish Health Authority, Søren Brostrøm, the following descriptions emerged:

Linda: We might see a hint of a smile [on Frederiksen], that sort of strong woman thing. And he [Brostrøm] has a bit of a smile and looks a bit goofy. Whimsical.

Trine: There is a kind of softness to him.

Lasse: I think he looks like a wet puppy. People who like dogs can also like him!

Trine: There is a kind of humanity in him, whereas Mette Frederiksen only has one agenda: "I'm moving full speed ahead."

Despite the majority being highly critical of Frederiksen's character, not everyone believes her intentions are "all bad." Jesper (youngest group) gave her the benefit of the doubt: "[Frederiksen] has upset many people with her [mink case] decision. There's that. But I am convinced that it has been done with the common good in mind." When directly asked about Frederiksen's intentions, Jesper said: "She has good intentions." Lasse in the same group was a bit more doubtful: "That's difficult to say." And Thomas joined in: "Yes, cause if I don't believe that, then I don't believe anything. So yeah, I think so."

During a discussion in the youngest group, it became evident that the mink case was quite detrimental to Frederiksen's credibility:

Jesper: What I think has made her credible is that she has tried to create a community. So, one could agree or disagree with the measures she has introduced, but I think she has been good at representing the government: "Now we do this together."

Moderator: So, she has had a strength in this message of solidarity?

Jesper: Yes. [...]. Where I feel that we have been able – political positions notwithstanding – to unite under what Mette Frederiksen has implemented. At least in the beginning. Before the mink case.

Lasse: I agree. Until the mink case.

Moderator: Does the mink case affect her credibility?

Lasse: Yes, exactly, it does. But overall, it has been OK. But the mink case does a lot for her credibility.

In sum, whereas Solberg is perceived as striking a balance of competency and nurture that makes her credible to our focus group participants to the point that they forgive her mistakes, Frederiksen's performance of the "mother of the nation" is perceived as more cynical or strategic and, hence, less credible, meaning her actions are judged more harshly. In what follows, we discuss the theoretical implications of these empirical findings.

### Concluding Discussion

In this study, we asked the following research questions: 1) How is the "mother of the nation" persona performed and perceived in each of the cases of PMs Erna Solberg in Norway and Mette Frederiksen in Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic? and 2) How does mediated negotiation of the PMs' "mother of the nation" personas relate to public perception of their credibility as national leaders during a health crisis? As women leaders were claimed to have been more successful in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and as previous studies indicate that successful pandemic leaders utilized a feminine rhetorical style (Dada et al. 2021; Johnson and Williams 2020; Voina and Stoica 2023), we sought to detail how women leaders can harness feminine traits rhetorically (i.e., be perceived as credible) in a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In this final section, we draw lines between the two types of analyses we conducted – the analyses of the PMs' mediated performances and their perceived credibility as negotiated in focus group interviews – and discuss our findings in relation to the rhetorical and political contexts of each PM in their respective country.

In the case of Solberg, aside from some skepticism regarding the motives behind certain actions, we found that she was evaluated by the focus group participants as a highly credible prime minister during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was perceived to possess both the traditionally masculine traits of competence and toughness and the traditionally feminine traits of empathy, nurture, and warmth. There was consensus across the three age-groups on Solberg's abilities as a political leader and her overall character as a "tough lady" who is capable of "taking a hit." Simultaneously, we find a mirroring in the focus group data of the mediated image of her as a homey, down to earth, cute, and clumsy "mom," which we identified in the first analysis. She is perceived as warm, likeable, and "making one feel safe" by putting politics aside and having the citizens' best interest at heart. Politically, she avoided making highly unpopular decisions (like Frederiksen's decisions during the mink case), and rhetorically, she utilized both sets of gendered traits, leading to a general perception that Solberg performed motherhood successfully in line with the "good mother"

ideology of being selfless, naturally nurturing, and hard-working. She performed within the strategic frame that Schreiber (2016) identifies as “feminine toughness.” And although she was criticized – in media commentaries and in the focus group data – for breaking pandemic measures when celebrating her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, our findings suggest that the incident did not have as negative an impact on her credibility as could potentially have been the case, but rather supported the image of her as a well-meaning but fallible matriarch. Thus, Solberg was deemed credible due to the authenticity of her image as a “mother of the nation,” which was established through a clear consistency in the way that she performed and was portrayed by the media and how she was perceived by the focus group participants.

Moving to Frederiksen, we found that, like Solberg, she was perceived by the focus group participants to possess the masculine traits of competence and toughness but, unlike Solberg, to lack the feminine traits of empathy, nurture, and warmth. Instead, she was perceived as selfish and power-hungry, what Hays (1996) calls the “good professional” but “bad mom.” As showed in the first analysis, Frederiksen’s attempts to perform a motherly persona were not reinforced by the media. Instead, her own performance of the role of caring and homey motherhood was mocked for its insincerity, and serious media representation of her took on more traditionally masculine traits of competence and authority – a perception that was echoed directly in the focus groups. Thus, while Frederiksen attempted to use the feminine rhetorical style in ways that were quite similar to Solberg’s (such as by attempting to establish herself as “the children’s minister” and posting pictures of herself with homemade sandwiches), her performance was perceived as strategic and inauthentic.

As to the rhetorical situation of a health crisis – in our case the COVID-19 pandemic – our findings support the suggestion by Johnson and Williams (2020) that in this situation women heads of state can benefit rhetorically from utilizing feminine traits to perform a more traditional gender role – materialized in a motherhood persona – than what is normally associated with political leadership. Whereas traditionally feminine traits can have a negative impact on women leaders’ credibility, reinforcing the double bind of either possessing femininity or competency (Jamieson 1995), we find that a health crisis such as the pandemic offers a unique opportunity for women heads of state to take advantage of their feminine traits and gain credibility as national leaders – as shown in the case of Solberg – by activating what they would, arguably, need to downplay in “ordinary” times. Our findings support Davidson-Schmich, Jalalzai, and Och’s (2023) argument that the pandemic as a health crisis is the “right” type of crisis for women leaders to be able to benefit from social (gender) role congruency. At the same time, the analysis of Frederiksen shows how the appeal to feminine traits does not guarantee credibility, not even in the context of the pandemic. Frederiksen, who also attempted to perform the “good mother,” was not perceived as authentic – as her own performance and the media’s portrayal of her were inconsistent, our focus group participants perceived her as lacking credibility.

Despite her high credibility, Solberg was not re-elected in the 2021 national election. This has largely been explained by two factors that are not connected to



her credibility per se: 1) how unusual it is for a leader to be re-elected for a third term in Norway, and 2) the public being “sick and tired” of the pandemic and wanting a change (Avisa Nordland 2021). Frederiksen, on the contrary, was re-elected as PM following the pandemic, despite having suffered a decrease in credibility. Arguably, this has more to do with the Danish proportional electoral system, which fosters a multiparty parliament with many possibilities for coalitions and compromises, than with Frederiksen’s rhetorical performance. Also, it speaks to Frederiksen’s political skills and, perhaps, reinforces public perceptions of her will to power, since she now heads a coalition government “across the middle.” While these developments may be interpreted as indicating the limited relevance of women leaders’ gendered performances, we understand them as highlighting the intricate relationships between political contexts, rhetorical situations, and enacted strategies. What works in one context and for one person, may have different outcomes for another; neither one’s performed or mediated persona can explain one’s success, but the interrelations of the two as negotiated by citizens to form public perceptions of one’s authenticity are always central to political as well as rhetorical performance.

This view, we find, is echoed in *Agenda Magasin*, a Norwegian political analysis magazine, in its comment on the Danish public perception of Frederiksen:

When certain mass media refer to the up until now so popular Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen as “powerful,” it must in fact be interpreted as “this power mad woman who is a prime minister.” A male version would probably have been referred to as decisive and strong (Sanden 2021).

Although any politician would surely be criticized for the illegal handling of the mink case, our material indicates that media representations of Frederiksen’s gendered performance did impact the way in which she is perceived and described, negatively affecting her credibility. Specifically, she was criticized for her harsh actions and the negative economic effects they had on mink farmers, but concern for animal welfare was almost completely absent from the debate at the time of the decision (see Lantz, Feddersen, and Just 2024). Meaning, the gendered critique of Frederiksen’s actions could have been even harsher.

In sum, rhetoric and gender alone cannot explain the successes and failures of women political leaders. In our two cases, the severity of specific misdemeanors (i.e., the mink scandal vs. the birthday party) and the practicalities of the political multi-party systems and coalition governments of the two countries must also be taken into consideration. Further, the national differences in gender equality and concomitant different evaluations of and approaches to feminism also play their part in explaining why Solberg succeeded whereas Frederiksen failed. The state of gender equality and feminism in Norway may provide a bigger space in which to maneuver gender performances, thereby making it easier to succeed as a “mother of the nation.” However, we do not think that the particular party affiliations of the two women leaders were central in this case, as the transcendent nature of the pandemic emergency was repeatedly highlighted by our focus

group participants who set their evaluations of the leaders' credibility apart from their own voting behavior.

Conclusively, we argue that the strong consensus on Solberg's high credibility during the COVID-19 pandemic is related to the authentic performance of a "mother of the nation" persona, which she enacted in collaboration with the news media, facilitating a public perception that aligned with her performance. Frederiksen's low credibility, to the contrary, is related to misalignments between her own performance and its mediation, which led to perceived incongruity and inauthenticity. The media ridiculed Frederiksen's attempts at performing caring motherhood and, instead, presented her as calculating and manipulative, leading to negative public perceptions of her "mother of the nation" persona. Adding to existing literature on the gendered performance of political leadership in times of health crisis, we find that women leaders gain credibility when the performance of their persona is consistent with public perceptions of them, with mediated representations playing a major role in ensuring or destabilizing such consistency.

**Funding declaration.** This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 296347).

**Competing interest.** The authors declare no competing interests.

## References

- Analyse & Tal. 2021. *Krig og kærlighed i coronaens tid. En kortlægning af debatten om corona i mediernes og politikernes kommentarspor på Facebook* [War and love in the times of corona. A mapping of the debate on corona in the media's and the politicians' comment sections on Facebook]. <https://www.octal.dk/assets/files/Krig-og-kaerlighed-i-coronaens-tid.pdf>.
- Arora, Sanjana, Jonas Debesay, and Hande Eslen-Ziya. 2022. "Persuasive Narrative during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg's Posts on Facebook." *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 9 (35): 1–10. doi: 10.1057/s41599-022-01051-5.
- Askanius, Tine and Jannie Møller Hartley. 2019. "Framing Gender Justice." *Nordicam Review* 40 (2): 19–36. doi: 10.2478/nor-2019-0022.
- Avisa Nordland. 2021. "Erna Solbergs fall i popularitet skyldes mer enn tabbemiddagen på Geilo [Erna Solberg's fall in popularity is a result of more than the mistake dinner at Geilo]." *Avisa Nordland*, August 18. <https://www.an.no/erna-solbergs-fall-i-popularitet-skyldes-mer-enn-tabbemiddagen-pa-geilo/o/5-4-1454757>.
- Bear, Allyson and Roselle Agner. 2021. "Why More Countries Need Female Leaders." *USNews*, March 8. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2021-03-08/why-countries-with-female-leaders-have-responded-well-to-the-pandemic>.
- Berg, Siv Hilde, Jane K. Ohara, Marie Therese Shortt, Henriette Thune, and Kolbjørn K. Brønne. 2021. "Health Authorities' Health Risk Communication with the Public during Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review." *BMS Public Health* 21: 1401. doi: 10.1186/s12889-021-11468-3.
- Björkdahl, Kristian, Jens E. Kjeldsen, Lisa Villadsen, and Orla Vigsø. 2021. "Argumentum ad Solidaritatem: Rhetorical Leadership Strategies in Scandinavia during COVID-19." In *Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Monique Lewis, Eliza Govender and Kate Holland, 163–84. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boris, Eileen. 1994. "Mothers are not Workers: Homework Regulation and the Construction of Motherhood, 1948–1953." In *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, 161–80. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. [1990] 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

- Campbell, Karlyn K. 1998. "The Discursive Performance of Femininity: Hating Hillary." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1 (1): 1–19.
- Casey, Emma, Sarah Childs, and Rupa Huq. 2022. "A Gendered Pandemic: Editors' Introduction." *Journal for Cultural Research* 26 (1): 1–5. doi: [10.1080/14797585.2022.2041317](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2022.2041317).
- Dada, Sara, Henry Charles Ashworth, Marlene Joannie Bewa, and Roopa Dhatt. 2021. "Words Matter: Political and Gender Analysis of Speeches Made by Heads of Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *BMJ Global Health* 6: 1–12. doi: [10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003910](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003910).
- Dahlerup, Drude 2018. "Gender Equality as a Closed Case: A Survey among the Members of the 2015 Danish Parliament." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 41 (2): 188–209. doi: [10.1111/1467-9477.12116](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12116).
- Davidson-Schmich, Louise K., Farida Jalalzai, and Malliga Och. 2023. "Crisis, Gender Role Congruency, and Perceptions of Executive Leadership." *Politics & Gender* 19 (3): 900–7.
- Deason, Grace, Jill S. Greenlee, and Carrie A. Langner. 2014. "Mothers on the Campaign Trail: Implications of Politicized Motherhood for Women in Politics." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3 (1): 133–48.
- Drivsholm, Louise S. 2022. "Kritikken af Mette Frederiksen har været kønnet, siden hun blev kaldt skrigeskinke, mener professor [The criticism of Mette Frederiksen has been gendered since she was called a gendered slur, professor believes]." *Information*, October 18. <https://www.information.dk/indland/2022/10/kritikken-mette-frederiksen-vaeret-koennet-siden-kaldt-skrigeskinke-mener-professor>.
- Eagly, Alice H. and Steven J. Karau. 2002. "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders." *Psychological Review* 109 (3): 573–89.
- Eller, Emil and Andreas N. Just. 2023. "Ny måling: Mette Frederiksens popularitet er styrt dykket [New poll: Mette Frederiksen's popularity has plunged]." *DR*, March 31. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/ny-maaling-mette-frederiksens-popularitet-er-styrt-dykket>.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. 2006. "Angela Merkel: What Does It Mean to Run as a Woman?" *German Politics & Society* 24 (1): 93–107. doi: [10.3167/104503006780935315](https://doi.org/10.3167/104503006780935315)
- Fjellanger, Runa. 2021. "Erna Solberg i karantene – igjen [Erna Solberg in quarantine – again]." *VG*, December 24. <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/y4Kp7x/erna-solberg-i-karantene-igjen>.
- Flam, Harry and Oskar N. Skans. 2022. "The Nordic Economies and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *COVID-19 Effects on the Economy in the Nordics. Nordic Economic Policy Review* 2022. <https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1665244/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Flick, Uwe. 2018. *An introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th edition. London: Sage.
- Frederiksen, Mette. 2020. "Pressemøde om COVID-19 den 11. marts 2020. [Press meeting about COVID-19 on the 11th of March 2020]." *Statsministeriet*, March 11. <https://www.stm.dk/presse/pressemoedearkiv/pressemoede-om-covid-19-den-11-marts-2020/>.
- Frækhaug, Ingelin M. 2014. "I krig og kjærlighet – en analyse av representasjonen av mannlige og kvinnelige toppolitikere på norske avisforsider i perioden rundt stortingsvalget 2013 [In war and love – an analysis of the representation of male and female top politicians on Norwegian newspaper covers in the period around the 2013 general election]." [Master's thesis.] University of Bergen.
- Fuusager, Helle and Theis E. Molin. 2024. "Nu vil flere partier genåbne minkaftalen. For vi har fået fingre i endnu et hemmeligt dokument [Several political parties now want to reopen the mink agreement. Because we have gotten our hands on another secret document]." *Zetland*, April 30. <https://www.zetland.dk/historie/se6Dp3Mg-mOz9Kr7Q-7074e>.
- Garikipati, Supriya and Uma Kambhampati. 2021. "Leading the Fight against the Pandemic: Does Gender Really Matter?" *Feminist Economics* 27 (1–2): 401–18. doi: [10.1080/13545701.2021.1874614](https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2021.1874614).
- Gamerdinger, Alexander, Sine N. Just and Prins Marcus Valiant Lantz. 2023. "Healthy Transparency: Dynamic Interrelations between Credibility, Transparency, and Trust in the Context of Danish Public Authorities' COVID-19 Communication". *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 8 (1): 100688. doi: [10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100688](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2023.100688).
- Gillard, Julia and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. 2020. *Women and Leadership. Lessons from Some of the World's Most Powerful Women*. Corgi Books.
- Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

- Goldenberg, Suzanne and Richard Adams. 2008. "The Tears over Coffee that Turned round Poll." *The Guardian*, January 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/10/hillaryclinton.uselections20082>.
- Goren, Lilly J. 2018. "Authenticity and Emotion: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Dual Constraints." *Politics & Gender* 14 (1): 111–15. doi: 10.1017/S1743923X17000630.
- Greene, Mark. 2022. "'Barefoot, Pregnant and in the Kitchen' Was Never Intended as a Joke." *Medium*, June 26. <https://remakingmanhood.medium.com/barefoot-pregnant-and-in-the-kitchen-was-never-intended-as-a-joke-3c3e57dc04b4>.
- Greenlee, Jill, Grace Deason, and Carrie Langner. 2017. "The Impact of Motherhood and Maternal Messages on Political Candidacies." In *The Political Psychology of Women in U.S. Politics*, eds. Angela L. Bos and Monica C. Schneider, 184–201. New York: Routledge.
- Hansen, Anders and David Machin. 2019. *Media and Communication Methods*, 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Helle, Arild. 2021. "En feil må kunne tilgis, selv om den er gjort av vår statsminister [A mistake must be forgivable, even if it is made by our Prime Minister]." *Bergens Tidende*, March 22. <https://www.bt.no/btmeninger/debatt/i/2djpzr/en-feil-maa-kunne-tilgis-selv-om-den-er-gjort-av-vaar-statsminister>.
- Hernes, Helga. M. 1987. *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Hertzberg, Hendrik. 2008. "Second Those Emotions." *The New Yorker*, January 13. <https://www.ny.com/magazine/2008/01/21/second-those-emotions>.
- Holst, Cathrine. 2018. "Scandinavian Feminism and Gender Partnership." In *Sustainable Modernity: The Nordic Model and Beyond*, eds. Nina Witoszek and Atle Midttun, 102–18. New York: Routledge.
- Hultén, Lene. 2021. "Coronahåndtering, ubrugelige testkits og makrelmadder – Mette Frederiksen, du aner ikke, hvor frustrerende mange er [Corona handling, useless test kits and mackerel baits – Mette Frederiksen, you have no idea how frustrated many people are]." *Jyllands-Posten*, February 22. <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/kronik/ECE12777508/coronahaandtering-ubrugelige-testkits-og-makrelmadder-mette-frederiksen-du-aner-ikke-hvor-frustrerede-mange-er/>.
- Ihlen, Øyvind, Margalit Toledano, and Sine N. Just. 2021. "Using Rhetorical Situations to Examine and Improve Vaccination Communication." *Frontiers in Communication* 6: 697383. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.697383.
- Jamieson, Kathleen H. 1995. *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Carol and Blair Williams. 2020. "Gender and Political Leadership in a Time of COVID." *Politics & Gender* 16: 943–50.
- Johnston, Deirdre D. and Debra H. Swanson. 2006. "Constructing the 'Good Mother': The Experience of Mothering Ideologies by Work Status." *Sex Roles* 54: 509–19. doi: 10.1007/s11199-006-9021-3.
- Johnston, Deirdre D. and Debra H. Swanson. 2009. "Undermining Mothers: A Content Analysis of the Representation of Mothers in Magazines." *Mass Communication and Society* 6 (3): 243–65. doi: 10.1207/S15327825MCS0603\_2.
- Jørndrup, Hanne. 2021. Ligestilling i nyhedsmediernes [Gender equality in the news media]. [https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/78390176/LIGESTILLING\\_I\\_MEDIERNE\\_2020.pdf](https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/78390176/LIGESTILLING_I_MEDIERNE_2020.pdf).
- Knudsen, Erik, Åsta D. Nordø, and Magnus H. Iversen. 2023. "How Rally-Round-the-Flag Effects Shape Trust in News Media: Evidence from Panel Waves before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis." *Political Communication* 40 (2): 201–21.
- Krogstad, Anne. 2015. "Visuell politisk retorikk [Visual political rhetoric]." In *Makt, medier og politikk: Norsk politisk kommunikasjon* [Power, media, and politics: Norwegian political communication], eds. Øyvind Ihlen, Eli Skogerbø and Sigurd Allern, 244–56. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Lantz, Prins Marcus Valiant, Jonathan Feddersen and Sine N. Just. 2024. "Overtaken by Reality: The Temporal Interplay between Rhetoric and Collective Action." *Academy of Management Perspectives*. doi: 10.5465/amp.2023.0096.
- Luebke, Simon M. 2021. "Political Authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (3): 635–53.

- Mackenzie, Jai. 2017. "‘Can We Have a Child Exchange?’ Constructing and Subverting the ‘Good Mother’ through Play in Mumsnet Talk." *Discourse & Society* 28 (3): 296–312.
- Mackenzie, Jai. 2021. "Analysing Gendered Discourses Online. Child-Centric Motherhood and Individuality in Mumsnet Talk." In *The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, eds. Jo Angouri and Judith Baxter, 408–21. New York: Routledge.
- McGee, Michael C. 1990. "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54: 274–89.
- Mogensen, Lars T. 2020a. "Vogteren af de vanrøgtede børn [The guardian of the neglected children]." *Føljeton*, January 20. <https://www.foljeton.dk/post/vogteren-af-de-vanroegtede-boern>.
- Mogensen, Lars T. 2020b. "Mette Frederiksen er Danmarks corona-commander-in-chief [Mette Frederiksen is Denmark’s corona commander-in-chief]." *Information*, March 14. <https://www.information.dk/indland/2020/03/mette-frederiksen-danmarks-corona-commander-in-chief>.
- Nykvist, Kato. 2020. "Korona kan gjøre landsmoder av Erna Solberg [Corona can make Erna Solberg into a mother of the nation]." *Adresseavisen*, April 2. <https://www.adressa.no/midtnorske/batt/i/Eap6dG/det-sa-bekmorkt-ut-for-erna-solbergs-mannskap-sa-kom-koronakrisen>.
- Offerdal, Truls S., Sine N. Just, and Øyvind Ihlen. 2021. "Public Ethos in the Pandemic Rhetorical Situation: Strategies for Building Trust in Authorities’ Risk Communication." *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research* 4 (2): 247–70.
- Olganier, David and Trine H. Mogensen. 2020. "The Covid-19 Pandemic in Denmark: Big Lessons from a Small Country." *Cytokine & Growth Factor Reviews* 53 (June 2020): 10–12.
- Oltermann, Philip. 2015. "Mama Merkel: The ‘Compassionate Mother’ of Syrian Refugees." *The Guardian*, September 1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2015/sep/01/mama-merkel-the-compassionate-mother-of-syrian-refugees>.
- Orange, Richard and Pamela Duncan. 2019. "And the least Feminist Nation in the World is... Denmark?" *The Guardian*, May 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/10/and-the-least-feminist-nation-in-the-world-is-denmark>.
- Outzen, Mads. 2020. "Gense pressemødet, hvor Mette Frederiksen lukker store dele av Danmark ned [Revisit the press conference, where Mette Frederiksen closes large parts of Denmark down]." *Altinget*, March 11. <https://www.altinget.dk/artikel/live-mette-frederiksen-kommer-med-corona-opdatering>.
- Parry-Giles, Shawn J. 2014. *Hillary Clinton in the News. Gender and Authenticity in American Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Piscopo, Jennifer M. 2020. "Women Leaders and Pandemic Performance: A Spurious Correlation." *Politics & Gender* 16 (4): 951–59.
- Power, Kate and Peter Crosthwaite. 2022. "Constructing COVID-19: A Corpus-Informed Analysis of Prime Ministerial Crisis Response Communication by Gender." *Discourse & Society* 33 (3): 411–37. doi: 10.1177/09579265221076612.
- Puglierin, Jana. 2020. "Mother of All Problems: The Return of Crisis Manager Merkel." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 24. [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_mother\\_of\\_all\\_problems\\_the\\_return\\_of\\_crisis\\_manager\\_merkel/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_mother_of_all_problems_the_return_of_crisis_manager_merkel/).
- Redaktionen@radio4.dk. 2022. "Mette Frederiksen om magtkritik: At jeg er kvinde spiller en rolle [Mette Frederiksen on the power criticism: Being a woman plays a role]." *Radio4*, September 27. <https://radio4.dk/nyheder/mette-frederiksen-om-magtkritik-at-jeg-er-kvinde-spiller-en-rolle-i9MNnCE1J00AdZXqLHA4>.
- Remen, Anne Cecilie and Pedja Kalajdzic. 2021. "Erna Solberg og familien brøt anbefalinger og regler om smittevern: - Jeg kan bare beklage [Erna Solberg and her family broke recommendations and rules on infection control: - I can only apologize]." *NRK*, March 18. [https://www.nrk.no/norge/erna-solberg-og-familien-brot-smittereglene\\_-\\_beklager-1.15422762](https://www.nrk.no/norge/erna-solberg-og-familien-brot-smittereglene_-_beklager-1.15422762).
- Rogstad, Ingrid D. 2013. "Klesvask og kjoleprat? Fremstilling av kjønn i valgkamp [Laundry and dress talk? Representation of gender in election campaigns]." *Norsk Statsvitenskapelig Tidsskrift* 26 (2): 169–90.
- Sanden, Knut Arne. 2021. "Makt-Mette ble til Mink-Mette [Power Mette became Mink Mette]." *Agenda Magasin*, November 24. <https://agendamagasinet.no/debatt/makt-mette-ble-til-mink-mette/>.

- Schreiber, Ronnee. 2016. "Gender Roles, Motherhood, and Politics: Conservative Women's Organizations Frame Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann." *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* 37 (1): 1–23.
- Simpson, Patricia Anne. 2019. "'Mama Merkel' and 'Mutti-Multikulti': The Perils of Governing while Female." In *Realities and Fantasies of German Female Leadership*, eds. Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson, 301–17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Suder, Gabriele. 2021. "From 'Mädchen' to 'Mutti': as Angela Merkel Departs, She Leaves a Great Legacy of Leadership." *The Conversation*, September 21. <https://theconversation.com/from-madchen-to-mutti-as-angela-merkel-departs-she-leaves-a-great-legacy-of-leadership-168187>.
- Svendsen, Helle L. and Heidi S. Lilleås. 2023. "Super-veteran på full fart inn i Oslo bystyre: Ja, slik kan det gå, sier hun til Nettavisen [Super veteran at full speed into Oslo City Council: Yes, that's how that can go, she says to Nettavisen]." *Nettavisen*, September 14. <https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/gro-gjor-comeback/s/5-95-1330577>.
- Søe, Camilla. 2022. "Nej, Mette Frederiksen, dit køn har intet at gøre med kritikken af din magtarrogance [No, Mette Frederiksen, your gender has nothing to do with the criticism of your power arrogance]." *Altinget*, October 3. <https://www.altinget.dk/artikel/nej-mette-frederiksen-dit-koen-har-intet-at-goere-med-kritikken-af-din-magtarrogance>.
- Teigen, Mari and Hege Skjeie. 2017. "The Nordic Gender Equality Model." In *The Nordic Models in Political Science. Challenged, but Still Viable?*, eds. Oddbjørn Knutsen, 125–147). Oslo: Fagbokforlaget.
- Tjora, Aksel. 2019. *Qualitative Research as Stepwise-Deductive Induction*. Routledge.
- Tonn, Mari B. 1996. "Militant Motherhood: Labor's Mary Harris 'Mother' Jones." *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82: 1–21.
- Vital Strategies. 2021. "Women Leaders at the Center of the COVID-19 Response." March 8. <https://www.vitalstrategies.org/vital-stories-women-leaders-at-the-center-of-the-covid-19-response/>.
- Voina, Andreea and Mihnea S. Stoica. 2023. "Reframing Leadership: Jacinda Ardern's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Media and Communication* 11 (1): 139–49.
- World Economic Forum. 2023. "Global Gender Gap Report 2023, July 20." <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/digest/>.

**Anja Vranic** is a PhD Student in Political Communication at the University of Oslo: [anja.vranic@media.uio.no](mailto:anja.vranic@media.uio.no)

**Sine Nørholm Just** is Professor of Strategic Communication at Roskilde University: [sinenjust@ruc.dk](mailto:sinenjust@ruc.dk)

---

**Cite this article:** Vranic, Anja, and Sine Nørholm Just. 2025. "Mother of the Nation: Negotiating Women Leaders' Credibility in a Health Crisis." *Politics & Gender* 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2500008X>