

A Global Network of Women Leaders



Laura A. Liswood

An Interview with Laura A. Liswood,
Secretary General, Council of Women World Leaders

EDITORS' NOTE In August 1996, Laura Liswood co-founded the Council of Women World Leaders with President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir of Iceland and is its Secretary General. In 2001, Liswood was named Managing Director, Global Leadership and Diversity for Goldman Sachs. She is now a senior advisor to that firm. In 1997, Liswood co-founded The White House Project. From 1992 to 1996, as Director of the Women's Leadership Project, Liswood identified global leadership contributions by women heads of state. She interviewed 15 current and former women presidents and prime ministers, which is chronicled in her book and video documentary, *Women World Leaders*. After the events of September 11, 2001, Liswood became a reserve police officer in Washington D.C. and is now a sergeant. Liswood was previously a consultant for The Boston Consulting Group. She holds an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and a B.A. from California State University, San Diego. She holds a J.D. degree from the University of California, Davis, School of Law, and is admitted to practice law in California and Massachusetts. Her latest book is called *The Loudest Duck: Moving Beyond Diversity*.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Housed at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., since 2011, the Council of Women World Leaders (www.wilsoncenter.org/program/council-women-world-leaders) expands the understanding of leadership, establishes a network of resources for high-level women leaders, and provides a forum for the group to contribute input and shape the international issues important to women and society.

How did the Council of Women World Leaders come about?

I traveled around the world and interviewed all of the living women presidents and prime ministers, which numbered 15 at the time, and I heard each of them describe similar challenges that women leaders face.

I also asked these leaders if they felt there would be value in meeting with each other, which led to a summit in Stockholm with most of the female heads of state in attendance. They agreed it would be worthwhile to create a council where they would have the opportunity to spend time with other female leaders and share experiences. The Council is now 15 years old.

They also had the goal of raising the visibility of women leaders because these women at the time, with few exceptions, were relatively unknown. They were also hopeful that they might be able to create common support and increased visibility for important issues. They wanted to partner with other organizations and to get more involved in setting the world agenda at organizations like the UN, the IMF, and the G-7 to ensure that women's voices were included. With their combined power as women leaders, they felt it could happen.

So we formed the Council of Women World Leaders. Today, we continue to raise the visibility of women, collaborate with other organizations, promote research on women's issues, and help younger women leaders enhance their opportunities – there is a graduate leaders program that we've had for a number of years where graduate students can participate in fellowships and internships in our council members' offices and other ministerial offices. The current Chair is President Halonen of Finland.

We also created a ministerial effort, originally chaired by Secretary Madeleine Albright, and now chaired by Minister Margot Wallström. There are upwards of 500 women who hold various ministerial portfolios.

Have you made the kind of progress you had hoped for in terms of opportunities becoming available for women to reach those positions of leadership?

Today, there are 49 women who are or have been presidents or prime ministers and are currently Council members. Membership is limited to freely elected heads of state and heads of government.

If we compare that to the number of male leaders, it's a small number. It continues to grow, although the number of sitting women leaders doesn't seem to get above 15 to 20 at any point in time.

The numbers of top women leaders has not increased quite as quickly as I would have anticipated. We need to push to get more advancement. Research on women's progress around the world will still show gains – the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report shows substantial gains in closing the gap between boys' and girls' education and health. But the gaps are still significant when it comes to women's economic and political participation. We thought if we educated girls and kept them healthy, they would naturally rise to these positions. It turns out that is not yet the case.

Do you focus solely on women government leaders or do you also address women business leaders?

We want women leaders at the top levels in both politics and in business. The Council worked with Harvard, the Kennedy School of Government, and the World Economic Forum to create a major program that highlights the research on business women. We need women leaders in all fields.

Is the Council focused on specific topics or is it concerned with a broad range of issues?

We focus on a broad range of issues. You can't just address, for instance, women gaining the right to vote or educating girls, or overcoming the various barriers for women in society and expect that those singular successes will finalize the process.

We will continue to move ahead and sometimes will only realize later that we created an inflection point on how people think about things. Leadership is like that. One can call oneself a leader but it's in hindsight that people give you that title; it's not enough to just call yourself a leader.

On the Council, do you utilize similar metrics as you would in business to track results or is it looked at differently?

We try to measure impact, but it's easier to do that in the defined world of business. Can we say we have increased the number of women heads of state by X? No, we can't say that. Can we say we were part of a movement that helped create a critical mass of ideas that helped shape people's attitudes? Yes, we can. I think we were one among many who helped change attitudes globally about women eventually becoming leaders of their country. ●