Female Leadership of Cabinet Ministries

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Over the past few years, that secretary of state role in the United States seems to have become "feminized." Men led the State Department for more than two hundred years; since 1997, three of the State Department's four chiefs (Madeleine Albright, Condeleezza Rice, and Hillary Rodham Clinton) have been women. Is the feminization of this important role an accident, or does it represent a meaningful shift in the way political leaders think about diplomacy and governance? How significant is it that the American cabinet, which has been run exclusively by men for the vast majority of American history, is now composed of 33% women? Once women take the reins of departmental power (a commodity that most other countries call "ministerial power"), do they lead their departments in predictably different ways?

For the past couple of years, we have been working on a project, along with Suraj Jacob from JMU's Department of Justice Studies, that seeks to answer these and similar questions. It turns out that the United States is in good global company when it comes to the feminization of cabinets. In 1980, women controlled 3.3% of ministerial positions worldwide. In 2011, they controlled 16% of such positions. Women constitute more than 50% of the world's population, so we are a still a long way from parity. But the global trajectory, particularly since the middle of the 1990s, has been striking: women are gaining an increasing share of very important political positions.

"Hold on!," you may be thinking. "I remember my Mark Twain (and my intro to statistics class at JMU)– 'there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics!'" Is the global rise in the ranks of female ministers being driven by big gains in some states, while other states are continuing on with no female ministers? Are the Denmarks, Norways, and Swedens of the world masking goose eggs in places like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen? The answer to these questions is simple: Yes . . . and no! It is true that northern European countries have some of the highest levels of women's ministerial representation in the world (as of January 2011, 55% in Denmark, 50% in Norway, 50% in Sweden). But countries like Cape Verde (57%) and Bolivia (50%) are right with them at the top of the global table. Each year, fewer and fewer countries boast of (or, rather, admit to) having "woman-less" cabinets, and the numbers suggest that the Americas and Africa—yes, Africa—have established themselves over the last decade as clear world co-leaders alongside Europe.

Of course, political scientists and sociologists have been interested in women's political representation for years. For the longest time, though, they have focused on legislatures rather than cabinets. On one hand, this focus is understandable—legislatures, after all, are "the voice of the people. " On the other hand, it's very strange: the average cabinet minister controls dramatically more symbolic and material resources than the average legislator, and if we want to understand women's relationship to public power, we must focus on the most powerful public institutions.

The field has traditionally neglected cabinets for one simple reason: cabinets are harder to study than legislatures. Unlike legislators, who usually serve out the full duration of their terms,

cabinet ministers are hired and fired frequently. For a global study like ours, it is a formidable task to keep up with the comings and goings (and, of course, the genders) of cabinet ministers in 197 world states. It has been our pleasure, as we've tackled this important challenge, to work with committed undergraduate students and EUPS master's students. In exchange for a few credits and some practical project experience, the students help us with data management, coding, and—most importantly—ideas. One of the beauties of working on a field (cabinet personnel dynamics) that is still relatively young is seeing our relatively young assistants ask the right questions and contribute ideas about how to find the answers.