RIS

Beyond the numbers on women's representation: Recognition of women's leadership in global governance

Hortense Jongen

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, VU Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands and School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
Email: h.j.e.m.jongen@vu.nl

Abstract

To what extent has the glass ceiling in global governance been shattered? To answer this question, we need to look beyond the numbers on women's representation and study how far women are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders in global governance. This article offers an analysis of perceptions of inspiring and visionary leadership in global multistakeholder initiatives from a gender perspective. Based on 467 interviews with participants in a leading multistakeholder initiative, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), it presents four findings: (1) respondents identify more men than women as inspiring and visionary leaders, with the difference roughly corresponding to the share of women in leadership roles; (2) respondents tend to ascribe more leadership attributes to women than to men when explaining why they find them inspiring and visionary; (3) both feminine and masculine leadership traits are appreciated in relation to both men and women leaders at ICANN; (4) female respondents identify more women as inspiring and visionary leaders than male respondents. These findings contribute novel insights into gendered perceptions around leadership and the importance of role models in global governance. They also shed much-needed light on the demands and expectations from leadership in global multistakeholder arrangements.

Introduction

To what extent has the glass ceiling in global governance been shattered? The appointment of women to various leadership positions in international organisations, including the European Central Bank, the European Commission, the World Trade Organization, and several United Nations (UN) specialised agencies might suggest it has. Women's representation in the UN, once coined the 'world's largest men's club', has increased steadily since the 2000s.[1] The same is the case for women's leadership in the European Commission.[2] Yet while these numbers are encouraging, they do not capture the full picture. Several studies reveal that, although more women have acceded

---

[1] Gayle Kirshenbaum, quoted in Kirsten Haack, 'Gaining access to the world's largest men's club: Women leading UN agencies', *Global Society*, 28:2 (2014), pp. 217–40.

[2] Miriam Hartlapp, Henriette Müller, and Ingeborg Tömmel, 'Gender equality and the European Commission', in Gabriele Abels, Andrea Krizsán, Heather MacRae and Anna van der Vleuten (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and EU Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 133–45.

to leadership roles, they are often assigned gender-specific portfolios.[3] Others indicate that a seat at the negotiating table does not necessarily translate into effective influence.[4] Thus, while representation is important, the numbers on women in leadership functions provide limited insight into how women leaders are perceived within global governance institutions and to what extent they are recognised as leaders.

This article argues that it is crucial to obtain such insights and research how far women are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders in global governance. It draws upon scholarship in the fields of psychology and organisation sciences that views leadership as inherently relational rather than tied to a specific role.[5] In this understanding, leadership is socially constructed. It exists to the extent than an individual is capable of motivating others towards a collective goal or mission and is shaped by the interactions between a leader and their followers. While much of the existing literature in the field of International Relations has studied and identified women leaders based on their role or function within a country, international organisation, or global company (i.e. 'their positional power'),[6] to the best of my knowledge, none of it has analysed the extent to which women are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders in global governance. However, it is important to look beyond the numbers on women's representation and study who is perceived as an inspiring leader in today's circumstances, where old-style multilateralism operates alongside – what claim to be – more participatory modes of global governing. Global multistakeholder initiatives, which are at the focus of this article, are one example of this trend. An analysis of the extent to which women are recognised as leaders within these contexts helps advance understanding of gendered perceptions of leadership in global governance, which might act as a barrier to women reaching the upper echelons of global governance institutions.[7]

This article's main goal is to analyse from a gender perspective who is recognised as an inspiring and visionary leader in multistakeholder governance and to identify what leadership traits are ascribed to these individuals. It additionally probes into the characteristics of the participants in multistakeholder initiatives who identify certain individuals as inspiring leaders, in order to shed light on the importance of role models in global governance. The article addresses these goals through a case study of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is a leading global multistakeholder initiative in the Internet ecosystem.[8] Data consists of qualitative and quantitative insights from 467 mixed-method interviews conducted with members of the ICANN board, community, and staff in 2018 and 2019.

ICANN is an apt case to study gendered perceptions of leadership. Although global Internet governance might appear largely technical in nature, the political stakes are high.[9] Specifically, ICANN

---

[3]Haack, 'Gaining access'; Kirsten Haack, 'Breaking barriers? Women's representation and leadership at the United Nations', *Global Governance*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 37–54; Kirsten Haack, Margaret Karns, and Jean-Pierre Murrary, 'The United Nations at seventy-five: Where are the women at the United Nations now?', *Ethics and International Affairs*, 34:3 (2020), pp. 175–98; Hartlapp, Müller, and Tömmel, 'Gender equality'.

[4]Denisa Kostovicova and Tom Pakhalis, 'Gender, justice and deliberation: Why women don't influence peacemaking', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 263–76.

[5]Michael Hogg and Daan van Knippenberg, 'Social identity and leadership processes in groups', in Mark Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2013), pp. 1–52; Mary Uhl-Bien, 'Relational leadership theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17:6 (2006), pp. 654–76; for an application of this conception of leadership in the field of International Relations, see Dirk Nabers, 'Power, leadership, and hegemony in international politics: The case of East Asia', *Review of International Studies*, 36:4 (2010), pp. 931–49.

[6]Nancy Adler, 'Global leadership, women leaders', *Management International Review*, 37:1 (1997), pp. 171–196 (p. 177).

[7]Haack, 'Gaining access'; Ingvild Bode, 'Women or leaders? Practices of narrating the United Nations as a gendered institution', *International Studies Review*, 22:3 (2020), pp. 347–69.

[8]Slavka Antonova, *Powerscape of Internet Governance: How Was Global Multistakeholderism Invented in ICANN?* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2008); Mikkel Flyverbom, *The Power of Networks: Organizing the Global Politics of the Internet* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011); Hortense Jongen and Jan Aart Scholte, 'Legitimacy in multistakeholder global governance at ICANN', *Global Governance*, 27:2 (2021), pp. 298–324.

[9]Corinne Cath, 'Loud men talking loudly: Exclusionary cultures of internet governance', Primer prepared for the launch of the Critical Infrastructure Lab, April 2023.

plays an important role in enabling the transmission of data on the Internet by developing policies for the global Domain Name System (DNS) and managing the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) functions (i.e. domain names, Internet Protocol numbers, and protocol parameters). Policies around the DNS do not only bear implications for freedom of expression, privacy, and (cyber)security globally but also have significant distributional effects.[10] Given that ICANN's rules and policies shape the terms on which people get access to the Internet, gender inclusivity (as well as inclusion of other underrepresented groups) in its governance model is important.[11] However, although global multistakeholder initiatives are often presented as more inclusive compared to multilateralism, it remains unclear whether they also perform better in terms of ensuring gender equality.

By analysing perceptions of leadership in global multistakeholder governance, this article makes several important contributions. First, while an extensive body of research deals with leadership in global governance, this article takes an original approach by analysing from a gender perspective who are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders. Second, this article is the first to study leadership in global multistakeholder initiatives. It is important to obtain such insights, given that – by claiming to take a participatory, bottom-up approach – multistakeholder initiatives aim to promote the development of leadership from below. This leads to different leadership demands, arguably rendering the question of who is perceived as inspiring and visionary equally important to who holds a (formal) leadership position. Third, the article fills the above-mentioned gaps in knowledge by means of an original dataset based on mixed-method survey interviews with a representative sample of regular participants in ICANN.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the state of the art on (woman) leadership in global governance. Drawing upon research on political leadership,[12] the article subsequently introduces an analytical framework that outlines various leadership qualities. This framework – which in modified form has been used to study gender differences in how political leaders are portrayed by the media[13] – helps to shed light on gendered perceptions of leadership in multistakeholder governance. Next, the article discusses the case selection, data, and methods. It subsequently presents the analysis and four key findings, specifically that:

(1) Participants in ICANN (both men and women) tend to identify more men than women as inspiring and visionary leaders, with the difference roughly corresponding to the share of women in leadership roles.

(2) Respondents who perceive women leaders as inspiring and visionary tend to ascribe multiple leadership attributes to them. Over a third of them describe these women in relation to their competence and expertise, and about a fifth refer to their responsiveness. Respondents who recognise men as inspiring and visionary leaders refer to comparably fewer leadership attributes when describing them.

(3) Both stereotypically feminine and masculine leadership traits are appreciated in relation to both men and women leaders at ICANN, which points to the importance of androgynous leadership styles in this type of governance.

(4) Female respondents recognise significantly more women as inspiring leaders at ICANN than male respondents. Interestingly, the reverse is not found to be the case.

---

[10]Samantha Bradshaw and Laura DeNardis, 'The politicization of the internet's domain name system: Implications for Internet security, universality, and freedom', *New Media and Society*, 20:1 (2018), pp. 332–50.

[11]Hortense Jongen and Jan Aart Scholte, 'Inequality and legitimacy in global governance: An empirical study', *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:3 (2022), pp. 667–95.

[12]Loes Aaldering and Rens Vliegenthart, 'Political leaders and the media: Can we measure political leadership images in newspapers using computer-assisted content analysis?', *Quality and Quantity*, 50 (2016), pp. 1871–905.

[13]Loes Aaldering and Daphne van der Pas, 'Political leadership in the media: Gender bias in leader stereotypes during campaign and routine times', *British Journal of Political Science*, 50 (2020), pp. 911–31.

These findings are not only important in that they can help address underrepresentation of women in global governance, but also because they contribute novel insights into the demands and expectations from leadership in global multistakeholder arrangements.

Women's leadership in global governance

Before I discuss why we should care about women leaders in multistakeholder governance, it is important to reflect on the relevance of studying leadership in global governance arrangements. Sceptics might argue that an analysis of leadership in global governance is hardly useful. Realist scholars, for example, posit that intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and other global governance institutions have little agency, rendering irrelevant the question of who is at their helm.[14] However, many scholars today recognise that global governance institutions have some degree of authority and autonomy in global affairs.[15] Several of them have argued that IGO secretariats assume a political role to some degree independently from their member states.[16] Others show how decision-making authority has shifted from public to private actors.[17] Although we do need to consider structural and organisational constraints on individual leaders,[18] leadership in global governance matters.[19] If we are to better understand how and why global governance institutions act in the ways that they do, as well as the direction that they take, we need to further our knowledge on leadership within them. This includes leadership by women.

In recent decades, the popularity of feminist institutionalism as a theoretical approach in International Relations has been coupled with academic interest in women's leadership in global governance. Research on women leaders in the United Nations contributes important insights into the factors that affect women's rise to the upper echelons of the organisation, as well as the portfolios they are assigned once in office.[20] Other studies have covered the role of women judges in the International Criminal Court and the European Court of Human Rights as well as women's leadership in the G8 and G20 and peacekeeping missions.[21] However, many of these studies focus on women's representation in formal leadership positions in global governance (i.e. their positional power) and thereby tend to overlook the more informal ways in which leadership can take shape. The present article's analysis of perceptions of women's leadership in global governance fills an

---

[14] John Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security*, 19 (1994/5), pp. 5–49.

[15] Debora Avant, Martha Finnemore, and Susan Sell, *Who Governs the Globe?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Darren Hawkins, David Lake, Daniel Nielson, and Michael Tierney (eds), *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[16] Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner (eds), *Managers of Global Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

[17] Claire Cutler, Virginia Haufler, and Tony Porter (eds), *Private Authority and International Affairs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[18] Nina Hall and Ngaire Woods, 'Theorizing the role of executive heads in international organizations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:4 (2018), pp. 865–86; see also Christoph Harig and Nicole Jenne, 'Whose rules? Whose power? The Global South and the possibility to shape international peacekeeping norms through leadership appointments', *Review of International Studies*, 48:4 (2022), pp. 646–67.

[19] Robert Cox, 'The executive head: An essay on leadership in international organization', *International Organization*, 23:2 (1969), pp. 205–30; Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek, 'Leadership of international organizations', in R. A. W. Rhodes and Paul 't Hart (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 595–609.

[20] Bode, 'Women or leaders'; Hilary Charlesworth, 'Transforming the United Men's Club: Feminist futures for the United Nations', *Transnational Law and Contemporary Problems*, 4 (1994), pp. 421–54; Haack, 'Gaining access'; Haack, 'Breaking barriers'; Kirsten Haack, 'Women, organizational crisis, and access to leadership in international organizations', *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*, 38:2 (2017), pp. 175–98.

[21] Louise Chapell, 'Gender and judging at the International Criminal Court', *Politics & Gender*, 6:3 (2010), pp. 484–95; Hugo Dobson, 'Where are the women in global governance? Leaders, wives and hegemonic masculinity in the G8 and G20 summits', *Global Society*, 26:4 (2014), pp. 429–49; Stephanie Hennette Vauchez, 'More women – but which women? The rule and the politics of gender balance at the European Court of Human Rights', *European Journal of International Law*, 26:1 (2015), pp. 195–221; Nina Wilén, 'Female peacekeepers' added burden', *International Affairs*, 96:6 (2020), pp. 1585–602.

important gap in the literature, as it helps advance understanding of the perceptions and practices that potentially sustain gender inequality in global governance.[22] As I will discuss in more detail below, the article draws upon an extensive body of research in the fields of psychology, management, and business studies that has studied perceptions of women's leadership in a variety of work settings.

It is important to broaden the research focus on leadership in global governance beyond multilateralism. Today, global multistakeholder initiatives carry out significant regulatory functions in various spheres of global affairs, ranging from sustainable forestry to Internet governance, and from conflict diamonds to epidemics.[23] In doing so, they provide a major alternative to multilateral organisations[24] and create different opportunities for leadership to take shape. Specifically, in their ambitions to take a participatory, bottom-up approach to policymaking as opposed to hierarchical, top-down decision-making by the executive leadership, global multistakeholder initiatives aspire to offer opportunities for leadership to develop from below. It is therefore important to study who is recognised as a leader in these contexts and can inspire their intended followers towards a collective goal or mission.

Considering the different forms that leadership can take in multistakeholderism, the question emerges whether gendered perceptions and practices around leadership have taken hold in these bodies, as has been the case in several multilateral organisations.[25] While multistakeholderism is often touted as more inclusive than multilateralism, there is no guarantee that this mode of governance does not reproduce or perpetuate global inequalities, including gender imbalances. Indeed, several scholars have argued that multistakeholderism does not deliver upon its democratic promise but consolidates existing power hierarchies.[26] At the same time, international institutions might not just reflect the norms and interests of hegemonic groups in society but can also serve as an arena for counter-hegemonic change.[27] Consequently, it is important to study gender issues in a large variety of international institutional settings, which might to different degrees and under varying circumstances provide a platform for emancipatory change.[28]

Charismatic, transformational, and inspiring women's leadership: An analytical framework

This article is interested in the extent to which individuals are recognised as inspiring and visionary leaders, a type of leadership that offers a good fit with how multistakeholder initiatives operate. In doing so, the article draws upon a body of literature originating in Max Weber's writings on charismatic authority. Weber conceived of charismatic authority as a type of leadership enacted by individuals who are endowed with exceptional, almost divine, qualities.[29] Charisma manifests itself as a quasi-religious veneration of a leader by their followers. To this day, charismatic leadership

[22]See also Bode, 'Women or leaders'.

[23]Jan Aart Scholte, 'Multistakeholderism: Filling the global governance gap? Research overview for the Global Challenges Foundation' (2020), available at: {https://globalchallenges.org/wp-content/uploads/Research-review-global-multistakeholderism-scholte-2020.04.06.pdf}.

[24]Jongen and Scholte, 'Legitimacy'.

[25]Bode, 'Women or leaders'; Haack, 'Gaining access'.

[26]Madeline Carr, 'Power plays in global Internet governance', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 640–59; also Carol Glen, 'Internet governance: Territorializing cyberspace?', *Politics and Policy*, 5:42 (2014), pp. 635–57; Nicola Palladino and Mauro Santaniello, *Legitimacy, Power, and Inequalities in the Multistakeholder Internet Governance: Analyzing IANA Transition* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[27]Robert Cox, 'Social forces, states and world orders: Beyond international relations theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10:2 (1981), pp. 126–55; Sandra Whitworth, *Feminism and International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Georgina Holmes, Katharine A.M. Wright, Soumita Basu et al., 'Feminist experiences of "studying up": Encounters with international institutions', *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:2 (2018), pp. 169–320.

[28]Holmes et al. (2018).

[29]Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

continues to be associated with men, and limited examples of women have been ascribed this type of leadership.[30]

In recent decades, charismatic leadership has developed into a popular object of research among organisational scientists and psychologists.[31] Much of their work links charisma to transformational leadership,[32] a type of leadership that is capable of actualising leaders and followers through 'a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation'.[33] In contrast to transactional leadership, in which the relationship between a leader and their followers is based on an instrumental exchange and is driven by self-interest, transformational leaders can motivate their intended followers to relinquish their private interests and to work for the collective benefit of an organisation.[34]

What makes transformational leadership particularly suitable for an analysis of global multi-stakeholder initiatives is that this type of leadership 'is not just the province of people at the top', but 'can occur at all levels and by any individual'.[35] It emerges even in the most informal types of groups. Hence, being appointed to a leadership role does not mean that an individual is also recognised as an inspiring and visionary leader. Conversely, individuals who hold no formal leadership position can still be perceived as leaders and wield significant influence, for example, by inspiring their intended followers, by providing meaning or a higher purpose, by instilling a collective vision and identity, or by serving as role models.

Thus far, few researchers have studied charismatic leadership in global governance. However, charismatic leadership appears important in these contexts also. In their work on IGO bureaucracies, Biermann and colleagues describe 'as strong leadership' a style that is 'charismatic, visionary, and popular as well as flexible and reflexive'.[36] Charisma might render certain people more effective in leading an IGO, as it enables them to inspire others to follow their rule instead of having to entice, threaten, or coerce them. In the context of multistakeholder initiatives, charismatic leaders can be expected to encourage individuals to join the institution and to aspire to leadership roles.

While considered important for leadership, charisma appears difficult to capture empirically and is fraught with both positive and negative connotations. Hence, this article examines perceptions of inspiring and visionary leadership, terms that are less ambiguous than charisma and preclude some of its negative associations. In this regard, the article takes a narrower approach than most studies on charismatic and transformational leadership, some of which treat being 'inspiring'[37] or 'visionary'[38] as sub-dimensions of charisma.

This article does not assume *ex ante* that certain personality traits or leadership qualities make an individual inspiring or visionary but studies this through an exploratory, mixed-method design. However, this approach still requires a framework to guide the analysis and categorise different leadership traits. While a vast body of literature discusses leadership characteristics,[39] these studies are inconclusive about the number and types of traits that matter for shaping different audiences'

[30]Shilpika Devarachetty, 'Women as charismatic leaders', PhD diss., University of Akron (2012).

[31]For an overview, see Jay Conger, 'Charismatic leadership', in Michael Rumsey (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 376–91.

[32]John Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); Bernard Bass and Ronald Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (New York: Psychology Press, 2005); Bass, *Transformational Leadership: Industrial, Military, and Educational Impact* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998); Joyce Bono and Timothy Judge, 'Personality and transformational and transactional leadership: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 98:5 (2004), pp. 901–10.

[33]Burns, *Leadership*, p. 4.

[34]Burns, *Leaderhip*; Jay Conger, 'Charismatic leadership'.

[35]Bernard Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), p. 2.

[36]Frank Biermann, Bernd Siebenhüner, Steffen Baueret al., 'Studying the influence of international bureaucracies: A conceptual framework', in Frank Biermann and Bernd Siebenhüner (eds.), *Managers of Global Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 37–74 (p. 58).

[37]Bass and Bruce Avolio, 'Transformational leadership: A response to critiques', in Martin Chemers and Roya Ayman (eds), *Leadership Theory and Research: Perspectives and Directions* (New York: Academic Press, 1993), pp. 49–80.

[38]Jay Conger and Rabindra Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).

[39]For an overview, see Aaldering and Vliegenthart, 'Political leaders'.

perceptions of leaders. To shed light on this, this article draws upon research on political leadership, specifically the work by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (see n. 12). Based on an extensive review of the literature, the authors set out six traits covering a large spectrum of leadership qualities, which I present here in slightly modified form. Specifically, I refer to the first leadership trait, political craftsmanship, as *competence and expertise*, a term which is more suitable for analysing leadership in global governance. This leadership trait concerns an individual's knowledge of and experience with a specific issue. In this reasoning, a leader is considered inspiring because they are recognised as (seasoned) experts in their field and perceived as knowledgeable, capable, insightful, professional, and intelligent. The second trait, *vigorousness*, is associated with strong leadership. It pertains to the extent to which leaders are assertive, decisive, powerful, and confident in their decision-making. *Integrity*, the third leadership trait, concerns the degree to which leaders are seen as conscientious, trustworthy, and sincere. Leaders who act with integrity are driven by honest motivations rather than self-interest. A fourth reason why leaders might be considered inspiring is because of their *communicative and social skills*,[40] which relates to social leadership. Leaders can be inspiring because of their allure or enchanting oratory skills (which corresponds to more traditional conceptions of charisma), their communication ability, or because they are perceived as empathetic and agreeable. The fifth trait concerns leaders' *responsiveness*, i.e. the extent to which they are cognisant of and responsive to concerns present among those who are being governed. This can be the electorate but, as is the case for global multistakeholder governance, also different stakeholder groups, constituencies, or the public at large. Individuals who exhibit responsive leadership are perceived as approachable rather than aloof and out of touch. The final trait is *consistency*, which concerns the stability, predictability, and reliability of leaders. This pertains, for example, to the extent to which leaders are perceived as consistent in their opinions, actions, and outlook for the organisation.

The main question this article addresses is to what extent perceptions of leadership in multistakeholder governance of the Internet are gendered. To this end, the article turns to research in the fields of psychology, business, and management. Leadership has long been associated with men and masculine (i.e. agentic) qualities, such as strength, decisiveness, effectiveness, competitiveness, and assertiveness. Stereotypically masculine descriptions of leadership as well as prejudice against women, rooted in the perceived incongruity of women's gender and leadership roles, disadvantage women in several ways.[41] Specifically, when women are expected not to have what it takes to become a leader, it becomes more difficult for them to progress into leadership roles. When they do exhibit masculine leadership qualities, they are often evaluated more negatively than their male colleagues, as their leadership style deviates from stereotypical expectations of how they ought to act.[42] These stereotypes do not only affect who is perceived as capable of holding a leadership position, but also have consequences for how woman leaders perceive themselves, which can impair their performance, a phenomenon referred to as 'stereotype threat'.[43]

Leadership demands and descriptions are likely to differ, however, depending on organisational and national context. Some organisational settings might be more appreciative of androgynous leadership styles and feminine (i.e. communal) leadership qualities, such as compassion and honesty, as well as being caring, emotional, or a good listener. An example of such a leadership style is transformational leadership, which some studies suggest is more often ascribed to women leaders and associated with feminine traits.[44] As mentioned before, transformational leadership is expected

---

[40] Aaldering and Vliegenthart only speak of communicative performance.

[41] Alice Eagly and Steven Karau, 'Role incongruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders', *Psychological Review*, 109:3 (2002), pp. 573–98; Anne Koenig, Alice Eagly, Abigail Mitchell, and Tiina Ristikari, 'Are leader stereotypes masculine? A meta-analysis of three research paradigms', *Psychological Bulletin*, 137:4 (2011), pp. 616–42.

[42] Eagly and Karau, 'Role incongruity', Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, and Ristikari, 'Are leader stereotypes masculine?'.

[43] Crystal Hoyt and Susan E. Murphy, 'Managing to clear the air: Stereotype threat, women, and leadership', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27 (2016), pp. 387–99.

[44] E.g. Tiina Brandt and Piia Edinger, 'Transformational leadership in teams: The effects of a team leader's sex and personality', *Gender in Management*, 30:1 (2015), pp. 44–68; Shu-Chen Chen and Jieqi Shao, 'Feminine traits improve transformational

to be important in multistakeholder global governance. As these initiatives aim to take a participatory, bottom-up approach (as opposed to top-down control), they might place more emphasis on leaders' ability to empower and mentor followers rather than to command them.[45] Descriptions and expectations of leaders in modes of governance that involve more democratic, participatory decision-making might therefore highlight feminine traits. In addition, feminine leadership has been argued to square well with some features of global leadership, such as the need to bring together diverse cultures.[46]

Finally, inspiring and visionary leadership is relational, i.e. rooted in an affective relationship between a leader and their followers.[47] Recognition of an individual as an inspiring and visionary leader does not only depend on their personal attributes and leadership styles but might be mediated by characteristics of the followers. Social identity theory posits that leaders are more likely to be assessed positively by members of their social group.[48] Thus, women would be more likely to look favourably upon women leaders and men upon men leaders. Indeed, some studies suggest that women are more likely to positively assess women in authority as compared to men, and vice versa.[49]

Case selection, data, and methods

This article analyses perceptions of inspiring and visionary leaders through a case study of multistakeholderism in ICANN. In contrast with IGOs where authority rests within governments, multistakeholder modes of regulation bring together a variety of public, private, and civil society actors. Apart from this key characteristic, they can be organised in different ways.[50] Some have a more informal character, whereas others exhibit a high degree of institutionalisation and organisation. Global multistakeholder initiatives also differ in the degree to which they involve governmental actors in their policymaking activities. In some of them, governmental actors have no formal role, whereas in others they have more authority.

Founded in 1998, ICANN is tasked with developing policies for the DNS and managing the IANA functions, which are crucial for enabling global communications via the Internet. As such, ICANN represents an interesting case where a private governance institution (in which governments only have an advisory role) is tasked with ensuring the functioning of a public good. Compared to many other multistakeholder initiatives in the Internet ecosystem, ICANN is highly institutionalised, assembling different actors in cross-cutting stakeholder and constituency groups.[51] Collectively referred to as the ICANN community, representatives from these groups convene three times a year in different parts of the world to engage in policymaking activities. These ICANN meetings may attract close to 2,000 participants from around the world. Final decision-making authority lies with a 20-member board – composed of representatives from the

leadership advantage: Investigation of leaders' gender traits, sex, and their joint impacts on employee contextual performance', *Gender in Management*, 37:5 (2022), pp. 569–86; charismatic leadership, however, is more often ascribed to men and associated with agentic leadership traits (see Devarachetty, 'Women as charismatic leaders'.

[45]Janine Bosak and Sabine Sczesny, 'Exploring the dynamics of incongruent beliefs about women and leaders', *British Journal of Management*, 22 (2011), pp. 254–69.

[46]Adler, 'Global leadership'.

[47]Conger and Kanungo, *Charismatic Leadership*; Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

[48]Michael Hogg, 'A social identity theory of leadership', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5:3 (2001), pp. 184–200; Henri Tajfel and JohnTurner, 'The social identity theory of intergroup behavior', in John Jost and Jim Sidanius (eds), *Political Psychology: Key Readings* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 276–93.

[49]Andrea Vial, Victoria L. Brescoll, Jaime L. Napier, John F. Dovidio, and Tom R. Tyler, 'Differential support for female supervisors among men and women', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103:2 (2018), pp. 215–27.

[50]Mark Raymond and Laura DeNardis, 'Multistakeholderism: Anatomy of an inchoate global institution', *International Theory*, 7:3 (2015), pp. 572–616; Scholte, 'Multistakeholderism'.

[51]Jongen and Scholte, 'Legitimacy'.

community – of which 16 have voting power. Both the board and the community are supported by the ICANN organisation (ICANN.org), which consists of a few hundred support staff.

Two features in particular make ICANN an interesting case for studying gendered perceptions of leadership. First, ICANN operates in the field of Information Technology, a line of work in which women are still underrepresented.[52] Despite efforts to broaden participation, most participants in ICANN – as in many other Internet governance organisations – are male. This makes ICANN a less likely case for women's leadership to materialise and be recognised. If women are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders in this sector, it is plausible that they are also viewed favourably as leaders in areas where they have traditionally been represented in larger numbers. Second, many participants in ICANN are volunteers, raising the question of who can motivate people to volunteer their time and energy to participate in the policymaking activities of a multistakeholder body. When asked how far they find it important for ICANN to have inspiring or visionary leadership, more than a quarter of survey respondents indicated that they found this 'quite important' (28.7%), and almost half of them reported that they considered this 'extremely important' (48.2%). As one of them remarked: 'That's how the followers are created … that's how they get motivated, get involved in the issues.'[53]

Although at the time this study was conducted no woman had held the position of CEO/president of ICANN,[54] women have held important positions on the ICANN board and in its various constituency and stakeholder groups. In 2018–19, women made up around 30% of the ICANN board, which is equivalent to the share of women participants at ICANN meetings. Further, a report by the French Association for Cooperative Internet Naming (AFNIC) indicates that of the 190 community leaders at ICANN in 2016, 26% were women.[55] However, even though the share of women leaders at ICANN roughly equals the share of women participants at ICANN meetings, this should not overshadow the fact that women's participation in ICANN is low.

To identify whose leadership in ICANN is perceived as inspiring and visionary, by whom, and why, I take a mixed-method approach. Together with a larger research team that I was part of,[56] I conducted 467 mixed-method interviews with a representative sample of regular participants in ICANN. These respondents include all members of the ICANN board between 2015 and 2018 (N = 30). In addition, we interviewed 132 out of the 182 staff members whom we could contact (response rate of 72.5%),[57] and 305 out of 741 randomly sampled community participants in ICANN (response rate of 41.2%).[58] In total, 145 respondents identified as female (28.9%) and 315 as male (67.5%). In addition, seven respondents identified neither as female nor male or did not disclose their gender. This gender distribution largely corresponds to published statistics on attendance at ICANN meetings.

Focusing solely on ICANN enables a detailed, in-depth analysis of participants' perceptions and experiences. The research team was able to attend multiple ICANN meetings in person and conduct most interviews *in situ*, which led to a high survey response rate and yielded valuable quantitative and qualitative data. ICANN makes a good case for studying leadership in multistakeholder governance, as it has actively promoted the multistakeholder model globally[59] and many of its defining features are also present in other multistakeholder initiatives in the Internet ecosystem.

---

[52]Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 'Bridging the digital gender divide: Include, upskill, innovate' (2018), available at: {https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf}.

[53]Interview 3335.

[54]Since 22 December 2022, ICANN has a female interim President and CEO.

[55]AFNIC, 'ICANN diversity data: Providing facts and figures to support diversity enhancements' (2016), available at: {https://www.afnic.fr/wp-media/uploads/2021/01/2016_Icann_Diversity_Data.pdf}.

[56]Fieldwork for this article was conducted within the project 'Legitimacy Outside the State: Governing the Global Internet at ICANN', led by Jan Aart Scholte.

[57]The total number of ICANN staff members is 188 (coverage rate of 96.8%).

[58]We took a random sample of 898 out of 1,256 community participants who attended at least three out five ICANN meetings between October 2015 and October 2018. Of these 898 sampled participants, we were able to retrieve contact details of 741.

[59]Jongen and Scholte, 'Legitimacy'.

Table 1. Framework for analysing perceptions of leaders.

Leadership trait	The leader is perceived as:
Competence and expertise	Capable, competent, expert, insightful, intelligent, knowledgeable, professional, smart, skilled, thoughtful (as in analytical/contemplative), having good ideas
Vigorousness	Assertive, confident, decisive, persistent, persuasive, powerful, strong
Integrity	Conscientious, fair, honest, sincere, trustworthy; *not* self-interested or selfish
Communicative and social skills	Agreeable, eloquent, emphatic, helpful, friendly, kind, likeable, thoughtful (as in caring/mindful); a great speaker and/or clear communicator
Responsiveness	Approachable; aware; personable; *not* arrogant, aloof or out of touch — **Inclusive, capable of bringing people together**
Consistency	Focused, level-headed, predictable, dependable, reliable, stable, steady
Commitment	**Committed, passionate, hardworking, dedicated**

At the same time, ICANN does stand out in some respects, for example, for its efforts to promote diversity and gender equity. While some multistakeholder initiatives in Internet governance are making efforts to promote participation by women,[60] cultural change in other organisations is slow.[61] Depending on the area where the multistakeholder initiative is active and their efforts to promote gender equity, women leaders might be viewed more or less favourably than in ICANN, which is why we need to be cautious with generalising the study's results.

The analysis of the interview data proceeds in three steps. First, I analysed responses to an open-ended question, asking whether there have been any community leaders or ICANN board members whom respondents have found particularly inspiring or whose vision they have found very appealing. In doing so, this article leaves the choice of whose leadership matters (which can range from the executive head to leaders of specific stakeholder or constituency groups) to respondents. One implication of this is that the boundaries of what it means to be a leader or to be leading are intentionally not clearly defined; inspiring leadership lies in the eye of the beholder. I coded the answers to this interview question, distinguishing between men and women leaders in ICANN. Of course, this distinction is an oversimplified binary, and the gender that I ascribe to certain leaders (based on their appearance, name, or the pronouns used in online documentation and interviews) might not correspond to their gender identity.

In a second step, I conducted a content analysis using the software program Atlas.ti to identify which attributes respondents ascribe to the women they find inspiring and visionary, and to what extent these attributes differ from the terms that are used to describe inspiring and visionary men. The content analysis combined deductive and inductive methodologies and was done in two rounds. The first round took as a starting point the six leadership traits discussed in the previous section but kept an open approach to leadership qualities that are presently not discussed in the literature. Based on the inductive part of the analysis, two adjustments were made to the original framework, which are marked in bold in Table 1. First, I introduced a new category, 'commitment', which refers to an individual's hard work, dedication, and passion. Second, I broadened the category of 'responsiveness' to also include 'inclusive leadership', i.e. the capacity to bring together different groups. The second round of coding included all categories in the analysis.

For the third step, I created a dichotomous variable by assigning each respondent who reported finding at least one woman in ICANN inspiring or visionary a score of 1. Respondents who only identified men as inspiring and visionary leaders received a score of 0. Respondents who reported not finding anyone particularly inspiring, who did not mention any names, or who indicated that they did not know the answer (N = 117) were excluded from the analysis. I did the same with

---

[60]For example, the Regional Internet Registries.
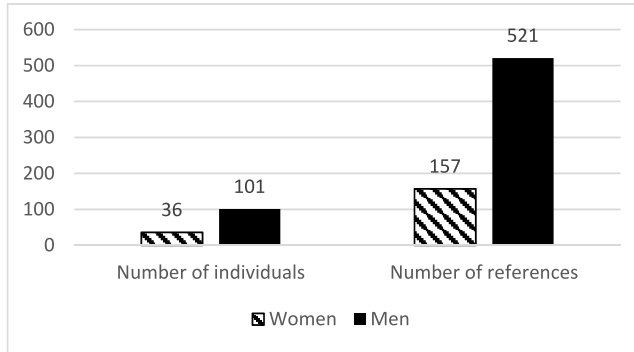[61]Cath, 'Loud men'.

Figure 1. Inspiring and visionary women and men leaders.

respondents who skipped this question (N = 35). I subsequently created two ratio variables: the first specifies the total number of inspiring women that a respondent mentions, the second includes the total number of inspiring men. I subsequently ran several descriptive analyses to study gender differences in terms of who perceives women leaders as inspiring and visionary.

Divergent perceptions of who is an inspiring and visionary leader

Who are perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders? As shown in Figure 1, 678 references were made in interviews, describing 137 individuals as inspiring and visionary.[62] Of those individuals, 101 are men (521 references to individuals) and 36 are women (157 references to individuals). Thus, women make up just over a quarter (26.2%) of all the individuals who are perceived as inspiring and visionary. Although it is difficult to determine the exact share of women participants at ICANN meetings,[63] the ratio of women to men who are recognised as inspiring leaders (1:2.80) is greater than the ratio of women to men participants at ICANN meetings (which varies between 1:1.62 and 1:2.65).[64] This means that slightly fewer women are recognised as inspiring or visionary leaders than we would expect, based on the numbers at which they are present at ICANN as well as the number of leadership roles they fulfil. So not only are women at ICANN represented in substantially lower numbers than men, those women who do participate in ICANN are also less likely to be perceived as inspiring and visionary leaders, although this difference is rather small. A survey conducted by ICANN in 2017 suggests that this is not due to weaker leadership aspirations among women, as female respondents reported to have slightly stronger leadership ambitions compared to male respondents. However, more than half of them feel that 'preconceptions about female leadership have a negative effect on women's opportunities to advance as community volunteer leaders'.[65]

Another relevant finding of the content analysis is that perceptions of inspiring and visionary leadership at ICANN diverge considerably. Although three men (two former board members and one former CEO/President) were mentioned 98, 47, and 74 times respectively,[66] most individuals (92% of men and 86% of women) were brought up fewer than 10 times, and about half of the men (48%) and a third of the women (31%) were mentioned only once. Further, while some of these individuals have fulfilled more senior leadership roles (e.g. as the (former) CEO/President of

---

[62]14 references to men and 7 references to women were unclear.

[63]Between 7 and 25% of participants did not disclose their gender in published meeting statistics.

[64]Excluding participants who preferred not to disclose their gender, the ratio of woman to man participants is 1:1.62 (ICANN61), 1:2.44 (ICANN62), 1:2.65 (ICANN63), 1:2.37 (ICANN64) and 1:1.74 (ICANN65).

[65]ICANN, 'Gender diversity and participation: Survey report' (2017), available at: {https://www.icann.org/en/system/files/files/gender-survey-complete-11oct17-en.pdf}.

[66]They account for 7.2% of all the references made in interviews.

Table 2. The share of respondents who discussed individuals with reference to a specific leadership trait.

	References/Total responses	References to women/Responses that mentioned women	References to men/Responses that mentioned men
Competence leadership	27.9%	34.8%	19.5%
Responsiveness	22.2%	18.3%	17.4%
Communication and social skills	18.1%	11.3%	16.4%
Charisma and oratory skills	7.0%	0.9%	7.3%
Communication ability	7.0%	3.5%	7.3%
Agreeableness	6.3%	7.8%	4.5%
Vigorousness	11.1%	13.0%	8.4%
Commitment	10.8%	10.4%	8.4%
Integrity	8.6%	12.2%	4.5%
Consistency	6.0%	7.8%	4.9%

ICANN or as board members), others have not. This confirms a key postulate of the literature on transformational leadership, namely that leadership is not exclusive to the executive level.

Finally, turning to the respondents, of the 315 survey respondents who named at least one person whom they find inspiring or visionary, 200 (63.5%) did not give the name of a single woman. By comparison, only 28 respondents (8.9%) did not mention the name of a single man. In total, 115 respondents indicated that they felt inspired by at least one woman at ICANN as compared to 287 respondents who identified at least one man. I return to this finding later.

Perceived attributes of women and men who are recognised as leaders

We turn now to the next research aim: what leadership traits do respondents ascribe to the people they find inspiring and visionary, and can we observe gender differences in this regard? Table 2 summarises the results of the content analysis. I start with the most frequently mentioned characteristic (competence and expertise) and end with a trait that was hardly discussed at all (consistency). The first column presents the percentage of respondents who gave the name of at least one person and discussed them with reference to a specific leadership trait. The second and third columns present the share of respondents who identified at least one woman (or man) as an inspiring or visionary individual and described this woman (or man) with reference to this attribute. It is important to underline that the second and third columns provide insight into how women (and men) are described, once they are perceived as inspiring or visionary leaders. These percentages should, therefore, not obscure the fact that fewer women than men participate in ICANN, fulfil leadership roles, and are recognised as inspiring and visionary leaders.

Of all the leadership traits, **competence and expertise** are mentioned most often in relation to leadership at ICANN. Over a quarter of respondents who mention the name of at least one individual refer to this leadership trait, using adjectives such as knowledgeable, smart, clever, intelligent, and bright to describe them.[67] This share is higher for respondents who identified a woman as an inspiring leader (34.8%) than for respondents who described a man as an inspiring and visionary leader (19.5%). Thus, while fewer women than men participate in ICANN and are identified as inspiring leaders, a comparably larger share of them are described in relation to their competence.

[67]Interviews 1017, 1025, 1062, 1072, 1076, 1077, 1078, 1080, 1082, 1113, 2010, 2011, 2064, 2211, 2224, 2231, 3017, 3100, 3215, 3500, 4014, 4066, 4221, 4233, 4240, 4250, 4275, 4278, 4280, 4287, 5002.

Specifically, the names of no fewer than 17 women[68] (41 references)[69] were mentioned in interviews as compared to 30 men[70] (62 references).[71] Although qualitative insights from the interviews do not reveal notable gender differences in how women and men are described in relation to this leadership trait, they do underscore that leaders' technical savviness and background are important in a technical organisation such as ICANN.[72] Illustrative of this is the following remark by a participant:

> I think when he speaks, he is not that kind of inspiring person, but the message included in this speech is quite inspiring, because he knows the Internet deeply. He knows how to make the Internet function very normally, securely, safely, so that is kind of inspiring because that is authoritative.[73]

Next, **responsiveness** stands out as a leadership trait that is often discussed in relation to leadership at ICANN. Just under a quarter of respondents refer to this attribute in the interviews. Specifically, 18.3% of respondents who identified at least one woman as an inspiring leader mention this leadership quality compared to 17.4% of all respondents who described men leaders. In addition, these respondents perceive eight women[74] (22 references) and 22 men[75] (56 references)[76] to exhibit this trait.

Appreciated are individuals who are willing to listen to community members, who are receptive to their concerns and ideas, and who make them feel important.[77] As two ICANN fellows recall:

> So he [an ICANN board member] used to come to our meetings and used to sit down with us like he was a fellow. He does not talk to us like he was a board member, he used to come sit down with us in a circle, share and laugh with us, and even learn from us.[78]

> She can connect to you when you are newcomers. … You do not need to be afraid, because she gives us the importance of being selected.[79]

Inspiring leaders are then also frequently described as 'approachable'[80] and 'accessible'.[81] They mingle with people at ICANN meetings, remember everyone's names, and are down to earth, humble, and modest.[82] Respondents also mention the names of people who actively engage with underrepresented groups in ICANN and who make efforts to represent their interests.[83]

---

[68]In addition, three references/names were unclear.

[69]One interviewee referred to two individuals at once, another to three. Double or triple entries were removed when they referred to individuals from the same sex. For example, if a respondent stated that Leader A (woman) and Leader B (woman) are very inspiring because they are extremely knowledgeable, this was counted as one reference to the 'competence/expertise' of a woman (rather than two references). However, if a respondent stated that Leader A (woman) and Leader B (man) are very knowledgeable, this counted as two references: one refence to the competence/expertise of a women and one reference to the competence/expertise of a man. If an interviewee referred to two or more individuals from the same sex, but used different terms and/or referred to them at different moments during the interview, these were added as separate entries.

[70]Two references/names were unclear.

[71]Three interviewees referred to two individuals at once.

[72]Interviews 1001, 1011, 1013, 1015, 1019, 1113, 2005, 2011, 3012, 3032, 3047, 4033, 4221, 4257.

[73]Interview 4218.

[74]In addition, one name was unclear.

[75]One name was unclear.

[76]Three respondents referred to two men at the same time.

[77]Interviews 1114, 2013, 3040, 3064, 3338, 3904, 3911, 4002, 4098, 4247, 4281, 4292.

[78]Interview 1051.

[79]Interview 3094.

[80]Interviews 1017, 1051, 1088, 1089, 4250.

[81]Interview 4204.

[82]Interviews 2006, 3001, 3021, 3033, 3080, 4088, 4090, 4094, 4208, 4280.

[83]Interviews 2044, 3211.

These groups include participants from countries and regions in the Global South,[84] women,[85] new-comers, and younger participants.[86] Other leaders stand out for their cultural sensitivity and appeal to audiences from diverse backgrounds. One respondent recalled an occurrence at an ICANN open forum, during which the community can ask questions to the board:

> Some of the questions are translated, but I think it was one person who asked a question in Chinese and instead of replying in English, she [a board member] responded in Chinese![87]

Finally, leaders who are seen to possess this leadership trait are capable of bringing people together[88] and effectively balancing their interests.[89] What is interesting is that several aspects of this trait, which are often regarded as feminine qualities (e.g. being modest, humble, a good listener), are appreciated at ICANN and are discussed extensively, including in relation to men.

Next, some of the largest gender differences become evident regarding people's **communicative and social skills**. About a fifth of respondents brought up this leadership trait in interviews (18.1%), somewhat more often in relation to men (16.4%) than to women (11.3%). However, this difference becomes larger when looking at the different components of this attribute, specifically a leader's charisma and oratory skills, communication ability, and agreeableness.

A leader's charisma and oratory skills speak to more traditional conceptions of charismatic leadership. Respondents refer to this leadership trait more often in relation to men (7.3%) than to women (0.9%). Charismatic individuals are described as distinctively gifted or as having 'the magic touch'.[90] Charisma can be enacted in different ways, for example, through specific gestures, a certain style, or speech. As one respondent describes an inspiring leader:

> His style, his gestures … Have you seen his speech on the stage? Take off his jacket on the stage? I think his style is quite inspiring. His tone and message delivered to the audience makes people think about the bigger things.[91]

Charismatic leaders can enthuse, motivate, or even move people.[92] In the words of two ICANN community members, they are capable of making 'you believe that you belong to something big'[93] and can 'capture the imagination'.[94] They are also considered 'charming'[95] and 'enthusiastic', and have an 'engaging'[96] way of speaking.

The names of only six individuals are raised in relation to their charisma and oratory skills, of which, apart from one, all are men (22 references to men, 1 to a woman). One man is mentioned 16 times; the names of all the others are mentioned only once.[97] Interestingly, the description of the woman who is singled out in this regard still alludes to feminine qualities, specifically her ability 'to embrace the people to whom she was communicating'.[98] The highly limited number of references

---

[84]Interviews 1023, 1040, 1106, 1113, 2014, 2216, 3227, 3912, 4247.

[85]Interview 3227.

[86]Interviews 2010, 2214, 3213, 3904.

[87]Interview 1089.

[88]Interviews 1008, 1025, 1076, 1110, 3004, 3017, 3801, 4050, 4246.

[89]Interviews 1076, 1092, 3211, 4033.

[90]Interview 1096.

[91]Interview 4218.

[92]Interviews 1040, 1025, 1096, 3227, 4082, 4093.

[93]Interview 4243; also interview 3702.

[94]Interview 1078; or 'capture the audience' (interview 3233).

[95]Interview 1101.

[96]Interview 1009.

[97]One reference was unclear.

[98]Interview 3227.

made to women corresponds to earlier research, which also finds this leadership trait is associated almost exclusively with men.[99]

Somewhat different from charismatic leadership is people's communication ability. This concerns leaders who are described as 'eloquent' speakers,[100] who are great at explaining complex subject matter,[101] and who clearly articulate problems.[102] Leaders' communication ability appears particularly important in highly technical environments, such as ICANN, as clarity of speech helps leaders connect with the community and bring across their vision. This leadership trait was discussed slightly more often in relation to men (7.3% of respondents) than to women (3.5% of respondents); specifically, 11 men[103] (20 references) are described in these terms as compared to 3 women (4 references).

Finally, in a few instances, references are made to leaders' agreeableness, describing them as 'nice',[104] 'kind',[105] 'a pleasure to work with',[106] helpful,[107] 'sharing',[108] and as someone who 'get[s] along with everyone'.[109] Many of these leaders have acted formally or informally as mentors of the interviewees and have played an important role in welcoming newcomers.[110] Women are discussed slightly more often in these terms (7.8% of respondents) compared to men (4.5% of respondents). Notably, 8 women (9 references)[111] and 13 men[112] (13 references) are considered inspiring for this reason.

Next, **vigorousness** features in the descriptions of inspiring leadership given by about a tenth of respondents. Specifically, 13% of respondents refer to this trait when describing women as compared to 8.4% of respondents who discuss men. Specifically, 13 women (16 references) and 18 men (27 references)[113] are described as vigorous, and many of them are referred to as 'strong' leaders,[114] who are persistent and do not back away from things.[115] Others are viewed as courageous[116] for bringing up difficult topics and described as exuding confidence.[117] The capacity to be able to convince[118] or even persuade[119] followers is also brought up in relation to this attribute. Many of these leaders are then also perceived as having a straightforward[120] and outspoken leadership style[121] and as able 'to exercise judgment in the face of multiple differing points of view'.[122]

While women are discussed comparably more often in relation to their vigorousness, there are striking qualitative differences between men and women. Several men are singled out for having 'an effective and loud voice',[123] for 'speak[ing] [their] mind' (even if that comes at the cost of

[99]Devarachetty, 'Women as charismatic leaders'.
[100]Interview 4278.
[101]Interviews 3227, 4066.
[102]Interviews 1108, 1023, 3040.
[103]Two names were unclear.
[104]Interview 1013.
[105]Interviews 1025, 5002.
[106]Interview 1012.
[107]Interviews 2010, 4227.
[108]Interview 1072.
[109]Interview 1078.
[110]Interviews 1072, 3213, 3711, 3904, 4235.
[111]One interviewee referred to three women at once.
[112]One interviewee referred to two men at once.
[113]Two interviewees referred to three men at once.
[114]Interviews 1080, 3211, 3231, 4250, 4257, 4284.
[115]Interview 4104.
[116]Interviews 2232, 3003.
[117]Interviews 2206, 4250, 10335.
[118]Interview 1102.
[119]Interviews 4205, 4250.
[120]Interviews 1019, 1082, 2211, 4204, and 1113 ('being direct and frank').
[121]Interview 3037.
[122]Interview 3045.
[123]Interview 2063.

insulting people),[124] for aggressively promoting their ideas,[125] and for exhibiting a more dominant leadership style. Concerning the latter, one respondent remarked about a (former) board member:

> His leadership style has been a little bit too autocratic at times, but there is a good argument for that. ... a diverse board like that benefits from a strong leader.[126]

While women are perceived as confident, strong, straightforward, and courageous (including for putting gender issues on the table), none of them is described as dominant, let alone autocratic.

Continuing with the next leadership trait, references to leaders' **commitment** and hard work are made in about a tenth of the interviews. Gender differences are rather small: 10.4% of respondents refer to women in these terms as compared to 8.4% of respondents who describe men. Specifically, 9 women (15 references[127]) are singled out for their commitment compared to 18 men (28 references).[128] This trait, which was added inductively, concerns leaders' hard work,[129] dedication,[130] and passion.[131] As one interviewee remarks: 'if the average week is 40 hours, he puts in 80 hours of volunteer time every week in terms of these meetings'.[132] Others are praised for using vacation days to attend ICANN meetings.[133] Related to this, several respondents express general appreciation for the hard work done by the people who volunteer their time and energy to participate in ICANN, without naming them.[134] As one of them explains:

> they work so hard, they are volunteers, and they are committing countless hours and weekends to the work of ICANN and this in addition to their regular jobs ... a lot of times it is not a recognised job, I'm sure it's hard for them, in their day jobs, to justify the work they do. It's incredible![135]

Next, although **integrity** features in under a tenth of interviews, notable gender differences become apparent. Specifically, 12.2% of respondents who discuss women leaders refer to their integrity,[136] neutrality,[137] fairness,[138] and unbiased approach,[139] compared to 4.5% of respondents who describe men. Seven women (14 references) and eight men (14 references) are singled out for this leadership trait. They are considered to have good intentions and the organisation's best interests at heart,[140] to be sincere[141] and ethical,[142] and to be speaking the truth.[143] So while the overall number of references to this leadership trait is low, these terms are used more frequently in relation to women than to men.

The final leadership trait, **consistency**, is discussed only in 6% of all the interviews. Hardly any gender differences appear: 7.8% of respondents allude to this trait when describing woman leaders

---

[124]Interview 3073.

[125]Interview 4083.

[126]Interview 1062.

[127]One interviewee referred to two women at once.

[128]One interviewee referred to two men at once, another three.

[129]Interviews 1077, 2201, 2232, 3014, 3033, 3211, 3911.

[130]Interviews 1003, 1091, 1092, 2214, 2231, 3017, 3024, 3033, 3047, 3080, 4254.

[131]Interviews 1007, 1090, 2008, 2032, 2201, 2222, 3024, 3080, 3904, 3925.

[132]Interview 4154.

[133]Interview 3101.

[134]Interviews 1020, 1091, 1092, 2008, 2201, 2220, 3017, 3047, 3202, 4046.

[135]Interview 1020.

[136]Interviews 1012, 1076, 3032.

[137]Interview 1022.

[138]Interview 1012.

[139]Interviews 1012, 1062, 3911.

[140]Interviews 1024, 1078.

[141]Interview 1088.

[142]Interview 3013.

[143]Interviews 1113, 3027.

as compared to 4.9% of respondents who describe men. Further, only 6 women[144] (9 references) are described with reference to this trait and 12 men[145] (14 references).[146] In interviews, these individuals are appreciated for being 'level-headed',[147] 'balanced',[148] staying calm in stressful situations,[149] and sticking to their promises.

The findings of the content analysis offer useful insights into the leadership traits that are considered important for multistakeholder governance as well as the existence of gendered perceptions of leadership at ICANN. Confirming earlier theoretical expectations, androgynous leadership styles, which blend masculine and feminine traits, are appreciated in multistakeholder governance at ICANN. Of particular relevance is responsiveness, which is the second most often-mentioned leadership trait. Several aspects related to this characteristic, such as being a good listener as well as humility and modesty, are considered stereotypically feminine qualities. The same is the case for communicative and social skills, which also appear important for respondents' assessment of leaders. Vigorousness, a stereotypically masculine leadership trait, is mentioned comparably less often with reference to leadership at ICANN. Second, although fewer women than men are identified as inspiring and visionary, respondents tend to ascribe more leadership qualities to them when they do perceive them as such. What is interesting is that women are discussed slightly more often than men in relation to some stereotypically masculine traits (e.g. vigorousness). An important exception is charisma, which is almost exclusively associated with men. Finally, men are not described less frequently than women with reference to some feminine leadership traits (e.g. responsiveness and communication ability).

At first glance, the observation that a comparably larger share of women than men is described as competent and capable seems encouraging. Yet there is a possible caveat. Although we should be careful in drawing conclusions based on limited observations, the question arises whether the bar is set equally high for women to be recognised as an inspiring leader. The following remark by an ICANN participant illustrates this:

All three are women and I have noticed that in the technical world, and even in ICANN, it is quite hard for women to be as influential as some of the men. It is a very male-oriented business, I find, even now in the 21st century … It is just much harder for women to be taken seriously in ICANN … And all three in varying ways …. I find incredibly inspiring, because they are pretty knowledgeable and they can step into a room and be taken immediately seriously, just because of their knowledge, which as women, I think, is much harder.[150]

Compare this to the following two descriptions of men:

[he] is a well-respected member of the community with a lot of natural authority, so you automatically respect his viewpoints and contributions.[151]

I thought he had a good vision and he was a brilliant orator … In terms of [whether] he actually put his plans into practice, that is another story.[152]

Developing competence and expertise on a subject matter requires significant investment in terms of education or training. If the expectation is that women develop technical expertise to be recognised as leaders and to be taken seriously, whereas (several) men can rely on their charisma,

---

[144]One reference/name was unclear.

[145]Two references/names were unclear.

[146]One respondent referred to three men at once.

[147]Interview 1019.

[148]Interviews 1025, 3933, 4033, 4227.

[149]Interview 2005.

[150]Interview 3500.

[151]Interview 1082.

[152]Interview 1101.

Table 3. Gender differences in recognition of woman and man leadership.

	Recognition of at least one woman as an inspiring leader[a]	Mean number of women recognised (SD)/respondent	Mean number of men recognised (SD)/respondent
Total (N = 307)	36.5%	0.48 (0.76)	1.61 (1.07)
Female respondents (N = 94)	52.0%	0.69 (0.83)	1.47 (1.17)
Male respondents (N = 207)	29.9%	0.39 (0.72)	1.68 (1.04)

[a]For this column, N = 315 (total respondents), N = 98 (female respondents), and N = 211 (male respondents).

oratory skills, communication ability, or natural authority, women need to fulfil higher (or at least different) standards. While the present study's research design does not allow us to draw firm conclusions based on this, it is important to keep in mind. It might explain why fewer women than men are recognised as inspiring and visionary leaders in the first place but are ascribed more leadership attributes when they are identified as such.

Who recognises women's leadership?

Leadership is relational, which is why this section shifts the focus from the leaders to the followers, i.e. the individuals who report to feel inspired by certain leaders. Based on quantitative data, this section first analyses whether there are gender differences in terms of who recognises women's leadership, which is followed by a discussion of leaders as role models.

As mentioned before: of the respondents who gave the name of at least one person, 63.5% did not name a single woman (Table 3). Striking in this regard are gender differences: while 70.1% of male respondents (N = 148) did not single out any women as inspiring or visionary leaders, this is the case for 'only' 48.0% of female respondents (N = 47). A chi-square test reveals that this difference is statistically significant (phi-coefficient of 0.214; $p < 0.001$).

Considering that respondents could raise the names of multiple people, what is the average number of women and men that are brought up in interviews? As there are several outliers,[153] Table 3 excludes eight respondents who mentioned the names of more than five men or five women.[154] We then see that respondents mention on average the names of 0.48 (Standard Deviation [SD] of 0.76) women and 1.61 (SD 1.07) men. Again, gender differences appear. While female respondents recognise on average 0.69 (SD 0.83) women as inspiring or visionary, this number drops to a mean of 0.39 (SD 0.72) for male respondents. Independent sampled t-tests show that this difference is statistically significant ($t = 3.026$; $p < 0.01$). By comparison, I find no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents in terms of the average number of men they identify as inspiring leaders (1.68; SD 1.04 and 1.47, SD 1.17, respectively).

Confirming several key tenets of social identity theory, the above suggests that compared to men, women are more inclined to recognise other women as inspiring and visionary leaders. Thus, while men may be represented at ICANN in larger numbers (both as participants and in leadership roles), the large share of men who are identified as leaders cannot solely be attributed to their overrepresentation at ICANN. Specific markers of identity appear to play a role as well. Several qualitative insights from interviews confirm this, pointing to the importance of role models at ICANN.[155] As one respondent remarked: '[some people], when I see them … I would like to be like them when I grow up.'[156]

Who are these role models? Interviews suggest that many of them belong to underrepresented groups in ICANN and have successfully acceded to leadership positions or other influential roles.

---

[153]One respondent mentioned the names of 10 men.

[154]If we include these outliers, the numbers are as follows: the mean number of women mentioned per respondent is 0.52 (Standard Deviation [SD] of 0.84), and the mean number of men is 1.74 (SD of 1.35).

[155]Interviews 3213, 3912, 4227; others used the term 'idol' (1025) and 'hero' (1110, 4021).

[156]Interview 4284.

This includes women who have been able to claim a place in a 'space … mostly dominated by men'[157] and who have articulated concerns that affect women, including anti-harassment policy[158] and other gender issues.[159] Seeing women in influential positions is encouraging, as one respondent explains:

> I also have felt inspired by typically female leaders within the ICANN community because it is so nice to see myself represented in different leadership positions. There are of course male members of the ICANN community who I find inspiring … but I do tend to find myself more attracted to examples of women in the ICANN community.[160]

These observations confirm the findings of earlier research, which underscore the importance of female role models who demonstrate that 'success in the stereotyped domain is attainable' by 'increas[ing] a sense of social belonging and inoculat[ing] people's sense of self against identity threats'.[161]

However, individuals do not only identify with others based on their gender. Gender is also not the only potential barrier to a leadership role. An intersectional approach points to multiple other factors that shape women's experiences of and with leadership, such as their social class and ethnicity/race.[162] Qualitative insights suggest that many respondents feel inspired by women leaders who belong to underrepresented groups (e.g. in terms of ethnicity/race,[163] geographical background,[164] (dis)ability,[165] and/or age[166]). One respondent mentioned how she felt particularly inspired by a woman leader from the same ethnic background: 'To just look up to someone, another Asian female board member, was something that was pretty special.'[167] Another remarks about a woman leader with a disability:

> It would be very easy for someone in her capacity to say: 'I go and participate remotely, because that's easier for me.' … Yet, she is here every single meeting, showing up to every single session, especially. It's very much persistence and toughness, a character she has about her that's inspiring.[168]

At the same time, not all women feel equally represented or inspired by women leaders. One interviewee remarked that, as a young woman from a region that is presently underrepresented at ICANN, she does not feel represented by any of the ICANN board members, including the women on the board.[169]

---

[157]Interview 2232; see also 1025, 3047, 3100, 4227, 4240, 4284; the ICANN survey also finds that 66% of female survey respondents agree or strongly agree that 'the ICANN community culture is male-dominated' as opposed to 38% of male respondents (fn. 65).

[158]Interview 2232.

[159]Interview 3227.

[160]Interview 2030.

[161]Hoyt and Murphy, 'Managing', p. 392. Some studies suggest that female role models can also have adverse consequences for women's leadership aspirations, for example, when women feel they cannot achieve the same level of success. While this did not come to the fore during interviews with participants in ICANN, it is important to keep in mind.

[162]Jenny Rodriguez, Elisabeth Anna Guenther, and Rafia Faiz, 'Feminist futures in gender-in-leadership research: Self-reflexive approximations to intersectional situatedness', *Gender and Management*, 38:2 (2023), pp. 230–47; Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, Christy Zhou Koval, Anyi Ma, and Robert Livingston, 'Race matters for women leaders: Intersectional effects on agentic deficiencies and penalties', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27:3 (2016), pp. 429–45.

[163]Interviews 2005, 3227, 4240.

[164]Interview 1080.

[165]Interviews 1025, 1080.

[166]Interviews 1113, 1080; regarding age, both younger and older/retired women were discussed.

[167]Interview 4240; see also 3227.

[168]Interviews 1090, 1080.

[169]Interview 3335.

This article focuses on gender as a key source of structural inequality in relation to leadership at ICANN. However, other social characteristics might also shape people's progression into leadership roles and the extent to which they are recognised as leaders. In interviews, respondents then also singled out as role models men from underrepresented groups at ICANN. Examples include men with disabilities,[170] men from the Global South,[171] and men of younger age.[172] As one of the interviewees remarked regarding an inspiring board member:

> He is not very old with white hair and everything. Like most of the Board members are 50 plus in age, but [he] is much younger compared to the rest of them. So … if he can do all of this in that timespan, why not me or anybody else or any other young person …?[173]

This suggests that role models belonging to different social groups are important for participants at ICANN. They demonstrate that progression into a leadership role is possible and motivate others to become involved in the community.

Conclusion

Amidst processes of globalisation, the diversity in actors that carry out important roles in global affairs has increased substantially. While new global governance institutions might reproduce the power hierarchies present in multilateral organisations and national political systems, they can also provide a space for counter-hegemonic voices and emancipatory change. This article assessed how global multistakeholder initiatives fare in terms of women's leadership.

This article moved beyond the numbers on women's representation in leadership roles, focusing instead on gendered perceptions of leadership in global governance. While the numbers on women's representation are important and insightful, they do not capture the different ways in which leadership can take shape in global governance. This article has argued that in more participatory governance settings, where leadership can develop from below and outside of formal leadership positions, it is important to identify perceptions of leadership, specifically the extent to which women are recognised as inspiring and visionary leaders.

Based on mixed-method interviews with regular participants in a leading multistakeholder initiative, the findings indicate that more men than women are recognised as inspiring and visionary leaders. This difference largely corresponds to the share of women in leadership roles. At the same time, and in line with earlier research, this study also found that female respondents are more likely than male respondents to recognise women's leadership. This points to the importance of women role models in global governance, an observation confirmed by qualitative insights from interviews. Such perceptions of role models do not only seem relevant in relation to gender, but also in terms of age, ethnicity/race, disability, and geographical background.

Interestingly, the analyses show that, although fewer women than men are perceived as inspiring and visionary, those women who are perceived as such are discussed more often in relation to leadership attributes. An important exception to this are leaders' communicative ability and social skills, which are used more often to describe men. Another important finding is that, when describing whom they perceive as inspiring and visionary, respondents refer to both (stereotypically) masculine and feminine traits, suggesting that androgynous leadership styles are appreciated in multistakeholderism at ICANN.

While the above findings might seem encouraging at first (women are recognised for their expertise!), they do raise the question whether, to be recognised as leaders, women need to meet similar expectations as men. While such differing demands and expectations have not been systematically tested here, they provide an important avenue for future research. Survey experiments,

---

[170]Interview 1080.
[171]Interviews 1080, 4240.
[172]Interviews 1007, 1051.
[173]Interview 1051.

for instance, can shed light on the number and types of leadership traits women need to possess to be recognised as leaders. This might also help advance understanding of necessary leadership skills and so-called add-ons for leaders in multistakeholder governance.[174]

This article has offered the first empirical analysis of perceptions of inspiring (women's) leadership in multistakeholder global governance. However, the findings are based on one case study only, which brings limitations. It is not unlikely that different patterns in leadership recognition exist across the various policy areas and geographical locations in which multistakeholder initiatives operate. The fact that ICANN is situated in a sector in which men are still dominant shapes the ways in which leadership develops and is enacted. Further, ICANN has made efforts to promote women's participation. Fewer women might be perceived as leaders in organisations, where no such efforts are undertaken and where cultural change is slow. How women's leadership in ICANN compares to multistakeholder initiatives in other sectors as well as to other modes of global governance, therefore, constitutes another area for future research. An additional topic to explore further is how certain group dynamics and decision-making procedures might give more voice and recognition to women leaders than others.[175]

To conclude, the findings of this study bear significant implications for policy. If the goal is to attract more women to multistakeholder initiatives and Internet governance, women's leadership matters. Women act as role models to other women. However, a note of caution: we must ensure that we do not set additional expectations of women leaders that men do not need to meet. We know from other studies that instrumentalist arguments to increase the number of women in leadership roles might have adverse consequences for gender equality, as women need to work even harder to meet gender-specific expectations on top of general leadership demands.[176] Instead, it might be better to focus on creating and maintaining a working culture that supports and recognises women's leadership.

Hortense Jongen is Assistant Professor in International Relations at VU Amsterdam and Researcher in the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg. Her research focuses on legitimacy in new modes of global governance, with a specific interest in global Internet governance and the global fight against corruption. Her research has been published in *Cooperation and Conflict, European Journal of International Relations, Global Governance, Review of International Political Economy*, and *Review of International Studies*.

---

[174] Andrea C. Vial and Jaime Napier, 'Unnecessary frills: Communality as nice (but expendable) trait in leaders', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9:1866 (2018), pp. 1–15.

[175] See e.g. Tali Mendelberg and Christopher Karpowitz, 'Women's authority in political decision-making groups', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27:3 (2016), pp. 487–503.

[176] Wilén, 'Female peacekeepers'.