



Role models against their will? On the discomfort and necessity of visibility

Janka Stoker, 6 March 2026, presentation of the Aletta Jacobs Prize by the University of Groningen to Elanor Boekholt-O'Sullivan

Madam Rector Magnificus, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests,

What a special and honourable occasion it is to be standing here today! I have been chair of the jury for the Aletta Jacobs Prize for almost 15 years, so the prize is very close to my heart. And what a wonderful winner we have this year. Elanor and the University of Groningen, both of you, congratulations!

However, I am not here today as a former chair of the jury, but as a researcher. I have been conducting research into leadership for decades, both at the University of Groningen's Faculty of Economics and Business and, since 1 January, at Aarhus University in Denmark.

When I was preparing my contribution with Elanor, she told me that there would be at least 100 leaders in the room, all of whom have a mandate and authority. So power and resources! That is a good starting point, because my appeal to you will be to do something with that power.

But let's start with this woman.



Who knows her? Elanor, perhaps? Indeed, Francien de Zeeuw. She was a resistance fighter during the Second World War and, in 1944, became the very first female soldier in the Dutch armed forces when she joined the newly established Marine Women's Division (Marva). It wasn't until 2005 that a woman was appointed as the first female senior officer, Leanne Van den Hoek. And, as you may know, today's laureate has also been the first woman to hold various posts within the Ministry of Defence: in 2016 she was the first female air base commander and in 2022 the first woman to be promoted to lieutenant general.

So all of that – I can hear you thinking – is fairly recent. And there may well be a few of you who are secretly thinking: well, what does it really matter whether a man or a woman is in a leadership position, as long as that person does a good job.

And that is indeed important. We need only look around us to understand that the threats and challenges are enormous. These threats are not only external and geopolitical in nature. There is also cause for concern in the area of women's rights. A UN Committee recently found that the Netherlands is falling short in protecting women's human rights, particularly in the areas of safety and structural inequality.

A great deal is therefore demanded and expected of leaders, and good leaders are perhaps more important than ever. But... it also matters that these leaders are not just men. Because leaders exert influence not only through their behaviour and decisions, but also through who they are. That makes them role models with whom people can identify. Such role models can represent a group other than the traditional one, thereby demonstrating that these kinds of positions are not reserved for a select few, but are accessible to everyone.

But the term 'role model' immediately puts us on very thin ice. Because before you know it, the fact that you are 'different' from the leader everyone was used to – purely on the basis of your physical characteristics (gender, skin colour or age) – also becomes the reason to assume that you must therefore possess all sorts of other leadership qualities and behaviours.

We all have stereotypes, based on these outward characteristics. This makes our lives easier: you can quickly pigeonhole people with them. However, stereotypes never do justice to a person's individual qualities. Moreover, they are often untrue: the differences within groups are usually greater than those between groups.

Stereotypes are therefore problematic. And when it comes to leadership, this is particularly true for women. This is because we also have a stereotypical image of the leader. A stereotypically 'good' leader is decisive, dominant and assertive: in other words, masculine. This stereotype of the 'good' leader corresponds exactly with that of a 'good' man. But it is quite different from the stereotypical image of a 'good' woman. A good woman is modest, warm and understanding: the more feminine qualities.

Well, that doesn't add up.

This presents a devilish dilemma for women in leadership roles, because you can't be both the stereotypical 'good leader' and a 'good woman' at the same time. And because women do not fit the stereotype of a good leader, they not only find it more difficult to be selected as a leader in the first place, but they are also often judged much more harshly once they are in the role. They have to be very good to get the job,

and to keep it. This is in contrast to a man, who seems suitable simply on the basis of his gender, and can therefore take on such a position much more easily.

We often see female leaders struggling with this dilemma. When, as chair of the jury, I rang previous winners to tell them they were receiving the award because they were an example to others, they always struggled with the term 'role model'. They were quick to say: "*I'm just doing my job!*" That behaviour, of course, fits with what we expect of women: they aren't supposed to say that they are good at what they do and inspire others through their actions and who they are – that makes them pretentious and insufferable.

And yet... we desperately need them: female leaders who dare to be role models, however uncomfortable that may be for many. And that applies to men as well. Because my argument today is that we need **both** female **and** male role models, but more on that later.

We need more women as role models in leadership positions, because this can help break the stereotype of the good, masculine leader, as my own research shows¹. People who have a woman as their manager, or who work in an environment with more women in leadership roles, see the ideal leader not only as decisive and results-oriented, but also as understanding and sociable. Furthermore, in a study², I and my colleagues demonstrate that in recent years the ideal leader has increasingly become a combination of masculine and feminine qualities.

In doing so, the stereotype is also evolving towards a more accurate picture of effective leadership. When you heard those characteristics of the stereotypical, masculine leader just now, you might have thought to yourself: *hmmm, I don't know... isn't that a rather one-sided image of a 'good' leader? Alongside all sorts of 'harder' qualities, shouldn't they also possess 'softer' traits, such as the ability to listen and empathise with others?*

Exactly. Ironically, the stereotype of the good, strong leader is also untrue. Effective leaders combine both hard and soft qualities, as my own research³, amongst other studies, shows.

¹ Stoker, J. I., Van der Velde, M., & Lammers, J. (2012). Factors relating to managerial stereotypes: The role of the gender of the employee and the manager and the gender ratio in management. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 27(1), 31–42.

² Feenstra, S., Stoker, J. I., Lammers, J., & Garretsen, H. (2023). Managerial stereotypes over time: the rise of feminine leadership. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 38(6), 770-783.

³ Stoker, J. & Garretsen, H. (2018). *Good leaders don't float: The foundations of effective leadership in organisations and society*. Business Contact.

Stoker, J., & Garretsen, H. (2022). *Good leaders in uncertain times: Lessons for organisations and politics*. Business Contact.

Although the stereotype of the ‘ideal’ leader is gradually coming to overlap more with effective leadership, this does not yet apply to all management positions. One of my recent studies⁴ on the stereotype of the ideal leader in healthcare, a female-dominated sector, shows that even there, the ideal leadership traits of senior management are still decisiveness and dominance. I have not investigated how this plays out in the military, but if it applies to senior management in healthcare, it seems unlikely that things would be any different for senior management positions in the more masculine context of the military.

Change is therefore possible – but it is slow, whilst that stereotype of the good leader, I hope you now agree with me, is a myth. It still makes it difficult for women to be selected as leaders and then to demonstrate that, as women, they can be good leaders. Plus, the stereotype is simply incorrect! It is high time to dispel this myth.

Which brings me back to you, the 100 leaders of Elanor. We need good leaders who take action on the issue of ‘safety for women’. Leaders who possess both decisiveness and empathy. And leaders who, through their behaviour, want to be role models by daring to speak out on these kinds of issues and taking action to address them.

And we really need more role models for this than just women. I’ve just explained that it’s always difficult for women to set an example as leaders and take centre stage. But that’s especially true when it comes to this issue. If a woman commits to this, she actually reinforces the stereotype that this is a ‘women’s issue’. Or, worse still, that safety for women is something women themselves must put on the agenda and resolve.

We therefore also need other – or, I should really say, *renewed* – role models: men. *Men?!?* Weren’t they always the norm and the role model of the leader, the very thing we were trying to move away from? Yes, that may seem paradoxical, but it isn’t. Because men were the norm, they can also shift that norm by demonstrating behaviour that **breaks stereotypes**.

Research⁵ in South Korea shows that men in the military who do not conform as strongly to traditional, ‘tough-masculine’ stereotypes can actually be effective leaders. In teams with such leaders, cadets performed better, as there was less of a competitive culture, which contributed to a more inclusive and effective working environment.

Last week, in the world of football – itself quite a masculine stronghold – the campaign ‘vulnerability is a strength’ was launched – incidentally, a wonderful

⁴ Van Roekel, H., Feenstra, S. & Stoker, J.I. (under review). Still “A Man’s World”? Gendered Leadership Stereotypes in a Female-Dominated Public Sector. Submitted to *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* (3rd round R&R).

⁵ Ko, J., Ku, X., Yoo, S., Hyun, S., & Kim, K. (2025). Gender-Atypical Male Military Leaders Enhance Followers’ Training Performance. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 26(3), 275–284.

variation on ‘armed with sensitivity’, the title of Elanor’s book. In the world of football, too, visible, stereotype-breaking behaviour is now high on the agenda.

My appeal is therefore also directed at men: realise that you can be a role model, particularly on topics that are not stereotypically seen as masculine. And if you can do that by combining decisiveness with emotion and thereby exhibiting non-traditional behaviour, it will also help in the fight against the outdated but persistent stereotype of the ideal leader. Uncomfortable? Yes. But oh so necessary.



Do you know who this is? Exactly, a predecessor of – if I may say so – Minister Boekholt-O’Sullivan: Marga Klompé. In 1956, she became the Netherlands’ first female minister, and in 1971 she was the first woman to be awarded the honorary title of Minister of State. So yes, it has taken a long time in politics too. And yes, there too we still need inspiring examples to show that women are also good leaders.

I hope that Elanor will be just as successful in this as she was at the Ministry of Defence. And above all, I hope that, alongside and together with women like Elanor, men will also emerge as new role models. Men who make it clear that women’s safety is not just a women’s issue, and, regardless of whether or not they are leaders, simply start by setting a good example themselves.