

Rhetorical Analysis of Political Feminist Icons and Two Double Standards: The Feminism of Two UK Prime Ministers and One German Chancellor

Two of the most powerful leaders in Europe—and the world—are German Chancellor Angela Merkel and United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May. Both are on the conservative spectrum. One is seen as a feminist icon while one is not. One identifies as a feminist while one does not. One argues for women's rights while one does not. Both of these female political leaders are compared to United Kingdom's Prime Minister Margret Thatcher. Known for her conservative and hardline policy, Prime Minister Thatcher considered feminism poison but is seen as a feminist nowadays, because she showed little girls that they can be prime minister too. Chancellor Merkel will serve for at least twelve years, so most children grew up having her as a leader, much like Prime Minister Thatcher. Prime Minister May is the second female prime minister of the United Kingdom. The prominent and powerful world leaders of Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister May are leaders in the feminist community through policies and personalities, even though some people wish to reduce them to sexist ideals like fashion and childlessness.

Both women are compared to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who, accordingly to Sanghani, "famously only promoted one woman to her cabinet in 11 years and was said to be to be the woman who smashed the glass ceiling and pulled the ladder up after her." It was well documented that Prime Minister Thatcher was not a feminist with many of her policies. One of the ways that Thatcher was able to succeed was because she "had been free to pursue her political career thanks to the support of a rich husband and an army of help in the house" (Murray). According to Murray, Thatcher played all the roles: mummy, nanny, governess, wife, matron, flirt or Boudicca. It has been a back and forth in modern day society with the argument of Prime Minister Thatcher as a feminist icon. She did nothing for women, "but nor should we deny the fact that as the outsider who pushed her way inside, as the woman in a man's world, she was a towering rebuke to those who believe women are unsuited to the pursuit and enjoyment of power" (Walter). On the other hand, many feminists argue that Thatcher set a bad example of feminism, like "designer vaginas and the Pussycat Dolls—a cynical bastardisation of what the real fight for women's equality is about" (Walter). Thatcher notoriously lowered her voice an entire octave when speaking (Barnett). The old British prime minister went with the idea that one should be judged on their actions and not their gender (Barnett), which is what feminists want: equality between the sexes.

In simple terms, Chancellor Merkel is considered a feminist but is not a feminist. Much like Prime Minister Thatcher, feminism is not "cool." In German society, feminism is still a shrill concept of bra burning and hating men. On the other hand, in British culture, feminism has marked a new age, and Prime Minister Theresa May calls herself a feminist. Yet, if asking the British public if she is a feminist, they would say no.

"The woman [Chancellor Merkel] who has governed Germany for the past four years has become something of a global super star -- admired for being a woman in what is still very much a man's world" (Dowling). She proved through her twelve years of service to Germany that she could work within a man's world, however her politics have not shown a woman's theme: "... saying that while having a female head of state can be broadly influential and can affect the general public's views on women, that does not mean that all women are now equal and that

there is no more need for policies promoting women's rights" (Dowling). In spite of her non-feminist views, Forbes named her "Most Powerful Woman in the World" for four years in a row.

Prime Minister May is a feminist and has fought for feminist policies, such as "... two of the top four cabinet jobs now held by women, she's extended domestic violence protections, including introducing a law against coercive control and pushing for an inquiry on the way police treat victims, she's cracked down on female genital mutilation, supported the introduction of shared parental leave, and voted to remain in the EU, which offers protections to women in the workplace" (Cosslett). While she has fought and continues to fight for women's issues, many people do not look at her as a feminist. Feminism seems like it would be a left idea, but feminism is for everyone.

"Sometimes feminism means a woman you don't agree with getting the chance to become prime minister" (Cosslett). Prime Minister May's conservative views, much like Prime Minister Thatcher, on immigration and economics. Due to these facts, she is not favored by left leaning feminists. "It is time for feminists to stop seeing feminism as a test to be passed and instead to focus, as many do already, on lobbying for positive policies that help women" (Cosslett).

Prime Minister May also has a history of working with female organizations. In 2010, she became Minister of Women and Equality. She voted for gay marriage in 2013, thus becoming the one of the major Conservative leaders to do so. Since 1997, she has been a Member of Parliament, and since 2010, she has been a home secretary. "In 2005, she co-founded Women2Win - a Conservative Party group that supported David Cameron's commitment to select more women to fight winnable seats and elect more Tory women to Parliament" (Sanghani). May, who has always been compared to Thatcher, is incredibly more experienced than Thatcher was when she became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (Freeman). A Member of Parliament even said that "Theresa's a bloody difficult woman, but you and I worked for Margaret Thatcher" (Tarabay). With every turn of May's prime minister term, she has been compared to Thatcher, for the worst and for the best.

Chancellor Merkel's policies about women has been to never talk about gender. A subject she only brought up for the 2017 election when she spoke to the German magazine *Emma*; in this article, she spoke about sharing chores with her husband and revealing details about her domestic life, even sharing a German recipe. This is all in contrast of her normal personality of "Her steady-as-she-goes, 'don't spend it unless you have it' approach has appealed to women, many of whom regard risk-taking macho behavior as exactly what got us into this mess in the first place" (Dowling). Fooling the two million more female voters of Germany worked to give her another election win. Merkel's use of the feminine card is much like Prime Minister Thatcher, who "irritatingly played the feminine card whenever it suited her purposes," even going so far to "shed a tear when needed" (Murray). Beatrix Campbell, perhaps, stated it best: "Femininity is what she wears, masculinity is what she admires" (Murray). Neither of these two leaders use their gender unless absolutely necessary. It is a tool to be used, not shown to the public.

For Family Minister of Germany, Chancellor Merkel appointed a female, and together they pushed for increased time and payment for parental leave, as well as allowing fathers to take time off of work. However, both women have "...deeply traditional viewpoint where women are regarded through the prism of motherhood" (Dowling). During Thatcher's time as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, she only had one woman in her cabinet. She did not argue for

women's rights. Both of these leaders chose to fly under the radar as women. People have argued that Merkel has "shed the Thatcher-esque image," yet she has some of the same ideals and ways of thinking (Dowling). These two leaders are more than likely to be compared in the future as Germany becomes for front of the European Union, like how the United Kingdom used to be in first place.

Before being German Chancellor, Merkel worked as a physics scientist—even having won a Warburg Prize for biochemistry and molecular biology scientists—and she spoke with many women about the wage gap in Germany. Compared to the European Union and other European nations, German women on average earn less than men by 23 percent (Dowling). Her advice to these women were going to their bosses and demanding change, saying that self-confidence was necessary. When asked if the government would interfere to improve the wage gap between genders, Chancellor Merkel responded that pushed change "would [not] bring much success" (Dowling). According to Burke from the *Federalist*, a right wing publication, feminists are arguing that being a stay-at-home mom should be illegal, but Germans enjoy the stay-at-home moms, going on to say, "[Merkel] cannot be the archetype of the feminist ideal: a woman with a husband who equally shares all the domestic duties, happy children and an enviable career." Burke is correct in the aspect that Merkel cannot be these things, but Burke is wrong that Chancellor Merkel is not a feminist in her own right.

Much of Chancellor Merkel's success has come from her personality. "Her cunning and skill helped her get to the top of her very patriarchal party" (Dowling). Almost in a stereotypical way, Merkel gives off the cool and collected persona. Prime Minister May gives off the same persona in the United Kingdom. While the British people live on the phrase "Keep calm and carry on," Prime Minister May's personality has made her unwelcome toward some communities. Prime Minister Thatcher's personality had the same hard upper lip, but she was also described as "... fizzed with an almost superhuman energy. She oozed that indefinable something that can only be described as star quality.... The power resided in her" (Murray). Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister May have not been described as such. In our current area, "star quality" may not be what is needed, though. Both of these current leaders thrust their policies into the public eye, not their personalities, which cannot be said for another country's leader.

While her style is more feminine than Chancellor Merkel's of cheetah print heels and pencil skirts, which is a topic much discussed in British media, Prime Minister May has been criticized for not having a personality. Because of her strong personality of straightforward with a break, she is seen as boring compared to her other Members of Parliament. When May became Prime Minister, *The Sun*, a London-based tabloid, showed a picture of her shoes with the headline "Heel, boys." With over 30 years of experience in politics and serving in multiple positions in the government, "there's been an increasing focus in the media on her clothes rather than her abilities" (Britton). May has been cited many times by prominent newspapers in London for her ability to recycle her clothes. There has also been a push against the current British prime minister over her receiving gifts from world, where other members of her cabinet have received no gifts at all. The King of Jordan, the King of Saudi Arabia and the president of Ukraine have all gifted her from jewelry to scarves to skirts and beyond (Elgot). Former Prime Minister David Cameron received gifts as well, but there was not such a push against him. This is one of the double standards that females face.

The second large double standard that Prime Minister May and Chancellor Merkel face is the childlessness double standard. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had children but while she was in office, she faced many questions about where her children and husband were (Barnett). Female politicians are faced with the “childlessness” term. The childlessness comes with the myth that “women without children are somehow deficient,” but the problem comes in that we voters want the “normal” (Hirsch). The normal would be a nice married politician with a family. However, for female politicians, they are put “through painful interrogations” why they may not have children (Hirsch). Too easily does this become a category of “childless female politicians,” which boasts the names of Prime Minister May and Chancellor Merkel, along with her other female politicians.

When running for the conservative party nominee on her road to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, May was faced with her competitor’s remarks by Andrea Leadsom, stating that May did not have much at “stake” because she was not a mother. Politicians from around the world called the remarks “insulting” and “wrong” (Cowburn). Multiple times it has been brought up on television or radio that Prime Minister May does not have children, and she has been forced to discuss why. Men are not expected to answer these questions, but when May was in the running for prime minister, there were times that she had to sit on couches and talk about it openly.

In Germany, Chancellor Merkel has been accepted into society for not having children because women are expected to cut back on work hours or do not work at all when having children because of the German cultural standards. Stay-at-home mothers are normal in the German society. It is not to say that Chancellor Merkel would not be able to accomplish what she has accomplished if she had children, yet there are strict societal rules. This opens the door, however, to some right-wing commentators as for the reason why Merkel has allowed 1.5 million refugees into Germany: Chancellor Merkel wants to be the mother to them. According to the Gatestone Institute, “Because Europe’s top political leaders do not have children, they do not know what it means to be a mother... therefore have ‘no reason to worry about the future of the continent’” (Smith). The Gatestone Institute goes on to say that “Muslims [are encouraged] to have ‘five children’ and Islamic imams are urging the faithful to ‘breed children’: to conquer Europe” (Smith). Chancellor Merkel’s lack of children, much like Prime Minister May’s lack of children, has put a target on their backs because they are “childless female politicians.” Both of them have had to fight against this line of thinking by keeping their heads down and continuing on with their jobs.

Through their policies and personality, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May are both feminists in their own rights, whether they or not they agree with the term. Since feminism is still considered dirty in Germany but is on its way up, perhaps Chancellor Merkel will someday consider herself a feminist, like Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher might today. Merkel and May have both been pushed together with American and German newspapers stating that May is the “British Angela Merkel” (Freeman). These two leaders are now placed together through feminism and the slow climb of feminist icons, even though some people wish to reduce these women into passing fads.

Works Cited

- Barnett, Emma. "Margaret Thatcher: ultimate feminist icon - whether she liked it or not." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 8 Apr. 2013, www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/9979076/Margaret-Thatcher-ultimate-feminist-icon-whether-she-liked-it-or-not.html.
- Britton, Bianca. "People care way too much about Theresa May's shoes." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 July 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/07/12/europe/theresa-may-sexism-prime-minister/index.html.
- Burke, Jessica. "Angela Merkel Isn't The Reason German Women Don't Like Feminism." *The Federalist*, A Division of FDRLST Media, 19 Sept. 2017, thefederalist.com/2017/09/19/feminism-not-angela-merkel-reason-german-women-dont-like-feminism/.
- Cosslett, Rhiannon Lucy. "Theresa May says she's a feminist. Let's ask her to eradicate period poverty." *The Guardian*, The Guardian News and Media, 13 December 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/13/theresa-may-feminist-bloddy-difficult-woman-period-poverty-afford-tampons>
- Cowburn, Ashley. "Andrea Leadsom attacked by Tory MPs over 'vile' and 'insulting' comments on Theresa May's childlessness." *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 10 July 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/andrea-leadsom-theresa-may-vile-insulting-children-conservative-leadership-tory-a7128311.html.
- Dowling, Siobhan. "Does Angela Merkel Deserve to Be a Feminist Icon?" *Spiegel*, Spiegel-Online, 24 September 2009. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/letter-from-berlin-does-angela-merkel-deserve-to-be-a-feminist-icon-a-650888.html>
- Elgot, Jessica. "Designer clothes, shoes and scarves among gifts sent to Theresa May." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Oct. 2017, www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/13/designer-clothes-shoes-carves-among-gifts-sent-theresa-may.
- Freeman, Hadley. "Theresa May, Margaret Thatcher: spot the difference – and the sexism | Hadley Freeman." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 23 July 2016, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/commentisfree/2016/jul/23/theresa-may-margaret-thatcher-spot-the-difference-uk-politics-hadley-freeman.
- Hirsch, Afua. "Why should Theresa May have to answer questions about her childlessness? | Afua Hirsch." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 May 2017, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/12/theresa-may-children-politics-women-gender.
- "Margaret Thatcher: a feminist icon?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Jan. 2012, www.theguardian.com/politics/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jan/05/margaret-thatcher-feminist-icon.
- Murray, Jenni. "What did Margaret Thatcher do for women?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 9 Apr. 2013, www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/09/margaret-thatcher-women.
- Sanghani, Radhika. "Is Theresa May Britain's most feminist Prime Minister ever?" *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 13 July 2016. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/is-theresa-may-the-most-feminist-prime-minister-ever/>
- Smith, Theresa. "Gatestone Institute: Childless European Leaders are 'Sleepwalking Us to

Disaster'." *CNS News*, Combined Federal Campaign, 26 June 2017, www.cnsnews.com/news/article/theresa-smith/gatestone-institute-childless-european-leaders-are-sleepwalking-us.

Tarabay, Jamie. "And Now for the Ritual Thatcher Comparisons." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 13 July 2016, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/07/theresa-may-margaret-thatcher-britain/491177