First Ladies

Three countries. Three new leaders. Three women.

Chile, Liberia, and Germany don’t seem to have much in common. The three countries lie on different continents. They do not have a shared language, currency, culture, or history.

But on closer examination, those different nations are more similar than they appear. In the past six months, all three nations have elected women leaders. Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, and Angela Merkel of Germany join a small but growing group of female heads of state.

Here is a look into the lives of these three powerful women and the challenges currently facing their countries.

Michelle Bachelet - Chile

When Michelle Bachelet was 23 years old, she and her mother were jailed and beaten. They had opposed a 1973 coup, or government overthrow, that brought Augusto Pinochet Ugarte to power. Pinochet was a brutal dictator who terrorized those who disagreed with him. He jailed more than 27,000 Chileans and executed more than 3,000.

Bachelet and her mother were released and exiled1 to Australia and Germany. In 1979, Bachelet returned to Chile and graduated from medical school. After democracy was restored in Chile in 1990, she entered public service. Bachelet served as minister of health and as defense minister. She was praised for helping heal lingering distrust between Chilean citizens and the military. On January 15, [2006] the 54-year-old was elected president.

Now as Chile’s first female head of state, Bachelet’s priority is to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. Chile is a wealthy nation, but the richest 20 percent of its population controls 61 percent of the country’s wealth, according to the World Bank.

"Chile needs to [create] more equal opportunities so that everyone can benefit from what the country has to offer," Bachelet told reporters after her election.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf - Liberia

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is known as "Iron Lady" and "Ma Ellen." Both sides of her personality will help her in the daunting2 task she faces: reuniting and rebuilding Liberia following 14 years of war.

Although the bloody civil war ended more than two years ago, scars still mark the African nation. Fighting left more than 200,000 people dead. Millions more were forced to flee their homes. Liberia still has no regular electricity or running water. The nation’s unemployment rate is 80 percent.

Johnson-Sirleaf, a 67-year-old Harvard-educated economist and grandmother, has vowed to make a "fundamental break" with her country’s past. "We [must] take bold and decisive steps to address the problems that for decades have stunted our progress," Johnson-Sirleaf said in her inaugural address on January 16 [2006].

Johnson-Sirleaf is Africa’s first elected female head of state, but she is not new to politics. She served as Liberia’s finance minister until 1980 and made an unsuccessful run for the presidency in 1997.

"I am excited by the potential of what I represent: the aspirations and expectations of women in Liberia, African women, and women all over the world," Johnson-Sirleaf says.

2 daunting: tending to overwhelm or intimidate

Angela Merkel - Germany

Angela Merkel, 51, is not only the first woman to serve as the chancellor of Germany but also the first chancellor, male or female, to have grown up in East Germany. After World War II (1939–1945), the United States, France, and Britain divided Germany into two parts—East Germany and West Germany.

As West Germany prospered as a democracy, communist East Germany remained poor. Under communism, the country had few jobs. East and West Germany were reunited in 1989.

Experts say Merkel’s humble3 upbringing as a minister’s daughter will help her understand Germany’s economic problems. The European country’s economy hasn’t grown for more than five years, and 12.6 percent of the population was unemployed in March 2005. That unemployment rate was the highest Germany had seen since the

1930s.

When Merkel was sworn in as chancellor on Nov. 22, 2005, she promised to reduce unemployment. "Our aim is to stop this downward trend and reverse it," Merkel told reporters. "We want to give people hope of having jobs."

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. The priority of both Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Angela Merkel is:

a. healthcare.

b. crime.

c. education.

d. unemployment.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Based on the passage, what do Liberia and Germany have in common?

a. Both countries have been negatively affected by war.

b. People in both countries speak the same language.

c. Both countries are located on the continent of Africa.

d. Neither country has electricity or running water.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. The author wrote that Bachelet has improved the lingering distrust between the military and the citizens of Chile. This means

a. the citizens of Chile trusted the military too much.

b. the citizens of Chile still do not fully trust the military.

c. the military is having a hard time controlling the citizens of Chile.

d. the citizens of Chile do not want to join the military.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. The three countries, Liberia, Germany and Chile, are all

a. wealthy nations.

b. experiencing low unemployment rates.

c. on different continents.

d. currently at war with one another.

5. Do you think women lead their countries differently from the way men do? Why or why not?

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