



Participatory Leadership and Democratic Governance: Challenging Traditional Leadership Models

By
Mishka Moujabber Mourani
Senior Vice President, International College, Lebanon

When one thinks of a leader in today's world, the image of a woman rarely springs to mind. It is not surprising considering that less than 7% of the countries of the world are led by women, and less than 15% of the world's parliamentarians are women. In order to challenge at the societal level the stereotype of men *only* being capable of leadership, assumptions, attitudes and behaviors have to be reshaped at the individual level. The concept of leadership beginning at home is key to the work of the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace (WLP) in its innovative approach to leadership training. The experience of this approach is the subject of this address. As the training manual *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women* indicates, WLP seeks to "empower women and girls in the Global South to re-imagine and re-structure their roles in their families, communities and societies." As a result, WLP has formed partnerships with organizations in the Global South to create leadership training programs and materials. One such partnership was formed with the Machreq-Maghreb Gender Linking Information Project (GLIP), a project of the Centre for Research and Training on Development, an NGO based in Lebanon.

Three years ago WLP collaborated with partner organizations in Morocco, Nigeria, and Palestine to create a new leadership training program that aims at increasing the democratic participation of women within a dialogical framework that emphasizes inclusion, participation, horizontal power structures, and learning partnerships. Adult learning theory and studies that emphasize the importance of establishing learning communities strongly support the WLP program and methodology. I will briefly describe the theoretical base on which the leadership training program relies and cite the experience of participants from actual workshops.

Today WLP has increased the network to include partner organizations in Afghanistan, Cameroon, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Zimbabwe. These organizations have conducted extensive leadership training workshops with over 1000 women using the prototype and customized leadership handbooks as the primary curriculum. Each workshop sets up a cooperative *learning* environment that is built on participation and dialogue.

The workshops explore definitions of leadership and the characteristics of effective leaders, how to formulate a personal vision, to communicate effectively, to negotiate, to share power, to accommodate cultural diversity, to build consensus, and to cultivate skills that mobilize for action. The workshops also help women examine the meaning of empowerment and consider the long-term value of empowering themselves and others. While the workshops are attended predominantly by women, men have also participated in the workshops, and the interactions have proved both significant and valuable.

It is an integral part of CRTD's mission to provide grassroots training and capacity building for the purpose of poverty alleviation within a framework of gender equality. The WLP workshops organized by CRTD/GLIP proved a worthwhile experience in Lebanon with about 90 participants in the last year, including women and some men from rural areas, from handicapped associations, and from refugee vocational training centers, the last of which I was personally involved in as a facilitator.

I will digress slightly to explain my involvement in this project, coming as I do from a background in education and administration. My work in school management has involved the supervision and training of teachers and school administrators to become instructional leaders. It has been part of the mission of International College (I.C.), which was founded 113 years ago and has a population of 3400 students ages 3-19, to reach out to the educational community in Lebanon and beyond via training initiatives and consulting services that feature successful research in curriculum and methodology combined with the experience of practitioners in the field. This work, coupled with my involvement as a member of the Board of CRTD/ GLIP led naturally to my interest in the Women's Learning Partnership initiative. I mention this as an example of the transferability of the WLP curriculum and methodology. I was able to use this innovative approach with vocational trainers who live in refugee camps, with teachers in the private and public sector, and in my day-to-day work supervising instructional leaders at the primary and secondary levels at I.C.

Several leadership workshops, which usually span 12 sessions of varying length over a number of days, were held in various parts of Lebanon. Two sets of workshops were carried out with a group of participants most of whom have motor disabilities and are members of the Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union. Levels of education varied and participants came from all parts of Lebanon, both urban and rural, and from all confessional groups. Their age range was 19 to 38 years. None of the participants was married and all came from relatively poor socio-economic backgrounds. Half were gainfully employed. In the first set, only women were involved. In the second set of workshops, a third of the participants were men.

At first participants, both male and female, did not identify themselves as leaders. This was primarily due to their perception of leadership as belonging to the politically and socially powerful. However, this view faded as participants exchanged stories from their experience, and as discussions focused on the ramifications of leadership and what leadership means in both the private and public spheres.

By the end of the first workshop, the consensus and shared experience amongst women contributed to raising self-confidence and self-esteem and building long term relations. During the second workshop, the group dynamics was to some extent perturbed by the fact that there was a mix of women and men. However, this served to bring women together and to increase solidarity and support among them, as well as challenge preconceived ideas. There is no doubt that the gender composition of groups should be studied further in order to maximize the benefits of both single gender and mixed workshops.

Another workshop included poor rural women from the informal agricultural sector who are involved in a women's cooperative. Income generated by the cooperative is used for the education of these women's daughters. They all knew each other well. All the participants were married with an average of 4 to 5 children. All were either barely literate or had had primary level schooling, and all were Muslim.

A set of workshops was also conducted with volunteer members of a women's NGO. Their ages ranged between 30 and 47. Most had completed high school and several had university degrees. They came from various religious backgrounds and most knew each other. Most work in the public or private education sector, are from an urban background, and are married with an average of 2-3 children.

A workshop was also held with vocational trainers who live and work in refugee camps around Lebanon. Most of the participants were women, and the group was mixed in terms of marital status with ages ranging between 23 and 49.

In all these workshops with participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, a common characteristic was the change in perceptions about leadership, which is so fundamental to any change in attitudes or behaviors. This echoes Senge's concept of *metanoia*, which is a necessary and fundamental shift in mind-set without which the insurmountable basic problem remains the jarring juxtaposition of a continuous *change theme* with a continuous *conservative system*.

I will now outline the theoretical framework that underpins *Leading to Choices*, the training manual which has been translated to six languages, including Maghrebi-Arabic, Shami-Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian, and Uzbek. Editions in Assamese, Hausa, Malay, Shona, Swahili, and Turkish are forthcoming.

The training manual is based on four premises:

The first, "is that in most communities, men are perceived as dominant and women as subordinate," even though concepts like power and leadership vary in meaning across communities and cultures. The second premise is that not only women but all of society will gain politically, economically, and culturally by leveling the power imbalance between men and women... Studies have shown that there is a direct causal relationship between women's involvement in social life and the strengthening of values, attitudes, and behaviors that reflect free, fair, and tolerant social interaction." That leaves little

doubt that women's leadership is an important factor in achieving sustainable development. The third premise is that good leadership - leadership that serves both women and men, poor and rich, the powerless and powerful - is inclusive, participatory, and horizontal. Leadership should be about the pooling of resources in order to get the most out of the abilities and competencies of as many individuals as possible. This *alternative leadership paradigm* avoids the belief in innate right or vertical power relationships. It is built on relationships and the involvement of others in decision-making processes. An effective leader generally has a vision of what needs to be done and brings others on board, within a framework of democratic and egalitarian processes. In fact, a good leader is "conscious that the processes are just as important as the objectives themselves." The fourth premise is that inclusive, participatory, and horizontal leadership is founded on effective communication. Like effective leadership, good communication is about how we dialogue, collaborate, negotiate and make decisions. This concept was pivotal to the progress of the CRTD workshop sessions where the practice of leadership appeared to be dependent on the capacity to communicate ideas, information, and points of view.

The methodology of the WLP leadership training handbook *Leading to Choices* reflects recent studies on adult learning that indicate that "Adults learn best in cohesive groups where learning is problem-based and participant-centered; furthermore, the literature indicates that adults learn best when they can direct their own learning, influence decision-making, focus on problems relevant to practice, tap their rich experiential backgrounds and build strong relationships with peers. This was particularly evident in the workshop conducted with the refugee camp participants: In groups, the participants identified challenges they faced in their everyday lives – one example was tackling an intractable school principal who was discouraging teachers to volunteer their time to help students, another was dealing with a co-worker who insisted on smoking in an enclosed space with no ventilation, a third was devising a plan with limited resources to organize a recreational area for children. For each of these problems the groups devised an action plan for implementation and evaluation. This example illustrates another fundamental point supported by research: For leadership training to be effective it is also important to set in place a democratic learning process that is characterized by shared interests, freedom to interact, and active participation. It is worth noting here that at this point one of the men declined to join a group or identify a problem. He explained that living conditions in the camp were so overwhelmingly poor that any attempt at bringing about change was hopeless. Although he admitted that leadership was possible in day to day situations and was comfortable with the idea of women being capable of leadership in the community, he said he felt disempowered and believed decision making at the local level was unrealistic as long as there was no change 'at the top' as he put it.

The *Leading to Choices* handbook also relies on instructional methods that have been shown to maximize learning in particular what Norris² and her colleagues, in their work on learning communities, call a *process* curriculum that maximizes the experience of empowerment in adult learners. They stress the importance of *trust building activities* and 'voice' – in other words an approach that respects and encourages varied opinions and the

right of those who have them to air their views. This was observable in all the workshops, with men and women becoming more and more comfortable expressing their views.

They also stress the significance of *individual growth plans and authentic assessment*, with participants involved in formulating goals that focus on problems of practice, choosing paths for achieving those goals, and assessing progress and success. The action plans that participants were asked to devise all emphasized a strategic planning approach based on identifying problems, setting objectives, identifying indicators of success and evaluating progress.

Other factors that maximize learning include *focus on reflection* and *self discovery* both features of the WLP training model. The interactive sessions succeeded in raising awareness, leading participants to question both their self-perceptions and their perceptions of others. One particularly lively session involved gender-based 'age' bias, where the notion of older women marrying men several years their juniors was less palatable than the reverse scenario. The facilitator reported that she was exhilarated by the palpable and stated change in perception and attitude that took place following that discussion.

In summary, the process used in the sessions is well supported by research into organizational culture change. For instance, Cameron and Quinn in *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture* emphasize the necessity for

- diagnosis and consensus
- illustrative stories
- strategic action steps, and
- an implementation plan.

The WLP handbook, in summary, is a guide that explores strategies that enhance women's empowerment and communication. It aims at creating conditions for the fair and balanced treatment of both men and women through strengthening women's participation and leadership in various spheres of social interaction and decision making. It also allows for individuals to find for themselves the best way to interact, "build consensus, create shared meaning, and foster learning partnerships at work, at home, and in the community."

In conclusion, what can we deduce from the experience? All the workshops, according to the participants' and facilitators' evaluations, had a palpable impact on participants ; they led them to challenge their perceptions about current models of leadership and about their own aptitudes as leaders. That alone was an empowering experience for most participants. Even in the case of a few participants (mostly male) who were uncomfortable with the idea of alternative leadership styles and practices, the workshops had a significant impact in terms of destabilizing gendered views of leadership.

Where do we go from here? After they completed the workshop, many of the women in the rural cooperative requested that it be repeated for their daughters. Organizing leadership workshops for young girls, students, and youth is an important next step, as is

the need to train more facilitators and to organize follow up workshops for participants. Other needs have been identified, such as enriching the data bank of activities used by facilitators, the identification of indicators of long term impact and change, and the augmenting the number and variety of *case studies* drawn from local contexts that deal with resistance at the religious, communal or cultural level.

CRTD also proposes to develop leadership modules that would be incorporated in other programs, such as its economic literacy and the Gender and Citizenship programs. Finally, on a macro level, one direction we should explore is the incorporation of leadership training in programs and curricula both at the school and at the university level.

I would like to leave you with a quote from one of the participants: "I knew that women's lot is difficult...for women with disabilities, there was nothing to hope for. However, I no longer think this is true. The leader of our association is a woman with a disability. She has gone a long way. I can now understand why. I, too, want to do things for my family, for my community."