INTRODUCTION

Premises

Throughout the Global South women activists are turning the page on women's role in politics. Events in the last century that led to the renunciation of colonialism, apartheid, and dictatorships also unleashed the aspiration for universal human rights and justice in hearts and minds in every corner of the earth. And while the progress of women's advancement varies from nation to nation, language to language, creed to creed, culture to culture, the principles of equality, justice, and rights are unwavering.

The struggle for women's rights is often presented as a struggle between tradition and modernity. In many parts of the world, religious, tribal, and conservative forces as well as various traditions and cultural practices dictate that women should only occupy the private sphere—the home and motherhood—and men should occupy the public sphere where they can control and shape their community's economic, political, and social landscape. But the advancement of women's human rights is not a balancing act between the public and private spheres or tradition and modernization. Gains in women's rights should not be equated with losses to tradition. Like the proverbial reed that bends in the wind, tradition or even culture, is not a static force that will break if winds are blowing too strongly. As traditions and cultures have done since the beginning of time, they will evolve, adjusting to new social conditions to make themselves stronger.

Women's public and political participation is a critical step towards reshaping economic, political, and social conditions to allow for equality in opportunities and results for women and men. Women can be informed, thoughtful, and strategic advocates for their own needs. Today, their political participation is subverting the private/public sphere dichotomy, putting real power and leadership in women's hands. *Leading to Action: A Political Participation Handbook for Women* was conceived and developed to help increase the number of women in decision-making positions by inspiring women to become politically engaged. However, we know from experience that parity in the number of women in leadership roles, though extremely important, is not sufficient. Political leadership can be a force for oppression and conflict regardless of the gender of the politician. For that reason, Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) and its partners developed *Leading to Action* to empower women to become democratic and participatory leaders.

Purposes

Leading to Action is designed for use as a learning tool by those who are challenging themselves to play a more significant political role in their communities. It is the newest addition to WLP's handbooks and manuals—concrete tools for women's empowerment and advancement. WLP's learning tools all share certain elements. As with other WLP materials, this handbook conveys information through dialogue and open-ended questions that allow readers and workshop participants to form their own conclusions.

There is an expression, "actions speak louder than words." *Leading to Action* helps its readers and workshop participants move beyond talking about political limitations to taking action. Whether your goal is to be elected to office, support the campaign of another person, encourage women to vote, or secure better legislation for your community, this handbook will help you hone your skills to take your next political step.

Values and Framework

Leading to Action can be used independently, but it shares the same values and learning framework as other WLP training materials. The political participation strategies emphasize *communicating, listening, building consensus, creating shared meaning,* and *developing learning partnerships.* These techniques create democratic, inclusive processes, and political participation strategies that are ethical in their means as well as their ends.

Just as there is no one path to political activism, there is no single approach to learning political participation skills. In *Leading to Action*, in addition to the political participation strategies, the learning process is itself intended to empower workshop facilitators and participants. The sessions presented are guidelines only, changeable and adaptable for the communities in which they are used. For instance, the biographies of influential people and stories about successful campaigns are only illustrative starting points for discussion, and can be substituted with biographies and stories more relevant or familiar in each setting.

Structure

The *Leading to Action* handbook is structured to be used in a workshop setting, and can be easily modified by those who use it. Lessons and exercises are designed to be changed, omitted, or borrowed to maximize their value, or adapted to meet the unique needs of each workshop group.

It includes an overview of the purpose and nature of political participation entitled "Essentials of Political Participation." "Guidelines for Facilitators" explains the structure of the workshop sessions and how to get the most out of them.

Ten sessions examine the barriers to political participation, and strategies for ethical political leadership. These sessions are divided into two parts. Section I, "Politics and Power: Where Do I Fit In?" has three workshop sessions that explore how the individual workshop participant sees herself as a leader, political activist, and citizen of the world. Section II, "Leading to Action: What Are My Next Steps?" presents seven sessions that help participants identify specific strategies for engaging in political campaigns. Each of the sessions examines barriers that women face in playing a larger role in the public sphere, and provides examples from real life about how some women leaders have dealt with their own competing expectations of themselves. The handbook also includes fictional scenarios that prompt a free exchange of responses, positive and critical, between workshop participants to the ideas presented.

The handbook concludes with appendices that provide additional resources for political activity at the local, national, and international levels.

Essentials of Political Participation
Mahnaz Afkhami

What is political participation? What is politics? Why are politics and participation important to women? Why have women everywhere, especially in developing countries, been denied equal opportunity in politics, as in almost all other fields, even when they have not been denied equal rights? What rewards are there for women if they become politically effective? How can women become politically effective?

These are but a few of the many questions we should ask and answer. Our answers and even our mode of posing the questions, however, cannot be the same everywhere. We live in different societies, cultures, economies, and political systems. Some of us fare better than others because we have relatively greater mobility or better access to decision-making positions. But the difference is not much. All of us have experienced the pressures of patriarchy and share similar hurdles when it comes to political participation. Because of this, we can learn from and help each other. We can develop a shared vision that deepens and expands as we learn more and achieve more on our path to becoming politically effective citizens.

Our purpose in this overview is to highlight elements of politics and participation that are critical to the condition and interests of women across the world, especially in non-Western countries. Since women live in societies that are culturally and socially different, the practice of politics cannot be the same for everyone. But the essentials of politics and participation are more or less the same for everyone. Here we are concerned primarily with the essentials.

Politics and Power
Politics has to do with power, the ability to influence the behavior of others. Power is a wider concept than politics; it is an aspect of human relations at all levels of human interaction. Most of us have never been involved in politics. All of us, however, have experienced power even when we were still only a child. We learned how to cajole our parents to give us what we want. As mothers we learned how to encourage our children to do what we want. We know that there are at least two general ways of influencing the behavior of others: by using force, that is, either a threat or act of punishment; or alternatively, by creating an environment in which what we ask for is considered legitimate and accepted voluntarily, eliminating the need for force. As women we clearly favor the second option on moral and emotional grounds. But we reject force also for a practical reason: as a rule, we do not possess the instruments of force. What's more, even if we did, using force would not be the most efficient way to exercise power.

In the non-force option, legitimate authority comes about as a result either of our personality or condition, both of which may be cultivated. Some individuals are naturally charismatic. People listen to them because they are what they are. Not all of us have this gift, though most of us can learn the ways and means of dealing with others effectively. We have talked about this in *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women.* Cultivating our leadership skills is critical because, as we shall see below, the formative elements of our condition are not always to our advantage as women.

Our "authority condition" is defined and constrained by our history—mainly our traditions and the legal framework that together determine the limits of our rights, obligations, and freedoms. Since most of us live in patriarchies, our obligations often trump our rights and freedoms. But we are not as powerless as this observation might suggest. As mother, wife, sister, and daughter, we command moral standing. In most countries we are recognized as citizens in our own right. In recent decades we have become increasingly educated. In many countries more of us are in universities than are men. We are now claiming the right to intervene on matters ranging from education and economy to culture and religion, which in some societies has induced patriarchal backlash. But we are on our way.

Still, we are faced with difficult hurdles, the most intransigent of which spring from the patriarchal values in which we are socialized. These values stem mostly from tradition. They are engraved in our psyche. They often cause a battle within us between reason and emotion. We do realize that our rights are restricted beyond reason, but we simultaneously subject our reason to the emotional force of our upbringing, to an obligation bred in us to uphold the "honor" of our family, community, and society. It is useless to tell ourselves that this is not our honor, that the concept of honor that is pressed upon us is not based on individual responsibility and individual rights. It is highly useful, however, to let the contradictions we feel and the injustice we see show us the way to a process of change that reconciles our honor, our rights, and our freedom—without tearing apart our societies or vitiating our mores. This is also why our way to our rights and freedom will be our own. We do not reject our traditions. We rethink our traditions to accommodate our demands for equality, rights, and freedom. And we work with men and with other social justice groups towards achievement of these goals, which are the foundations of equity and justice for all.

To accomplish all of this, we must, of course, participate in politics. At first glance, our chances may not seem too promising. If politics has to do with power, we as women are disadvantaged because we are short on all the factors that make a person powerful. First, we do not have much force at our disposal and we do not want it even if we were given it. Second, we are not historically well endowed with traditional authority because we live in a patriarchal culture which favors male authority. Third, because even in modern times laws that govern our lives have been generally enacted by men in positions of authority, from which we are generally excluded, we often are treated inequitably, even when laws are made based on "rational" criteria. This means we must approach politics and power creatively, devising concepts and methods that are new and

different, so that not only we succeed, but our success will be significant—for us individually and for our gender collectively. Before we proceed further, let us examine power and politics more closely.

Power as Communication

If politics has to do with power and power is defined as the ability to influence others to act along the lines one prefers, then, clearly, politics is inherently linked with communication. Unless we communicate, we will never be able to impart what we want, and if we do not let others know what we want, we cannot encourage them to do what we consider to be desirable or discourage them from doing what we consider undesirable. So communication is critical to political processes. Without it, we cannot even engage in politics. What then are the components of communication? In its simplest form, we need a communicator, a message, a communication channel, and a receiver—someone or some group to whom communication is directed. In our personal life, we communicate everyday. In our family, we communicate mostly face to face. We tell our son or daughter what to do or what not to do. Or we ask a question. With our friends, we might communicate via telephone or the Internet. We have learned over the years to respect certain constraints when we communicate in order to make our communication successful. For example, we don't ask our five-year-old daughter to do something she cannot physically perform or intellectually understand. We try not to ask of her to do something she terribly dislikes. If we must ask her to do something she considers unpleasant, such as taking her medicine, first we try to prepare her for the ordeal. We know instinctively that she must come to believe that what we ask of her is necessary and for her good. We know how to ease our way into her approval.

This example also illustrates the fundamentals of political communication. First and foremost we must want to communicate. Then we must have something to communicate. We must have a means of communication. We must have someone to communicate with. And we must fashion our message so that it fits the means and the recipient; that is, it is communicable and it falls within the zones of the recipient's understanding and inclinations. Otherwise, our communication most likely will fail to reach the recipient (which means it is not communication), will not be understood, or will be rejected. Given the structural similarity between talking to our child or friend and communicating a political message, it is probably correct to say that most if not all of us can, if we want to, engage in political communication, at least theoretically.

Political Communication

But what is *political* communication? How is it different from other kinds of communication?

For our purpose, there are at least two basic properties that distinguish the political from the non-political: community and authoritative sanction. A political communication aims at something that affects the whole community of which the communicator is a member—a village, a town, an organization, a state, or even a region. For the communication to be politically important, there must be

some assurance that if accepted, the community, whatever its size or character, will be bound to observe it. Usually political decisions are governed by certain rules, by-laws, or laws that carry the sanction of enforcement. In the past, a king or governor ruled by virtue of tradition. If someone asked why things are the way they are, the answer would likely be because they have always been that way. In modern times, the chances are that certain rules or laws have been enacted to define the limits of legitimate power and to establish rights, duties, and obligations of both the ruler and the ruled. In principle, we should be able to question things as they are and ask for a rational explanation of rules and laws. In principle, we have the right to question the legitimacy of individuals in power, the decisions they make, or the laws that do not accord with the established rules of enactment or are no longer responsive to society's needs and requirements. As indicated earlier, none of this means we should be frivolous about or unmindful of the weight of tradition. What it means is that we should not be expected to accept—in the name of tradition or one-sided explications of values, mores, or texts—shackles on our rights, liberties, or other primary needs simply because certain powers in our societies benefit from and wish to preserve prevailing conditions. We must remember and we must each within our society and culture strive to discover the most effective way of communicating to others that we have rights as human beings, and not only as members of a specific religion, nationality, race, or gender. Rights are universal, although implementation of rights and setting of priorities in our efforts to achieve rights are dependent upon specific socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions.

The Political Process

Just as power was more than politics, politics is more than power. Power refers to our ability to act; politics refers to the end for which we act. The political has to do with defining goals. Its aim is to determine where we go and how we weigh a proposed option against all other possible options. The political, thus, is concerned with values, something that is of interest to us and affects other interests in a given community frame—for example, our village, town, or workplace. We usually hear that certain organizations, such as political parties, are concerned with politics, and that other organizations, for example, government bureaucracies, are concerned with administration. This is only partly true. Politics and administration occur in both types of organizations, although the formal function of a political party is to develop general policies and strive for gaining political power, whereas the function of bureaucracy is the implementation of decisions made through the political process. In fact, in many countries it is the bureaucracy that makes the kinds of decisions that are critical to the everyday well-being of the people. Depending on what kind of society we live in, we must be careful to make the correct assessment as to the loci of political power.

Nonetheless, there are certain tested approaches that enhance our chances of success as we engage in the political process. Consider, for example, the community where you live. Suppose you have certain needs that you want the government to address. You may go to the person in charge in the governmental department responsible for the issue of your concern. He listens to you but

takes no action. Months pass. You wonder what else to do to get the result you seek. You know many others in your community share your concern but they also do not know what to do. It occurs to you that perhaps you can get together and speak to the government with a collective voice, thinking that the voice of many is likely more effective than the voice of one. Already you are on your way to becoming a political leader. You begin with the individuals you know. You realize that although they share your general concerns, the points they stress are not always the same. At first, you feel discouraged but you persist and soon you find that it is possible to expand the areas of agreement if you are willing to compromise. You give a little and take a little until you all agree on a set of statements that you can propose to a wider group. Soon, following the same pattern of dialogue you find yourself in the midst of a sizable community of agreement. In the process you realize that you must go beyond face-to-face communication; you need to use other channels to extend your reach—pamphlets, newspapers, radio, television, and these days increasingly the Internet. By this time, you have also fine-tuned your message to elicit a more favorable response. You are now in a position to *articulate* your interest more effectively, having mapped out your lines of communication. And you have a far better chance of being heard.

But who will hear you? You have less of a problem to be heard if your issue can be addressed at the local level. That is why, as a general rule, a decentralized system of decision-making affords more opportunity for participation than a centralized system. But if you need action at the national level, which women often do, you must secure channels to the national government. You might choose to direct your demand to one or another of the political parties, assuming there are efficient political parties in your country. If so, you will soon realize yours is not the only group with such an interest; there are other groups with similar or contrary interests. It is a function of an efficient political party to aggregate such interests and prepare them for introduction to the appropriate national decision-making structure—usually in the cabinet or the legislature. If the process is successful, what your group has articulated will be adjusted against other competing demands and, at the end, transformed to a language that satisfies no one completely but is a step forward in the direction that a majority with such interests can live with.

This process holds for political systems that are more or less responsive to interest group demands. Such political systems, even if they are not democratic in the western sense of the term, can be influenced if they are open enough to receive messages and not so overly ideological that they "hear" only one set of messages. Women, however, face a gender hurdle that surpasses these fine points: if they live in an overly patriarchal society, a more or less responsive political system very often responds more readily to the stronger social forces, which usually deny women even the most elementary rights. In such circumstances, women engaged in interest articulation and interest aggregation will have to focus primarily on re-socializing the society. That is, women must convince at least opinion leaders, if not the rest of society, that women's demand for rights is not a zero-sum game, but a winning proposition for both men and women. Such an undertaking suggests no less a task than successfully re-interpreting certain

values in the society that many among both genders consider fundamental. This is especially imperative in Muslim-majority societies, where over the past few decades there has evolved an incongruity between the role women play in the public space and their position in the private space. In most of these societies women are working hard outside of the home to supplement the family income, they are educated, and, above all, they are conscious of their individual rights. But their legal position at home and in private relations has remained substantially unchanged.

We must remember that this incongruity is rooted primarily in history, not culture. Women have been subject to similar divisions of rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis men across the world, across time, and across cultures. Until relatively recently, nowhere in the world could women decide independently to seek a job, have an education, get married, have children, vote, or be elected to public office. Switzerland gave women the vote as late as in 1970. Thus, societies and cultures change over time, religions receive different interpretations often against the will of established religious leaders, and increasingly, epistemology of religions has differed from the sociology of the peoples who practice them. Islam, for example, has been practiced in a variety of ways by Muslims in different parts of the world and at various times in history.

Women and Democracy

Democracy is said to be the best form of government we know. But we are entitled to ask: Why is democracy the preferred form of government? The answer usually given is that democracy is the preferred form of government because in a democracy, the people govern through their freely elected representatives. It is a system based on popular sovereignty. People have rights. Individuals are guaranteed their personal spaces. Government is limited. And majority rule is bound by minority rights. If we support democracy and are asked what we like best about it, we probably answer individual freedom, human rights, respect for the opinion of others, control over the government, and a lot of other good things that are inscribed in the international documents of rights and constitutions of "democratic" states. All of this assumes that the society on which a democratic political system is grounded is, philosophically speaking, a "liberal" society.

But suppose it is not. Suppose women live in a society where a majority does not believe in such values. Suppose a majority, in fact, thinks that such values are invented by a number of colonialist states to dupe, dominate, and exploit, that when others speak of women's rights, they employ a ruse to make women playthings, dolls. Suppose they say women's dignity is best protected if we all follow our holy books. And they add they are the only ones allowed to interpret the holy book.

Most of us, of course, know that this is not fantasy; we are faced with this problem now in certain countries, and unless we are careful we may be facing the same in other countries. This is why it is so important for women to engage in politics and to approach it courageously but cautiously, posing the issue of governance fully aware of the reality of their circumstance: that most of us do

not live in liberal societies as philosophically defined. We must therefore address the issue somewhat differently. Rather than talking about democracy uncritically, as if it stood alone, insulated, majestically unencumbered by historical, social, or cultural conditions, we should pose it problematically. What kind of a system in a given society optimizes the probability of approximating the values, mores, and procedures we appreciate most in an ideal democracy? To examine such a question, we have to begin with at least two sets of queries and propositions: 1) the values we would like to optimize—such as freedom, rights, equality, individual space, and limited government, but also security, community, and family; and 2) the society where we would like to optimize these values—such as rich or poor, literate or illiterate, liberal or illiberal, religious or secular, hierarchical or communicative, patriarchal or gender-friendly, homogeneous, or heterogeneous.

Power, authority, and justice—primary ingredients of any political system— must be dealt with in democracies at both the magisterial level where state and society intersect, and the individual level of immediate human interactions, such as those between man and wife, father and daughter, brother and sister, teacher and student, employer and employee. The two levels obviously interact, and sometimes, especially in illiberal societies, they create ironic contradictions, for example, when the process of promoting the procedures of democracy leads to conditions that negate the fundamental values of democracy. In the developing world, especially in Muslim-majority countries, women often find themselves at the losing end of this dynamic.

It is up to women in each cultural and social milieu to determine which approach to politics best serves their interests. But we must all work together to learn from each other and to create synergy for change.

A Women's Approach to Politics

We have learned from the successful experience of women activists working in a variety of political contexts the steps that help us optimize our chances of achieving our goal of full political participation.

First, we must work in cooperation with men. We have to take it upon ourselves to educate men by showing them that women's empowerment does not present a threat to them. On the contrary, it helps everyone by creating meaningful and efficient partnerships.

Second, we must build partnerships of respect, knowledge, solidarity, and support among ourselves, with other women, and with men. It is increasingly important for women from different societies to communicate with each other, to support each other's work, to teach each other, and to learn from one another. It is especially important for Muslim women to communicate and form partnerships with women from other regions, religions, and cultures. We all need to learn and we all have something to teach.

Third, we must work closely with broader social justice networks and organizations in a spirit of mutual cooperation. Especially critical in this respect are organizations and movements engaged in human rights promotion, environmental advocacy, labor relations, democracy promotion, and peace and conflict resolution.

Fourth, we must be conscious of the importance of capacity-building at the level of the individual as well as civil society. We must become adept at mobilization, advocacy, defining issues, pinpointing problems, and finding solutions. All of this is related to building leadership capacity.

Fifth, leadership, which is essential to women's empowerment, is a problematic concept. We do not want power for power's sake. In power, we do not wish to become surrogate men. We want to be empowered to help change our societies for the better. The same understanding pervades our concept of leadership. We at the Women's Learning Partnership and our partners across three continents have worked hard on the concept and developed an understanding of leadership as a communicative and dialogical model of interaction that represents the society we women desire and seek. In this model, leadership emerges from a learning partnership and takes the characteristics of a system of give and take in which each participant is at once or alternately leader and follower. This is the kind of condition we would want to inform the associations that constitute our emerging civil society.

And sixth, we need to have our voices heard. Something exists and is developing in our time that did not exist in the past: information technology. We must do our best to acquire and use it to develop the kinds of partnerships we alluded to in *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*, to forge political support, and to implement culture change. We have the knowledge potential, the resource potential, and the woman-power potential. We must work through our partnerships to get ourselves and our societies culturally attuned to the indispensability of information technology not only for learning about the world but also for making it.