

# *Women Leaders in Sustainable Development*



*Presentation Transcript*

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It is an honour to speak to such a diverse and distinguished audience and I thank the organisers, for the invitation.

Let me first say a word about my own organization the Commonwealth of Learning. COL was established in 1987, when Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Vancouver and we've been here ever since, making us the only intergovernmental Commonwealth organisation to be located outside London.

What do we do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth member states and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. Our motto is 'Learning for Sustainable Development'.

COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation.

My topic today is 'Women Leaders in Learning for Sustainable Development'. I will first look at the situation of women in the Commonwealth and then reflect briefly on some of the issues that prevent women from assuming leadership roles. I will then share the stories of two remarkable women leaders in development and conclude with how transformational leadership in such contexts can and must lead to empowerment of both the leader and the community. I have prepared this presentation with my two colleagues Dr K Balasubramanian and Rosanne Wong

Let us first the context.

Women's disadvantage stems from three primary reasons: in many countries they do not enjoy the same rights as men. Very often they do not have access to resources such as property. In sub-Saharan Africa,

women produce 80% of the crops but only own 1% of the land (World Bank). It is also important for women to have a voice in economic and political affairs.

The World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index shows which countries are the best in the Commonwealth for women. This ranking is not based on development levels in each country but on economic, political, educational and health-based criteria. So you'll note that Lesotho a developing country ranks higher than UK and Canada. In rich countries women have greater access to education and health but women in developing countries may have more opportunities for political participation. For example in Lesotho one in five government ministers is a woman. Similarly there are 52% women senior managers and officials in Lesotho compared to 35 % women officials in the UK. Pakistan, Nigeria and India rank very low in terms of providing opportunities for women.

In fact, poverty has a female face. The Commonwealth is home to one third of the world's poor and 70% of them are women.

Within the higher education sector, the situation is not too different in the Commonwealth. As you can see, of the 166 VCs in UK universities, 29 are women and this pattern of disparity between male and female VCs is repeated in South Africa and Pakistan.

So what are the barriers that prevent women from achieving leadership positions?

As we know that in many countries such as India, girls are outperforming boys in school. Boys' underperformance in the Caribbean has assumed crisis proportions. Similarly in Canada, women make up the majority of enrolments in college and the trend continues to grow. For example, in 1990, in the age group of 25-34 year olds, there was an almost equal percentage of men and women with a university degree. Twenty years later, we find that women have overtaken men and account for 34% as compared to 26 % men with a university degree.

Why does this academic achievement not translate into more women in leadership positions? There are several reasons, some of them being family responsibilities, restrictive social norms and the general human desire to be liked.

In addition, we have the issue of the negative correlation between success and likeability for women. As Sheryl Sandburg quotes the case of a successful woman entrepreneur Heidi Roizen who became successful because of her outgoing personality and vast personal and professional networks. Professors Flynn and Anderson of Columbia Business School assigned this story to two groups of students—changing the name of Heidi to Howard for one group. The students were asked to give their impressions and predictably both groups rated Heidi and Howard as equally competent. But Howard came across as a more appealing colleague while Heidi was seen as selfish and not 'the type of person you would want to hire or work for'.

Similarly, the recruitment and human resources services provider Ranstad found that in one of their surveys, 40 percent of the male employees preferred male managers while only half the number preferred women. Surprisingly 44% of the women surveyed preferred their managers to be men. What does this tell us about internalising gender bias and social stereotyping?

Let us now look at a different dimension of leadership—which exists beyond formal institutions and has the power to transform and empower.

What do we mean by transformational leadership? It is leadership that empowers the disempowered and the marginalised, a fundamental prerequisite of sustainable development.

Transformational leaders identify their own values and those of others and use these as a basis for collective action. The power is shared and this leads to the empowerment of all involved.

What is empowerment? This happens when people have the capacity to make choices which increases their ability to act and influence outcomes. People are disempowered when they don't have the freedom to choose.

Transformational leaders demonstrate four behaviours: they are charismatic, they inspire, provide intellectual stimulation and give personal attention to members of the group. How does this work?

Let me share the stories of two remarkable women from different parts of the Commonwealth. The first is Dame Carol Kidu, a former member of COL's board, an Australian, who married a citizen from Papua New Guinea. She integrated into the culture and society of her adopted country and soon found that women were deeply disempowered and faced widespread domestic violence.

She established Community Learning Centres to promote lifelong learning for women, making them aware of their rights and helping them to become leaders. She won all elections but chose to retire from politics and work in an NGO in her community.

According to Dame Carol, women leaders who transform 'walk with people, they talk with people, they learn from people and they lead by example'. She quote from Albert Einstein saying: 'Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others, it is the only means'.

Dame Carol visited COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers project in India and the women in the community were absolutely in awe of the fact that here was a powerful minister from a distant foreign land who could not understand their language but who understood them and their situation so completely. One of the women she met was Peria Jakkamal, an illiterate woman from a remote rural village. She had no assets or resources and was restricted from leaving the village unaccompanied. The turning point for her came when she joined COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers project.

Under this project, she negotiated and obtained credit from commercial banks and started goat rearing enterprises with other women. Peria Jakkamal learned about goat rearing from the experts of the nearby veterinary college using her cell phone. This project introduced her to a women's Self Help Group. She started self-help groups in her own village.

You can see the community and members of financial institutions at this gathering. She carried out the process of transformation smoothly and without disruption. She first transformed herself before transforming others and promoted the effective use of ICTs among other women.

As she told COL, leadership is not a permanent state of being—it is highly temporal and when other more efficient leaders emerge, you should pave the way to support them.

What do these two women leaders from such diverse cultures and backgrounds share? One, they are both people-oriented, empathetic and respectful. Two, they are courageous to break out of traditional moulds, but they did this through constant negotiations rather than disruption. They are both excellent networkers and good communicators and finally they are lifelong learners.

Frances Ferreira, Colin Latchem and I have documented many such reflections and insights from women leaders in open and distance learning and development in this book which is available free at our website [www.col.org](http://www.col.org). This book captures the reflections of women on becoming leaders, being leaders and helping others to become leaders. And it's clear there is a difference in the leadership styles required within academia and the field of development.

As Prof Brenda Gourley a former Vice Chancellor and President of the Open University, UK sums up 'Reflecting on the women I've worked with...I've found them to be less hierarchical, have more empathy for those who work for them and seem more caring in the process'. All this confirms what we've seen from the accounts of the two women leaders that we just profiled.

How can we support more women to become transformational leaders who empower themselves and others?

The nature of the economy is changing—from a manufacturing economy producing goods to a knowledge economy in which a different set of skills is required. The high achievers in the C21, when robots will be able to perform many tasks better than humans, will be relationship workers, according to Geoff Colvin. Women are socially more sensitive and this bodes well for their leadership of institutions and organisations.

However, the situation is different in development. As we have seen women's leadership can evolve through formal and non-formal processes. We don't necessarily need a structured roadmap that will fit all cultures and contexts. And transformational leadership is issues- and values- based rather than dependent on institutional or organisational authority.

In fact there are thousands of unsung women leaders at the bottom of the economic pyramid. So leadership is not restricted to the boardroom or the corner office. Women's leadership at the grassroots level is becoming increasingly important within the context of gender and the emerging social enterprise model of development.

The key message is that transformational leadership is a skill that can be acquired and governments must invest in skilling women if sustainable development for all is to become a reality by 2030.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention.