

Women Leaders in Development

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Commonwealth of Learning

It is an honour to speak to such a diverse and distinguished audience and I thank the organisers, Tess in particular, for the invitation. The lecture series on Global Leadership is a valuable forum to explore the theme from different perspectives and I congratulate Acsenda School of Management for taking this initiative.

Let me first say a word about my own organization the Commonwealth of Learning, which is just a few blocks away. 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. Our two sister organisations, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Commonwealth Foundation, are London-based.

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 Development'.

What does this mean? Following the ideas of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, COL understands development as freedom. Increasing the freedoms that men and women enjoy is a definition of development, and greater freedom empowers people to be more effective agents of development. Learning must enable people to exercise their freedom 'to be and to do'.

My topic today is 'Women Leaders in 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 look at the context.

You can see that the Commonwealth is a group of 53 member states spread across all regions of the world: from the Caribbean and the Americas to Europe and Africa; from Asia to the Pacific.

The 2.3 billion people in these countries constitute one third of all humanity, with the majority being young people under the age of thirty. Most of these countries are developing nations with challenges of poverty and illiteracy. There are 23 million children out of school, 462 million adult illiterates and a very high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the Commonwealth. In such situations you will find that women and girls are more disadvantaged than men.

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). Almost eight out of ten farmers who produce staple food in Africa are women but most of them do not own land or resources in their name nor do they have access to credit. 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 has rich countries like Canada, UK, Australia and New Zealand. But the majority of Commonwealth countries are home to one third of the world's poor and 70% of them are women. The Commonwealth accounts for more than half the number of maternal and infant deaths in the entire world.

Women represent more than 40% of the global labour force, 43 % of the agricultural workforce and more than half the world's university students, yet we find fewer women at higher levels. For instance, today women hold only 22% of parliamentary seats worldwide, and the Commonwealth is no different, with only 21% of female representation.

You will be interested to note that there are only three elected women prime ministers in the entire Commonwealth, Sheikh Haseena of Bangladesh, Kamla Persaud-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago and Portia Simpson Miller of Jamaica.

The situation is not too different in the Commonwealth universities. 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. Here 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.

As we know, women have double roles. The productive role refers to paid work; the reproductive to child-bearing and family care.

Globally men spend more time in paid activities while women spend more time in unpaid work. For example, in Bolivia, men would typically spend 9 hours in unpaid work per week compared to the 35 hours invested by women in such activities.

Canada is not far different. According to Statistics Canada, women spent double the time on taking care of children in 2010 compared to men who on average spent 25 hours for such activities.

So clearly women work more if you take into account the number of hours of paid and unpaid work that they do. This leaves them with less time for leisure, training or political activities.

In addition, we have the issue of the negative correlation between success and likeability for women. As Sheryl Sandberg 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?

And given the horrific discrimination and violence that women continue to face in many countries in South Asia and sub Saharan Africa, there is a greater need than ever before for women to make the transition from academic achievement to leadership.

When asked what could be done to reduce these inequalities, Lehmah Gwobee, the Nobel Peace Prize winner from Liberia suggests that the only way to address these is to put more women in power.

Let us now look at a different dimension of leadership—which exists beyond organisations and 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 development.

The critical feature of transformational leadership is that it empowers both the leader and the follower to higher levels of motivation and performance.

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.

The turning point came for her when she lost her husband. She wanted to do something about the poverty and social injustice around her and politics could be one way of doing this. But politics was considered an entirely male domain and it was unthinkable that the widow should express an interest in this field. There was an intense family struggle before she could get her brother-in-law to give the necessary permission. Supported by other women she became the only woman Member of Parliament and Minister for Community Development.

She was a very popular minister as you can see.

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.

How was Dame Carol a transformational leader? Even though she was a foreigner, she worked within the cultural norms of her community, showed empathy and gained trust. With her commitment and sincerity, she mobilised the community to speak in a collective voice against social injustice. She brought successful examples of development from other cultures and promoted lifelong learning. Dame Carol is very humble and unassuming and is at home in the company of both heads of state and illiterate farmers. And of course she is a great networker and communicator.

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 called VIDIYAL. She started self-help groups in her own village, mobilised the women and encouraged them to join the L3F project.

She not only sent her own children to school but motivated other women to do the same. She plays an important role in a 5000 member women’s federation with an annual turnover of CAD\$ 2 million. The women in her community discuss development issues and negotiate successfully with banks and markets to achieve development outcomes.

You can see the community and members of financial institutions at this gathering.

Even though Peria Jakkamal was illiterate, she could convince the community with her sincere and authentic eloquence. 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. She was inclusive and interacted with both men and women, always attributing the success to the group rather than to herself alone.

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.

What can we learn from women leaders in development? Jacqueline Novogratz sums it all up and I quote: 'I went in as a leader with pure audaciousness. I didn't have as much humility....The real lesson for me was how dignity is so much more important than wealth....And so leadership is a way of inspiring, listening, and letting people grow in themselves in their own way'.

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. This book captures the reflections of women on becoming leaders, being leaders and helping others to become leaders. And its 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?

In North America there is an interesting trend as more young women are earning higher salaries compared to young men. Why is this so? The nature of the economy has changed. Earlier it was a manufacturing economy producing goods and because strength mattered, men dominated the work force. Today we have a knowledge economy in which a different set of skills is required for success. According to Hanna Rosin, what is now needed is intelligence, the ability to sit still and focus, to listen carefully, communicate openly and work in teams. Women can do all these things very well and are earning higher salaries. (TED Talk). So there appear to be more opportunities for women leaders in 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.

But, transformational leaders can face challenges when confronted with formal institutions, rules and regulations. How can we sustain the transition from non-formal to formal leadership?

Peria Jakkamal played a role until a formalized platform emerged and made way for others to take over. Dame Kidu too encouraged others to take the baton as she moved on.

Leadership is mostly studied from the point of view of corporate and political organisations but we need to focus on how education and learning can lead to transformational leadership and what is the role of academic institutions?

The questions we need to ask would be is women's transformational leadership different from men's? What motivates women to transcend social constraints to take up leadership roles? Is a transformational leader also an empowered woman in her personal life? The Vice President of a Commonwealth country, a role model for other women in her country, suffered domestic violence on a continual basis until she broke down at a public speech and decided to extricate herself from the situation.

And if you were to ask me my personal views about women's leadership, I would say that one, there always seems to be a pressure to prove yourself. Two I find that I'm very cautious in taking risks and finally I do believe in a collaborative approach. But I think many men would probably feel the same way. Even so, it is important to consider the gender dimension of leadership because of the different situations of men and women in society.

As Kofi Annan reminds us that we cannot achieve our development goals by discriminating against half of humanity.

In the Global Monitoring Report, the international development community states very clearly that investing in women's equality and empowerment is smart economics. Reserving one third of the panchayat seats for women in Indian villages has led to improvements in the provision of water, sanitation in schools, a reduction in corruption, teenage girls marrying later, having fewer children and aspiring to higher education. (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). In India and Nepal, after women had a bigger say in forest management, there has been a significant improvement in conservation outcomes (Aggarwal, 2009). It is possible to see a clear link between women's empowerment and development effectiveness.

What can we do to make a difference? We can adopt a gendered perspective in everything we do—by being aware of power relations at every level; by being conscious of gender issues and women's rights; and by challenging gender stereotypes and biases. This perspective will definitely help us become more evolved and transformational leaders.

With that let me thank you for your kind attention.