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THE POWER OF...
LEADERSHIP

**Transformative
Feminist Leadership:**

What It Is and Why It Matters



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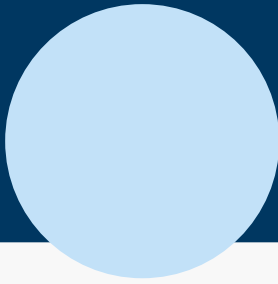


INTRODUCTION

***If you do not change direction,
you may end up where
you are heading***
– Lao Tzu

The words of ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu make the simplest, yet most profound, case for transformation – a change of direction, a fundamental shift in the nature or character of something, recasting the existing order and ways of doing things. This is what the world needs now, as institutions and systems of the past century prove unable to address the challenges of impending planetary disaster, persistent poverty, pandemics, rising fundamentalism and authoritarianism, wars, and everyday violence. Against a background of a worldwide backlash against women’s rights, gender parity in leadership positions – in legislatures, corporations, or civil society – has proved inadequate, as women in these roles often reproduce dominant patriarchal leadership models or propagate ideologies and policies that do not actually advance equality or universal human rights. What is required is truly transformative, visionary leadership, whereby new paradigms, relationships and structures are constructed on the basis of peace, planetary health, and social and economic justice.

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1. BACKGROUND

In most organisational structures^a the dominant paradigm of leadership is characterised by the top man, the boss – the one in charge. In this model, leadership is a solo endeavour, always in control, rarely making or acknowledging mistakes. Sometimes, this model is cloaked in benign attire: the leader who motivates, inspires, consults and listens, providing space and opportunities for growth. Other times it is unabashed tyranny: the leader who brooks no challenge, expects obedience, and rewards sycophants. There are, of course, many shades between. Yet at the core lies dominance and individualism – the products of an outdated model of masculinity. We experience such leadership from our earliest childhood, in families and households, at work, and in governing institutions.

The health sector mirrors this quite starkly. Medical professionals and “experts” sit at the top of the hierarchy, while paramedical staff, who are equally essential, are situated at lower levels. Within this overall power structure lie multiple forms of hierarchy and dominance based on gender, caste, class, and race. For example, until the mid-20th century, doctors were male and nurses were female and subservient to doctors. In some contexts, ancillary staff from the lowest socioeconomic groups did the “dirty” work.

Indeed, the medical system closely resembled the caste system, but it was not unique in this respect. Women and other oppressed identities faced similar barriers in many organisations that included the glass ceiling, lower pay, “old boys” networks, nepotism and cronyism, racism, casteism, homophobia, ableism, class, and ethnic and religious biases. Ageism excluded younger people from leadership roles, and biases favoured experience, education, and social and intellectual capital. Intersectionality – the feminist concept that multiple forms of exclusion work together, rather than separately – was scarcely recognised.

^a Including networks and multilateral institutions and regional bodies.

1.1. THE CONUNDRUM

Why are unjust, discriminatory power dynamics being reproduced, even in subtle forms, within the very organisations dedicated to eradicating them in the larger world? While certainly not the sole factor, the dominant leadership model is a big part of the problem. In fact, transforming leadership is a central challenge to the wider project of social transformation. Leaders have failed to recognise that social transformation begins with leadership itself, and must be reflected clearly within their own practice of power, within the spaces they control, the organisations they lead, and the way they lead.

1.2. THE ROLE OF GENDER PARITY

One key strategy to address the predominance of men in leadership positions has been to advocate for greater gender parity, both in formal political institutions, as well as private-sector and civil society organisations. Over the past 50 years some degree of success has been evident. However, leadership itself has failed to be transformed. When women assume leadership roles within an institutional culture shaped by men and male hierarchies, they “become men,” [1] or, as many Latin American feminists put it, “women with moustaches” [2]. Sometimes they outdo the machismo of male leaders. This is usually a survival mechanism that women leaders use to gain respect and power in male-dominated spaces with masculine institutional cultures and what is called “structural sexism” [3]. Women who have attempted alternative leadership styles in such settings have faced enormous challenges, and are often compelled to revert to patriarchal, hierarchal leadership styles to gain legitimacy. As Hope and Rudo Chigudu state:

There is a lot of talk about women’s leadership; however, it is very often leadership conceived in a social and political vacuum or within systems that are not designed to help them thrive or promote transformation. We then wonder why the few individual women who do get into positions of influence do not succeed in making the change that we want to see [4].

It appears that, rather than women transforming leadership and power, leadership and power transforms women.

This does not mean that the goal of gender parity in leadership positions is pointless. On the contrary, it is essential, and a matter of basic equality and human rights. Whether in the public or private realm, women, who constitute half of the world's population, must have equal representation in decision-making processes at all levels. Yet, we are far from that basic goal.

Only 45 legislatures out of nearly 200 countries in the world have more than 30% women [5]. In the economic sphere, it will take 257 years, at the current rate, to close the gender gap [6]. Even in the development sector, while 70% of the workforce is women, women constitute just 46% of top leadership positions [7].

Ultimately, it is clear that equal representation of men and women in leadership is a necessary but insufficient strategy; the nature of leadership must be transformed, regardless of the gender identity of individual leaders. But what is feminist leadership and how can it be practiced? This paper unpacks the core dimensions of feminist leadership, and describes the critical steps for transforming organisations and leaders according to feminist principles and values. Various challenges are discussed, and concrete examples of how feminist initiatives around the world have achieved such transformation are provided.



2. POWER, FEMINISM, AND FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

The feminist approach to power is both radical and revolutionary, because it recognises three “faces” of power – visible, hidden, and invisible – and realises that power operates in three distinct arenas: the public, private, and the intimate [8, 9]. Power itself can be defined quite simply as: (a) who gets what (the distribution of resources); (b) who does what (the distribution of waged and non-waged work); (c) who decides what (decision-making power); and (d) who sets the agenda (who decides what is important, what matters, what can be discussed) [10]. Power is neither inherently good nor bad, but becomes so by the way it is used. It can be used in oppressive ways, namely *power over* and *power under*, or in liberating and empowering ways – *power to*, *power with*, and *power within*. Perhaps most importantly, at the heart of feminism is the idea that the more you share power, the more powerful you become, both as an individual and as an organisation or movement – even though not all feminists may understand or practice this.

This is what makes feminist ideology and its approach to power unique. Feminism digs deeper and analyses how patriarchy and other power structures operate in the most private, hidden spaces – inside the home, in intimate relationships, in customary structures (clan, caste, tribe), and within our own minds. Most importantly, feminism recognises that bodies and sexuality are primarily sites of power, discrimination, control, and violence.

Feminists acknowledge that power is at the heart of leadership, especially power over. Thus, feminist leadership seeks to move away from this oppressive use of power towards forms that are empowering, enabling, inclusive, and collective – power with, to, and within.

From the 1970s, feminist groups began experimenting with flatter organisational structures. By 2000, however, it became evident that even flat organisations develop hidden hierarchies of class, education, age, experience, caste, race, sexual preference, length of service, and so on. This painful journey has revealed that feminist leadership is much more than merely embracing feminist ideology or leading feminist organisations.

Thus, the concept and practice of feminist leadership [11, 12] was developed, emphasising how feminist leaders could reflect, within their own organisations and spaces, the values, purpose and practices that they seek to advance in the larger world – for if we cannot demonstrate what feminist social transformation looks like in our own spaces, how can we expect people to believe it is possible in the world beyond?

The feminist mantra “the personal is political” means that feminist transformation, including feminist leadership, must begin with transforming the self. Feminist leadership is no longer about biological females (or those who identify as women), playing leadership roles, but about integral changes in the way leadership is practiced, no matter what the gender identity of the practitioner.

DEFINING FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Feminist leadership is:

- a process of transforming ourselves, our organisations, and the larger world to mirror and advance a feminist vision of social transformation and justice
- not about authority and control, nor about being the boss, the “shero” or the saviour, but about dismantling discriminatory structures of power – visible, hidden, and invisible, within ourselves, our organisations and movements, and the larger world
- about unleashing our individual and collective power to build a world of peace, equality, and respect for nature and the planet, and the rights and wellbeing of all people are ensured, regardless of age, gender identity, race, nationality, ability, class, caste, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or location.

2.1 FEMINIST LEADERSHIP: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Power, and the way we practice power, is at the centre of leadership, and what makes it either oppressive or enabling. Feminist leadership is based on the idea that our principles and purpose should guide the practice of power. Thus, the framework for feminist leadership contains four key facets (the four Ps): (1) power; (2) principles; (3) purpose; and (4) practice [11].

The diamond, depicted in Figure 1, indicates that when the practice of power is filtered through or mediated by the larger purpose for which we are leading, and the principles and values that underlie this purpose, then our practices will be consistent with our larger mission. Principles are guidelines based on our values, and provide a normative framework for our larger mission, but also for our way of relating to others. Our purpose, or politics, is based on what we see as wrong in the current social, economic, and political reality, as well as our vision for change and the particular aspects that we work to advance. Since feminist principles are such a critical filter for our practice of leadership, it is useful to recap some (but not all) of the core principles that must underlie and inform the practice of feminist leadership.

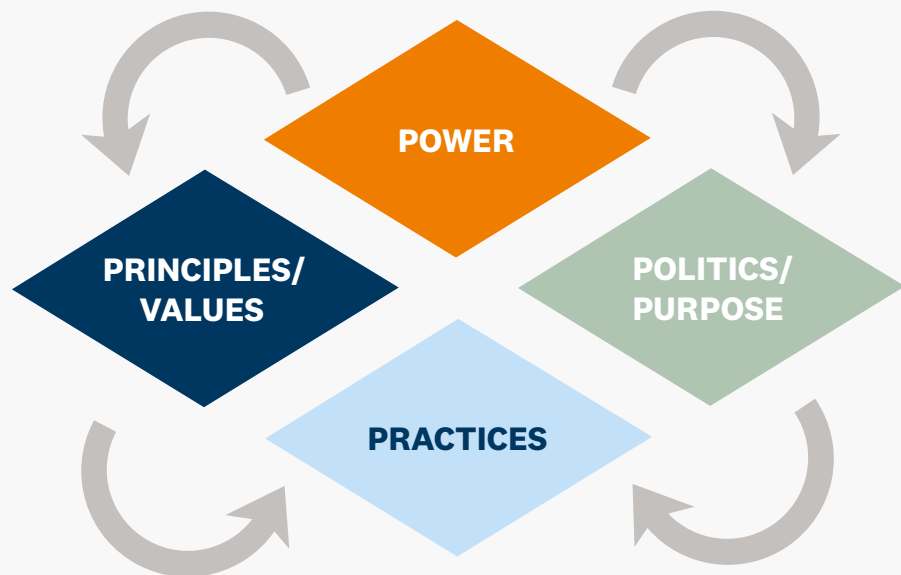


Figure 1: The feminist leadership diamond

2.2 PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

- **The personal is political.** Show, in your practice and your spaces what you preach to others.
- **The right to equality and equal treatment of all people**, regardless of identity.
- **Shared power**, and the transfer of decision-making power and control over resources to those who need it to make the organisation's mission successful.
- **Shared leadership and rotating leadership.** This could be in the form of co-leadership or collective leadership (where a small group shares decision-making), and ensuring term limits and periodic changes in leadership roles.
- **Democratic and accountable governance**, where not only the staff but the constituency is represented in all governance structures (boards, executive committees, etc.).
- **Openness and transparency about resources**, especially funding, and shared or consensus-based decision-making about how resources (human, financial, other) will be allocated and utilized.
- **Leadership training** for all members of the organisation, and active leadership transition systems.
- **Active support and space for younger leadership** and the programmatic or strategic innovations they bring.
- **Low levels of disparity in salaries** of staff at different levels, including leadership.
- **Policies that support wellbeing and resilience**, including paternity leave, creches and child care support, health coverage for mental health and wellbeing, sabbaticals, rest and leisure spaces and time off for those in highly stressful roles (e.g. working with survivors of trauma and violence or working in conflict situations), subsidized meals, ensuring work-life balance, and rotating responsibilities for manual labour (cleaning and maintenance of work spaces).
- **Transparent processes of recruitment, performance appraisal, and termination.**
- **Transparent and accessible internal conflict resolution and grievance procedures** that address hidden power dynamics and harassment or abuse.
- **Formal or informal systems of feminist mentoring** at both individual and organisational levels.

3. CRITICAL STEPS FOR TRANSFORMING ORGANISATIONS AND LEADERSHIP

There is no magic formula for deep organisational transformation. It requires action in several domains. The Gender-at-Work framework [13] identifies the key domains in which change must be located, whether informal or formal, individual or systemic (see Figure 2). Using these four axes, we create four quadrants of change.

First and foremost, we must examine the informal-individual quadrant to interrogate the unrecognised, and probably unhealed, trauma and pain that we carry within us. It affects our ability to lead in an enabling, feminist way. Our internalised attitudes, biases or sense of privilege shape the way we treat and behave with others. Setting up both daily healing practices, as well as deeper therapeutic measures, is essential to foster our healing and catalyse the positive, generous, and empowering energy within us.

In the formal-individual quadrant, we must ensure that each individual in the organisation has access to resources, voice, and control over the decisions that impact their work. In the formal-systemic quadrant, we must review our organisational hierarchies, policies, rules, roles, and performance and accountability systems to unearth hidden or invisible

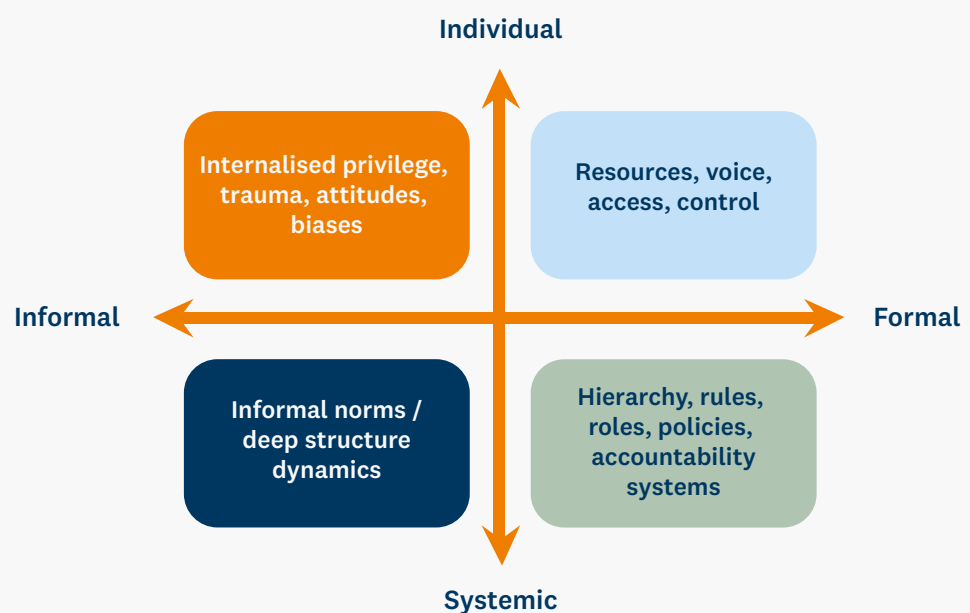


Figure 2: Gender at Work Analytical Framework [13]

biases and inequities that impair morale or perpetuate inequalities. We need to ask whether these reflect or contradict our stated principles and values, mission, or goals. We must analyse the informal-systemic quadrant to identify norms, expectations, hidden rewards and punishment systems, and other negative dynamics, and determine strategies to unearth and resolve them. Tools and external guides can support this process [12, 14, 15] and build capacity for feminist leadership [16].

3.1 CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO THE PRACTICE OF FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Aligning the four Ps – principles, purpose, and the way power is practiced – would appear to be quite straightforward. Why then is it so rare to see it in practice? Why are organisations that promote a healthy, equitable, nourishing environment the exception? Feminist organisational theorists and organisational change facilitators have identified a number of critical barriers:

(1) Biases with respect to identities, origins, and hierarchical status are normalised in organisational structures. For example, the health sector has legitimized its hierarchy of medical professionals, paraprofessionals, and ancillary staff. Similarly, political institutions or professions that historically evolved around men continue to exclude women in legislatures and local councils. Such exclusion has, historically, been viewed as “natural”. Racism embedded systematically (e.g. apartheid) is reproduced in all spaces and levels and widely considered “normal”.

(2) In feminist and social change organisations, these socially-embedded biases get subsumed in the “deep structure” of organisations [17]. Put simply, deep structures are the hidden, often unconscious, ways through which people reproduce internalised social biases and hierarchies within organisational spaces, constructing a kind of de facto culture that often contradicts the stated values and mission of the organisation. Some of the common deep structure dynamics in organisations include:

- a. **informal norms** (e.g. working late or on weekends to prove your “commitment”)
- b. **personal biases or sense of privilege** (e.g. women are responsible for meals and beverages while men take charge of the agenda, men commenting on women’s appearance or dress, the cleaning and caretaking of offices allocated to people from certain castes or ethnicities, or rude comments or jokes about people’s identities or background)

- c. **rewarding certain kinds of behaviour and penalising others** (e.g. promotions and benefits given to people who flatter or do personal favours for the leader, while those who question or challenge are excluded)
- d. **sub-groups and individuals have power and influence** unrelated to their formal position (e.g. the “old boys” club, the “founding” group, and those with long history in the organisation).

Deep structures are unique in that everyone knows they are there, but not how to name, confront, or tackle them. Leaders play a crucial role in these dynamics either by engaging in them directly or tolerating them, in spite of the negative impact on motivation and staff turnover. One of the critical tasks of transformative leadership is to uproot and dismantle such deep structures [12, 18] and proactively demonstrate the values of inclusion, equality, and solidarity.

(3) Another major barrier to achieving transformative feminist leadership is the self, because we bring to leadership our own unique histories, identities, and baggage – including systemic oppression and past traumas that have shaped our use of power – as well our talents, abilities, and social networks (Figure 3). Unfortunately, “we cannot leave our selves at home when we go to work” [1], so we carry this baggage, good and bad, but rarely recognise how it affects the way we are experienced by others, or how we relate to others. The most problematic dimension of the self is *power under*.

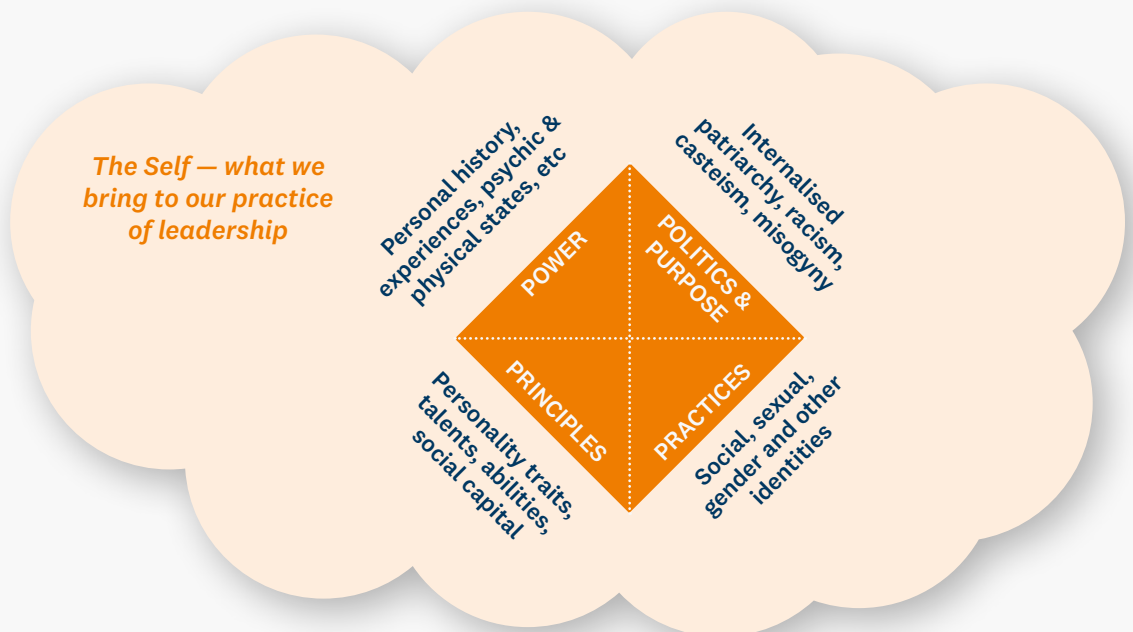


Figure 3: Gender at Work Analytical Framework [13]

(4) Power under is a term coined by psychoanalyst Steven Wineman to describe the way that people who have experienced trauma or oppression become oppressive to others when they gain power [19].

Wineman worked with people who had suffered various forms of trauma, and theorised that survivors carry within them powerless rage. This rage, when unhealed, leads survivors to practice power oppressively, for fear that otherwise, they will again be oppressed or victimized. For these people there are only two possible roles – victim or oppressor. In fact, Wineman proposed that without internal healing, even the most passionate of social justice advocates cannot achieve what he calls “nonviolent social change”. Karpman similarly theorised the concept of the “drama triangle”^{1b}, where people rotate between the three roles of victim, rescuer, and persecutor. Deeper analysis and healing is required to understand how to break out of this cycle.

(5) In previous work I proposed that people who experience not only severe trauma, but persistent, intensive, and systemic oppression also carry powerless rage, and therefore also practice power under when they gain positions of power or leadership [11]. This explains why so many people, regardless of whether they come from privileged or marginalized backgrounds, become oppressive leaders when they acquire leadership roles.

(6) Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is that operationalising feminist principles in the practice of leadership can make one personally vulnerable in various ways. Confronted with an unfamiliar mode of leadership, staff may take advantage or manipulate the situation in negative ways, or leaders may fear being disregarded and sidelined. It may be necessary to embrace this vulnerability as an opportunity to reflect and become more self-aware, which is a challenging journey in itself.

Given all these challenges, there is an urgent need for both individuals and organisations to become aware of them, and put in place mechanisms for overcoming them. The temptation, otherwise, will be to revert to tried and tested models that seem less complex, forgetting how oppressive these were.

b A summary of Stephen Karpman’s theory is available at: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karpman_drama_triangle.

Fortunately, there are concrete ways of doing this that are accessible to most of us, ranging from individual and collective healing [12, 20-21], to organisational change strategies [17]. Some organisations and networks have even created codes of conduct and manifestos to guide individual behavioural norms and organisational policies [22], and promote a healthy work-life balance and a positive organisational culture [23]. But where do we start? In the next section, we discuss the critical steps required to develop transformative feminist leadership and thus transform organisations.

3.2 A PATHWAY TO FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Although not intended as a definitive recipe or roadmap, the following key steps (though not necessarily in the same sequence) must be taken to realise transformative feminist leadership:

(1) No matter where you are located in the organisation, movement, or collective process, becoming a feminist leader begins with **analysing and working on yourself**, and aligning your four Ps. Are you dealing with unhealed trauma that needs to be tackled, or are you defaulting into power under – putting others down to make yourself feel more powerful?

(2) Mobilize others and build shared leadership of the transformation process – avoid the “s/hero” or “saviour” model. It is useful to articulate a set of principles of feminist leadership to guide both the individual and collective transformation process, as some organisations have done [24-26]. If you are in a formal leadership role, examine how power over resources and decision-making is shared in real terms, and what can change to empower people at different levels of the structure?

(3) Re-examine the organisational structure, or the structure of the movement or collective you are part of, to see if it reproduces a traditional top-down hierarchy. Examine potential opportunities to gradually restructure. Use Frederic Laloux’s “Reinventing Organisations” [27] model to identify which category your group falls in, and how you can move out of the impulsive (dominant), traditional (hierarchical), and achievement frameworks, towards a pluralistic (more circular) model adopting evolutionary structures.

(4) This requires us to **interrogate, analyse and dismantle the deep structure dynamics** – all the hidden forms of power, bias, and control that keep old inequalities going.

(5) All of these steps require the support of **feminist mentors and organisational change experts** who understand where we want to go, and support us on the journey, holding up a mirror, helping us explore new pathways and possibilities, and identify our internalised barriers as well as strengths.

(6) Create timelines, concrete goalposts, and activities, with measurable indicators of change. Otherwise the temptation is to default to old familiar approaches.

(7) Reach out and learn from others.

(8) Recognise progress and achievements along the way, both individual and collective, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem, and celebrate them!

This journey runs against many of the norms and standards you may have always considered “normal”. It will occasionally create confusion, even upheavals. The temptation will be to retreat to the known, the familiar, the well-worn systems of the past. It is vital, however, to embrace and work through these challenges. If you do, you will emerge as a transformed feminist leader, with a transformed organisation, movement, or collective, with a truly feminist culture.

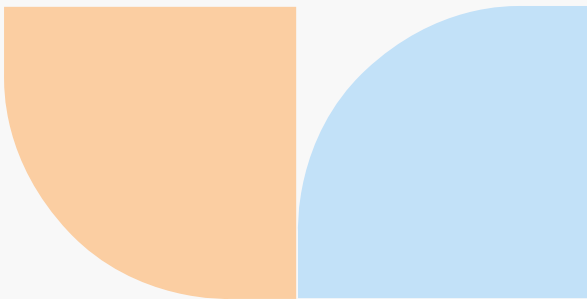


4. TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Some may feel that what is outlined above in the principles and pathways are utopian. However, evidence from the global to the grassroots level shows how the practice of transformative feminist leadership can be realised in each of the four quadrants. These experiments have painstakingly tackled the challenges that arise in the self, in hidden power dynamics, in changing formal governance and decision-making systems and policies, and in enhancing the voice, rights and participation of every member of their collectives, organisations, and movements. Some of these examples are not only inspiring, but also insightful into the difference that this kind of leadership can make.

4.1 THE INDIVIDUAL-INFORMAL LEVEL

This is the quadrant that deals with internalised privilege, trauma, and attitudes, with power under behaviour, including unconscious biases. Some examples of feminist organisational experiments in tackling trauma and powerless rage, and advancing wellbeing, are presented below.



EXAMPLE 1: DEALING WITH POWER UNDER

The leader of Hengasara Hakkinna Sangha (HHS, a feminist legal awareness organisation) in the Karnataka state of southern India, brought to its board's attention the disproportionate amount of time she was spending on dealing with deep structure and power under dynamics^a arising from the huge amounts of trauma and abuse many of her team were dealing with in their personal lives. She felt she was spending more time counselling them or sorting out interpersonal conflicts (rooted in the rage they carried into the organisational space from their private lives), than on the organisation's external work. In consultation with the board, a professional counsellor with feminist leanings was hired to counsel team members^b.

Initially, no one was willing to talk to the counsellor, lest they be stigmatised by their peers or supervisor. To break the barrier, the executive director began visiting the counsellor weekly and, soon after, others followed suit. The counsellor encouraged some staff to seek more formal support, including legal assistance and filing police complaints against domestic abusers, or finding women's shelters to remain safe while developing longer-term solutions. At the end of a year, the atmosphere within HHS improved remarkably, and the quality of its work was visibly enhanced thanks to the greater energy and motivation of the team. Investing in the mental health and wellbeing of its staff proved to be as effective in increasing HHS's external impact as it was in revitalising its internal environment.

a Though these terms and concepts were unknown at the time, this is clearly what they were.

b Although a very radical and farsighted experiment, it remains unrecorded. However, the author was involved in designing and launching this innovation during her time as Chair of the Board of Directors of HHS, and can vouch for its authenticity.

EXAMPLE 2: A WELLBEING SPACE IN THE OFFICE

Deepika, a young leader, was inspired by a feminist leadership and movement-building training programme. She focused on the lack of space for rest and recuperation for feminist activists, who bore the load of domestic labour and care work at home, as well as the emotionally and physically demanding tasks of the workplace. A number of young activists were burning out as a result, so Deepika persuaded her organisation, Feminist Approaches to Technology, to provide a small physical space where activists could read, rest, or simply sleep to recuperate their energy. She also organised discussions around wellbeing and the sustainability of feminist activism, and helped the team access wellbeing practices, such as yoga, meditation, and relaxation exercises. This radically and visibly transformed the internal environment and the energy that activists brought to their work.

EXAMPLE 3: HEALING FOR TRANSFORMATION

A number of global and virtual initiatives have addressed internal healing as part of the larger feminist transformation process. These have enabled individual activists to access healing and wellbeing practices outside of their formal organisational contexts.

Healing Solidarity (www.healingsolidarity.org) was set up in 2018 after a conference that focused on bridging the divide between transforming larger social structures of exclusion and inequality and the need to transform and strengthen our inner selves [20]. Their call is to “figure out how to create solidarity that heals rather than perpetuates injustice”. A range of online resources place individual healing and transformation at the centre of “re-imagining development.” These resources include online courses, healing workshops where methods are shared and practiced, and anti-racism workshops for white people working in international development.

Root, Rise, Pollinate (www.rootrisepollinate.us) is another fascinating initiative, whose core hypothesis is that “the transformation we need in the world is an (R) evolution of being” [21]. They believe that a peaceful, equitable, and affirming world that nurtures both individual and collective life cannot be achieved without mind, body, and spiritual practices. They engage and support feminist “pollinators” who help individuals and collectives heal and transform themselves as part of the wider transformation process.

4.2. THE SYSTEMIC-INFORMAL LEVEL

This domain is about changing the internalised social norms and practices that perpetuate inequality in both private spaces like the home and family, or within organisations in terms of the embedded male work culture or deep structure dynamics. A couple of interesting examples that tackled this are presented below.

EXAMPLE 4: THE REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN'S LAW OF THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT IN CHIAPAS, MEXICO

The Zapatista movement for autonomy in the Chiapas state of Mexico is the site of a longstanding political struggle for autonomy, and a great example of feminist leadership at the local level. In 1994, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN – known simply as the Zapatistas) enacted the Women's Revolutionary Law [28], which tackled discrimination and domestic violence faced by women from men within the movement, despite the lofty ideology and politics they embraced formally. The law lists a full range of women's rights, especially women's leadership at all levels of the struggle, decision-making rights within the family and the movement, including sexual and reproductive rights, and freedom from violence, with severe penalties for abusers.

Remarkably, the law was passed unanimously, including by the men, thanks to the support that was painstakingly built through grassroots discussions. Led by two senior commanders of the army, Commandanta Ramona and Commandanta Susana, the patriarchal deep structures of the movement were challenged. The revolutionary feminist nature of the law was that it was not intended to reverse roles or put women in a position of dominance over men. Rather, the domination model of leadership was dismantled, and collective processes of decision-making were built, allowing all voices to be heard and respected [29].

EXAMPLE 5: REVERSING DOMINANT CULTURES OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEADERSHIP

The programme *Mahila Samakhya* [women valued as equals] was launched in 1988 by the Government of India, using feminist popular education [30] methodologies to organise and empower marginalized women in rural areas. The programme was launched in 1989 in the state of Karnataka in South India through a government-created women’s NGO, *Mahila Samakhya Karnataka* [31], led by feminist staff, who mobilized Dalit^a and indigenous women into village-level collectives, leading to a mass movement of some 50,000 women. They fought on issues as diverse as minimum wages, the proper functioning of local schools and health services, and oppressive caste and gender norms and practices.

Given the radical nature of the empowerment process, the leadership simultaneously attempted to revise their leadership-building strategies, as well as those within the organisation [32]. One innovation was to reverse the permission process for seeking leave. Each individual was required to get permission from those most affected by her absence, rather than her supervisor. For example, village-level activists needed permission from the village collectives, the district coordinators from the activists, and the director from the district coordinators. Interestingly, many team members vigorously resisted the change, exposing the deeply internalised sense of privilege, status, and power that was being confronted.

In the village-level women’s collectives, leadership circles (of three or four women), rotating leadership and collective decision-making was introduced, responding to critiques of the usual leadership hierarchy seen in the village council or local cooperative. The model of collective leadership eventually took hold, after navigating struggles to determine who would represent the collective in various forums, and rotating core leaders after a set term. After a few years, collectives were proud of their radical ways of functioning and mocked the traditional hierarchical leadership model as outmoded and unfeminist. If an administrative official asked: “Who is your leader? Who is the president of this group?”, they would look at each other, smiling, and jokingly ask: “Who would like to be president today? Why not you? Or how about you?” The collective leadership model has continued within this movement till today.

a India’s most oppressed and impoverished castes, formerly known as “untouchables”.

EXAMPLE 6: TACKLING DEEP STRUCTURE DYNAMICS

One of the most challenging, yet essential, aspects of organisational transformation is in dealing with the informal-systemic quadrant.

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) conducted a bi-annual organisational survey that threw up a lot of deep structure issues, which were then tackled in transparent ways. The survey was designed in collaboration with AWID, but conducted by an independent organisation, and included questions around how each staff member rated the atmosphere in their team, the quality of the team leadership, and any experiences of bias, discrimination, or exclusion. While this sometimes led to turnover at key leadership levels, it also built a sense of trust and transparency, and manifested an earnest journey towards feminist transformation.

CREA is an international organisation based in the global south (New Delhi), and works on the intersections of gender, sexuality and rights. It has incorporated a 360 degree performance assessment system for staff at all levels, including leadership. This has democratised the appraisal of people's functioning, with subordinates, supervisors and peers engaged in the assessment, and broken the top-down model of performance appraisal, reducing opportunities for cronyism and patronage.

ActionAid Australia and Cambodia have conducted deep structure mapping and analysis exercises [12]. For example, male colleagues' comments on women's appearance and dress was identified as a discriminatory and unjust deep structure dynamic. Behavioural norms were then introduced, which precluded any staff member – no matter their level – from making such personal comments. Female staff experienced this as very liberating, and it has subtly shifted the power dynamic within the organisation.

4.3. THE INDIVIDUAL-FORMAL LEVEL

The following examples show that several organisations have empowered their members, increased their voice and decision-making power, and built supportive policies and mechanisms that promote wellbeing, while recognising the multiple roles of team members, especially women.

EXAMPLE 7: A GREATER VOICE FOR YOUNG WOMEN

The World YWCA, one of the oldest women's organisations (founded in 1894), for instance, has significantly transformed their own power structures and created space for 60% of their world board seats to be held by young women – young women made up 30% of the voting delegates at a recent world council [33]. This has given each young member of the organisation a far greater say in nominating and electing their representatives and leaders at the local chapter level and national level. It has also ensured that each young member of the organisation has more power in determining its overall priorities and governance.

EXAMPLE 8: SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVING ROLES

Many organisations have introduced measures to recognise the many caregiving roles that staff play, especially in their home lives, breaking the very patriarchal work-life binary that is so widely prevalent. These include paternity leave (to ensure male staff are supporting their partners when they give birth), time off for handling medical emergencies in the family, and of course, medical leave. However, many feminist organisations have gone a step further to provide health insurance coverage for mental health care (counselling, therapy, medicines), and time off or reduced workloads for those handling difficult emotional or physical health issues. Some also provide access to yoga, meditation, dietary counselling, breathing and relaxation exercises, and so on to help relieve stress and improve physical fitness.

Of course, all these measures have organisational costs that most organisations cannot afford; donors are still far from recognising the need to support such facilities. This reflects the prevailing attitude that individual wellbeing is a private matter and a private responsibility, which is paradoxical given the positive impacts on the workplace and work output.

EXAMPLE 9: THE FRIDA FUND’S HAPPINESS MANIFESTO

FRIDA, the young feminist fund, has created a happiness manifesto with guidelines for making FRIDA a happy and healthy feminist workplace [23]. The aim is to transform the internal culture of the organisation and promote the emotional health of staff.

“Whether we are leading online activism or organising public actions on the streets, young feminist activists are at the forefront of the battleground, pushing for transformative change, challenging the status quo, and striving for a world free of oppression and discrimination. Therefore, for us, individual and collective self-care are political strategies of resistance that help us become more resilient. ...

“We are passionate about our work, and we all work tirelessly. ... We overwork, deal with stress and anxiety, and witness violence and discrimination. ... This often leads to exhaustion, mental or physical illness, burnout and a constant imbalance between our personal lives and work.”

The manifesto contains 25 precepts or principles that each member attempts to follow, covering the three aspects of personal care: unleashing creativity, investing in developing personal capacity, and disrupting the system. The precepts include a 4-day week, with the fifth day devoted to reading and learning, taking responsibility to communicate over-tiredness, empathy towards each other, celebrating diversity, and even seeking therapy to heal from past trauma.

4.4. THE SYSTEMIC-FORMAL LEVEL

Many international, national and local women’s organisations and movements have developed structures and leadership systems based on shared power, accountable governance, and redistributed power at the formal-systemic level. These range from co-leadership and more authentically representative governance structures, to decentralising and democratising decision-making processes.

EXAMPLE 10: CO-LEADERSHIP

FRIDA adopted a co-leadership model almost from inception, with two women playing key leadership roles. They created a uniquely participatory and consultative grant-making process, where young women advise on grants in each region, challenging the top-down grant-making approaches followed by most funders. AWID also transitioned to a co-leadership model in 2017, with limited tenure; it is now in its second cycle of co-leadership. The former co-leaders of FRIDA have set up a path-breaking virtual lab or “hybrid space” called Closer Than You Think to promote innovative thinking about leadership, organisations, and transformation work rooted in feminist principles [34].

EXAMPLE 11: COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Network (IM-DEFENSORAS) is a network of activists across El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua, with Costa Rica acting as the security hub and safety net. Launched in 2010, the network developed a comprehensive and regionally-relevant response to the increasing violence against female activists, who were mainly from poor, indigenous and marginalized communities. They fight narco-mafias and ecologically destructive projects, such as dams. The women created local and regional leadership circles, and fostered democratic and decentralised decision-making, collective care and security (including rescuing and housing sister activists under threat, and supporting their families). They created a uniquely feminist analysis that links the defence of land and natural resources with the defence of livelihoods and bodies. They coined the term “women human rights defenders” but have demonstrated an intersectional feminist approach by marching for the rights of all oppressed, exploited, and excluded people, including LBTQI+ women and sex workers, as well as male activists under threat from ruling regimes, traffickers, and international corporate interests.

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Another exceptional example of not only collective, but highly dispersed feminist leadership, is the women's movement in Iran. Its survival under a very oppressive, misogynistic regime has been the result of creating completely localized and subterranean structures – women gathering under the guise of tea parties and sewing clubs – and highly decentralised leadership. Even the arrest and incarceration of several prominent national feminists has not managed to suppress or destroy it. Each local collective survives by going under the radar, but keeping alive a radical feminist analysis of national politics and local activism and resistance from time to time [35]. The power of this model of leadership is evident in the massive protests that are occurring in Iran today, with thousands of men joining in as well.

The Black Lives Matter movement across the United States is another site where feminist leadership emerged both online and on the ground, with highly decentralised, self-financed and localized systems of governance and strategic decision-making. There is no single central leader, which allows the movement to flourish and respond in agile ways to local contexts and challenges [36]. Its lack of formal leadership, and the extensive presence of women playing leadership roles at all levels, is quite striking as evidence of how impactful alternative forms of feminist functioning can be.

These stories reflect both the triumphs and challenges of the collective model, but demonstrate the transformative nature of shared power, decision-making, responsibility and accountability. They also emphasise the importance of building relationships of trust, open and honest communication when things go wrong, and of avoiding the external forces that often push some individuals from the collective into the limelight. One classic example is the valorisation by the media or on social media of specific individuals, or the singling out of individual “sheroes”.

EXAMPLE 12: DEMOCRATISING LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND OPPORTUNITIES

The National Domestic Workers Federation of the USA, one of the founding chapters of the International Domestic Workers Federation, introduced radical leadership innovations. They created collective and rotating leadership (after a fixed term) of each of their city chapters. They also ensure that every member of the federation undergoes leadership training within the first few years of joining the union, so that there is a wide pool of potential leaders, with basic skills, both at the local and national levels. This prevents a few dominant people monopolizing leadership positions for long periods of time [37].

EXAMPLE 13: TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE AND AGENDA-SETTING SYSTEMS

The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), founded in 1915, is one of the oldest women’s organisations dedicated to peace and challenging violence against women. Although founded and led for many decades by white women from the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, WILPF now has national chapters and member organisations in 52 countries in six continents, and has actively engaged in radically transforming its governance systems, its “herstory,” and its mission and agenda to reflect the diversity of its membership, and focus on issues and perspectives raised by members from different regions.

The International Domestic Workers Federation has created a highly democratic system of governance but, more importantly, member unions at national and local levels have a high degree of strategic autonomy, and they consciously embrace feminist leadership in concept and practice.

Similarly, WIEGO (an international network of women working in informal sectors) has created a governance system that ensures representation of key constituencies. That is, home-based workers (HomeNet International), street vendors (StreetNet International), domestic workers (International Domestic Workers Federation), and workers in the food processing and service industries (International Union of Food and Allied Workers) are represented in key governance bodies and decision-making processes.

4.5. FEMINIST MENTORING IS KEY TO TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP

Clearly, transforming both the practice of leadership and organisations to be in line with feminist principles is neither simple nor straightforward. The task is to reject the dominant social mores and rules, and to look within the most hidden and painful parts of ourselves in order to make fundamental change. Leadership can be lonely, even isolating, in many organisations. Very few individuals have the courage, capacity or commitment to enter into this kind of transformation on their own. Since this journey often creates upheaval and resistance, there is a temptation to revert to tried and tested forms, no matter how unequal and disempowering they are. We need support, guidance, and someone to help us embark on the journey, accompany us along the way, and get back on the path of change when we trip or fall down.

The need for external mentorship is clear. People in formal leadership positions, and organisations committed to transformation, need external guides who can hold up a mirror and explore pathways for internal and organisational transformation. Feminist mentorship fills this role:

Feminist mentoring has a distinct purpose – to deepen awareness of how gender/ other social injustices affect [our own psyche], [as well as] our functioning in our private and public roles; to challenge the socio-political-economic-historical-cultural systems and institutions that uphold these; build willingness to challenge belief systems that normalise and perpetuate these; and lastly, to mobilize others to work for equity and gender justice.

Thus, feminist mentoring goes beyond the boundaries of conventional mentoring in recognising the multiple spaces in which young women activists must tackle gender-based injustices: in social structures such as families and personal lives, in their organisations, and in their communities and societies at large [38].

Feminist mentorship can be distinguished from conventional mentoring, which is often focused on career advancement and how to succeed within existing organisational structures [39]. Although still evolving in both theory and practice, feminist mentoring in at least one context has demonstrated its tremendous impact in enabling individuals to work on the self, navigate change in organisational and community spaces, and emerge as stronger feminist leaders in practice [39].



5. CONCLUSION

Critical challenges confronting leaders and leadership, particularly for those in the social change and social justice sector, can be summarised as the following:

1 Resist and dismantle the myriad oppressive and intersecting structures of power that have brought us to the present precipice – unbridled and extractive capitalism, patriarchy, race, class, caste, heteronormativity, ableism – and build our collective power to save the earth for future generations and for all of Earth’s living beings.

2 Create and construct new visions using collective power for change, intersectionally, and help build empowering connections and relationships between people and the planet, based on such shared visions.

3 Protect and preserve not only our habitats and natural resources, but also rediscover and restore practices from our shared histories of living in far more socially connected, environmentally sustainable ways [40].

This of course is only possible with a fundamental transformation of leadership and its practice – a feminist transformation. It should be clear by now that transformative feminist leadership is about a fundamental shift in the way power is arranged and practiced by individuals and within organisations, and that transformative leadership and transformed organisations must go hand in hand.

We have seen that this kind of leadership is feminist because it involves examining and dismantling both the overt paradigms of leadership, power and organisational hierarchy embedded in virtually every institution. Virtually every institution, as well as the internalisation of the hidden, invisible and destructive ways in which power operates within ourselves and within our organisations – in their “deep structures” – needs to be overcome.

**“As for the best leaders,
the people do not notice their existence.
The next best, the people honor and
praise. The next, the people fear;
the next, the people hate.”**
– Lao Tzu

Most importantly, feminist transformation is not only concerned with changing society or the world at large, but begins with the self and the spaces in which we work and live. It involves recognising that we, and the spaces, organisations and structures we occupy, are important sites of change. Only feminist leadership and organisational development theorists, using feminist concepts and analytical frameworks, have confronted and articulated these issues clearly.

Their key message is that we must fundamentally transform the concept of leadership, and its purpose, form, and practice. This is best summarized by the great Zimbabwean feminist activist and leadership capacity-builder, Hope Chigudu, whose words sum up this paper:

[Transformative] leadership is not about positional power, accomplishments, not even about what we do. It's about creating a domain [a space and process] in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in ... creating new realities. Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances. It's about giving people hope [41].



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From Me to We – Feminist Leadership Mapping Initiative: <https://feministhikingcollective.org/from-me-to-we> &

Unpacking Collective Feminist Leadership - <https://feministhinkingcollective.org/reflection-project>

Closer Than You Think – an ideational space for rethinking structures / organization - <https://www.closerthanyouthink.co/>

Feminist transformative movement building: <https://www.rootrisepollinate.us/>

ON WELLBEING, HEALING & SELF WORK:

Healing solidarity - <https://healingsolidarity.org/>

Root, Rise, Pollinate: www.rootrisepollinate.us

Capacitar approach to healing and wellbeing: <http://www.traumaandnonviolence.com/capacitar.html> and Capacitar toolkit: <https://capacitar.org/wp-content/uploads/EngCapEmergKit.pdf>

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