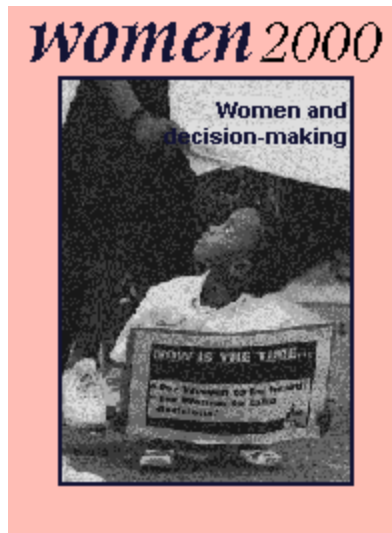


Women2000

Women and decision-making

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"You agree, then . . . that men and women are to have a common way of life . . . -- common education, common children; and they are to watch over the citizens in common whether abiding in the city or going out to war? . . . And in so doing they will . . . preserve the natural relation of the sexes."

The Republic, Plato (428-348 BC)

INTRODUCTION

At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995, the global community stressed the importance of women assuming positions of power and influence, not only because their points of view and talents are needed, but also as a matter of their human rights. Moreover, increased involvement of women in decision-making processes with respect to social values, development directions and allocation of resources enables women as well as men to influence societal agendas and to help set priorities. Efforts to achieve gender equality are thus more likely to be brought into the mainstream of decision-making and to be pursued from the centre rather than the margins.^{1/}

Yet questions about both style and substance persist where women and decision-making are concerned. As many historians listen, they hear the echo of questions raised at different times in different parts of the world when the right to vote and to hold office was granted to working men who had neither the property nor the level of income that, earlier, had qualified men as "responsible" citizens.

Like the questions at that time about working men's participation in the exercise of public power, interest in gender-based differences and similarities in approaches to decision-making has increased in recent years and has been the topic of a growing number of leadership training seminars and workshops in different parts of the world. This issue of Women 2000 offers some recent evidence on women's entry into the "corridors of power", whether in governance, business or other public domains, along with conclusions of a number of the studies on women's decision-making styles and focus. The purpose of this edition is to present issues, stimulate research and, above all, provoke discussion.

In exploring the question of women's role in decision-making, particularly in the public sphere, the term "corridors of power" itself may need scrutiny. In many cultures, people think of the space in which authority is exercised as small and exclusive. Why don't we speak instead of "arenas of power", "theatres of power" or, in an age of democracy, "amphitheatres"? A number of groups, among them women's activists, have called for using power openly and inclusively rather than in a hierarchical and exclusive manner. They also suggest that negotiation and consensus-building are among women's special abilities, along with the ability to listen, to see beyond one's own point of view and to adapt rapidly. According to a number of today's business thinkers, these are just the qualities needed in today's ferociously competitive economic environment.^{2/}

Some of these groups have also claimed that because of inborn altruism or their roles as mothers, women leaders would foster societies of peace and nurturing. In much the same way, they have assumed that women captains of trade and industry would advance economic justice. In addition, since the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, some women's advocates have argued that women are natural caretakers of the environment -- largely because in many rural societies, women have managed water, food and fuel resources and employed their knowledge handed down from generation to generation about herbal medicines and other natural products.^{3/}

But for every peacemaking woman monarch, a comparable warrior queen comes out of history's pages. For every female environmental healer, there is an exemplar of unsustainable consumption. Although much of the data on women and decision-making have been anecdotal, an increasing number of full-scale studies are emerging based on the growing number of examples of women decision-makers in public life. But until women's participation rate reaches the level of "critical mass", generalization is difficult. This critical mass can be defined as the proportion of 30 to 35 per cent that, in any group, may result in marked differences in content and priorities, often leading to changes in management style, group dynamics and organizational culture.

The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in support of the Commission on the Status of Women, the international intergovernmental body charged with securing the advancement of women, has been exploring the question of women and decision-making for some time. In 1989, an expert group met in Vienna to consider "Equality in Political Participation and Decision-Making". Another expert group met in 1991, in Vienna, to discuss "Women in Public Life". "Gender and the Agenda for Peace" was the focus of a 1994 expert group meeting in New York, while another expert meeting in that same year examined "Women and Economic Decision-Making". In 1996, two United Nations expert group meetings addressed these issues. The first considered "Political Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution: the Impact of Gender Differences", and was held at the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The second was "Women and Economic Decision-Making in International Financial Institutions and Transnational Corporations", held at Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts.

At its forty-first session in 1997, the Commission on the Status of Women considered a critical area of concern, women and power and decision-making, and called for acceleration of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in this area. Governments were called upon, inter alia, to take into account diverse decision-making styles and to project positive images of women in politics and public life.^{4/}

NOTES

1/ Johanna Schalkwyk, Helen Thomas and Beth Woroniuk, "Mainstreaming:
A
Strategy for Achieving Equality between Women and Men, A Think
Piece", unpublished paper, July 1996.

2/ Among the most widely read are Peter Drucker and Tom Peters. The
latter, as paraphrased by economist Robert Chambers in Whose Reality
Counts? Putting the First Last (London, Intermediate Technology
Publications, 1997) p.196 , calls for "achieving flexibility by
empowering people, learning to love change and becoming obsessed with
listening . . . a culture of knowledge-sharing versus hoarding, user
democracy versus authoritarianism"

3/ Cecile Jackson of the University of East Anglia questions this
belief from the standpoint of gender analysis worldwide in "Doing
What Comes Naturally? Women and Environment in Development", World
Development, vol. 21, No. 12, 1993, pp. 1947-1963.

4/ Commission on the Status of Women, Report on the forty-first
session
(10-21 March 1997), Official Records of the Economic and Social
Council, 1997, Supplement No. 7 (E/1997/27, E/CN.6/1997/9), pp. 10-12.

THE PERILS OF STEREOTYPES

Almost every class in every culture around the globe has projected an ideal of the woman who endures and sacrifices for her children, her family or her people. But worldwide there are also other visible images of women. In Viet Nam 1,000 years ago, legend has it, two princesses overthrew Chinese oppression for the first time in that country's history. In seventeenth-century Jamaica, Nanny of the Maroons is reputed to have outwitted the British for three decades. And from contemporary India comes the modern folk heroine Phoolan Devi, the "Bandit Queen". Despite adverse circumstances, she fought for the oppressed and later became a Member of Parliament. When we look at stereotypes of male behaviour, exceptions can also be cited.

What does modern science say? According to a number of experts, the vast outpouring of research since the 1980s has shown fewer differences between men and women based on gender than differences that grow out of disparities in income, household responsibility or access to power.^{5/}

Despite such examples, the belief that any one group of people is inherently predisposed -- usually by heredity --- to perform one or another function in society, such as to rule or to enjoy whatever a culture considers privileged, has persisted in some quarters and has been described by scholars as "essentialism". The idea of essentialism probably reaches back into prehistory. The oldest and most universal essentialism concerns the "nature" of women as distinct from the "nature" of men -- with whom "human nature" is generally associated in western culture. Some scholars have subscribed to an essentialist philosophy to defend women as having a particular style or approach.

Problems arise from essentialism. One is to equate identity with beliefs and behaviour. If a person is defined by any trait that is considered dominant by those who do the defining, he or she is also expected to hold certain convictions, exhibit certain behaviour patterns and take certain actions. Whether these convictions, behaviours or actions are judged good or bad, beneficial or destructive, essentialist perspectives tend to deny or gloss over differences within a given group -- even a group defined by a set of ideas, such as a religion or a political philosophy. All Christians, for example, might be presumed to adhere to a particular creed -- or all socialists or feminists; the creeds or behaviour themselves are at best represented simplistically, one or another element eclipsing the complex whole.

One analyst points out that if we reduce human beings to one or another facet of their identity, we reduce enormously the possibility of human change -- whether of groups or individuals -- through education and experience.^{6/} Essentialism thereby endangers reform as well -- certainly to the extent that it aims at reforming values, attitudes and behaviours. It is just as dangerous to champion women in terms of immutable biological traits as it is to ignore the needs that arise from these traits or to subjugate women because of them.

Since women inhabit the globe in much the same proportions as men, it is not surprising that they are as diverse as men. Over and against any concept of an inborn and universal female identity, the Fourth World Conference on Women set gender issues in the context of the evolution of societies and characterized women's diversity as an asset to all aspects of human development. A major message of Beijing was that stereotypes should be avoided -- particularly those that make assumptions about female and male traits.

Issues and Styles: Gender Dimensions

Despite their diversity, however, there appear to be specific kinds of issues women tend to champion, and they appear to bring distinctive styles to leadership. Arguably, such similarities can be traced to the different positions women hold in society, the ways in which different societies constrain women or enable them to fulfil their human potential and the distinct roles that society expects them to play in relation to men, rather than any supposedly "innate" female or male qualities. Whether as mothers or caregivers concerned with basic needs or, in times of war and conflict, as protectors and mediators, women are often directly responsible for the immediate survival of their families. Although their particular concerns and styles may vary from one society to another (and within societies), they tend to bring to governance and other public-sector affairs a perspective that in some measure reflects their social and cultural position and the prevailing gendered division of power.

The differences displayed by women and men must therefore be examined in relation to enduring social structures. Gender socialization begins in infancy for both girls and boys. The power relations between women and men are enforced and reinforced throughout their lives. As two social scientists have remarked, "The gender dimensions of multiple social structures interact and, in effect, 'discipline' individual behaviour to conform to stereotypes."⁷

So it is that women in authority have often assumed male attributes, even male dress. In Egypt 3,500 years ago, the only woman Pharaoh, Hatshepsut, had to put on a beard of lapis lazuli and a male kilt for ceremonial occasions. It was the only way she could perform the central ritual of Egyptian kingship, by which the god-monarch every morning celebrated the sun's rebirth and re-transmitted life to the people of the Nile valley. In literature, Shakespeare's Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, amazes everyone with her legal skill -- by which she "tempers justice with mercy" and outwits the villain in his lawsuit for a pound of flesh. But she does so disguised as a man. Similarly, both Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher were termed "statesmen" and contemporary women executives wear "power suits". The reverse, a man imitating a woman, is less frequent, particularly if the aim is to portray public power and influence.

Attributes women bring to public life: One expert group view

- A particular concern for justice and the ethical dimension of

- politics, derived in part from their experience of injustice
- A talent for setting priorities and accomplishing complex tasks learned in the course of balancing competing demands for their time and attention in the family, at work and in the community
- An awareness of the value of consensus and agreement, because of their central role in social relationships
- A concern for future generations^{8/}

In the early 1940s, a British diplomat summed up his view of women and political life that is still widely believed. There were three feminine qualities -- "zeal, sympathy and intuition" -- that he considered dangerous in international affairs unless kept under the firmest control. The ideal diplomat, in his view, needed "male" qualities such as "impartiality and imperturbability", and, he surmised, needed to be "a trifle inhuman".^{9/} Recently, an exit poll conducted by the University of Namibia in that country's regional and local elections found that about one fourth of the respondents said they would find it difficult to vote for a woman candidate because "women are not suitable".^{10/}

By contrast, in many countries today, some transnational corporations trying to survive in a highly competitive world appear to be "finding common ground with the values that women have been raised and socialized to hold".^{11/} These so-called "female principles" according to Anita Roddick, who founded a transnational firm, include:

"principles of caring, making intuitive decisions, not getting hung up on hierarchy or all those dreadfully boring business-school management ideas; having a sense of work as being part of your life, not separate from it; putting your labour where your love is; being responsible to the world in how you use your profits; recognizing the bottom line should stay there -- at the bottom."^{12/}

Notably, trends towards democratization and greater participation in both business and government point towards valuing traits that women acquire through socialization.

"Organizations of different kinds are now going through a 'feminization' of their structures, some more rapidly than others, creating more space for the discussion and valuing of personal issues and problems, as well as reconsidering a more

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