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WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING ROLES

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Why does it matter to have more women in decision-making roles in the international development and humanitarian system?

Well... you know the traditional answer, which is that you get better humanitarian and development outcomes by focusing on or involving women. But these are technical or utilitarian arguments. They see women only in their reproductive or economically productive roles i.e. they are means towards certain ends. These ends are either benign charitable ones such as reducing the suffering of women in disasters and crises, or mitigating the complications of their unavoidable biological attributes as mothers. These “ends” are well intentioned, and a lot of investment goes into the means to achieve them but they are not the drivers of the change that will have a sustained transformative effect on society.

The real answer depends on the framework of values to which you subscribe. Do you believe in a world in which there is equality of opportunity? Do you believe in allowing both men and women equal say in shaping the world we live in? Do you believe in fairness and justice?

This then, is my initial point – gender equality is vital because it is a basic human right, and the right thing to do. It is not a means to an end. It is an end by itself. It needs no other technical or programmatic or humanitarian or economic justification.

Coming then to the specifics of the humanitarian and development sector: today, this is characterised not just by individual compassion and charity but by organised and institutionalised efforts. This is reflected in the growth of numerous assistance organisations such as the large UN agencies, many international and national NGOs, and the Red Cross Red Crescent.

By and large women play significant roles in all these agencies. They are in the majority at the lower levels doing the day-to-day work, in both administrative and operational terms. And, at the management and leadership levels, good progress has been made to recruit women. Most of the UN development and humanitarian agencies have recently had women heads right at the top, and many women are also occupying director-level positions. Among international NGOs, there has also been progress but the Red Cross Red Crescent system has a lot further to go to catch up. However, at national levels, the target of at least one-third women (why not 50:50?) in decision-making roles has some way to go.

So, what are the constraints to women assuming decision-making roles? Research has indicated several factors.

- First, of course, it is straightforward gender prejudice or discrimination – an innate belief that many men – and even many women - have that women are less able than them.
- Second, it may be lack of governance commitment and systems for accountability to ensure that agreed policies on gender equality are actually put into practice.
- Third, it could be archaic work practices i.e. the way the normal rituals and demands of the work place are organised – that disfavours women from playing fuller roles.

Such constraints are not difficult to overcome if there is political and organisational will. There are many examples of how good organisations have got over them – through awareness and education of their staff, specific positive discrimination measures including quotas, making changes in the workplace, and instituting stronger accountability mechanisms.

But we have also learnt that these reforms don't happen by themselves: they need to be stimulated, incentivised, and struggled-for by the unrelenting efforts of those with the greatest personal stake. It is a lesson from history worth remembering that no social progress has been made or rights realised anywhere without a struggle – and sometimes a fight – for them.

But even if organisational obstacles are removed, it does not mean that women will suddenly take an equal place at decision-making tables. What about self-created constraints among women? I am referring here not to the familiar tension between juggling family commitments and professional careers but I am asking: are women different to men when it comes to leadership roles?

Quite a lot of research has taken place in this area. For example Zenger and Folkman, in 2011, assessed thousands of men and women leaders against 16 competencies considered to be crucial for good leadership. The results showed that women were rated higher in 12 of the 16 competences. And this was not just in traditional stereotypical areas like women having a more nurturing and co-operative leadership style compared to men, but even in areas that men boast as their traditional advantages i.e. being results driven and taking more initiative, women did better. In fact, the only place where women did not do as well as men was in the competency of “developing a strategic perspective”.

So it seems that it is now “scientifically proven” that women are better leaders than men. We can all reflect on our own experiences of being led by men and women. Speaking personally, of the 4 most memorable leaders – 2 men and 2 women – who have shaped my professional life over nearly three decades – I remember all of them with gratitude but it is the two women who left an indelible positive mark while the two men eventually disappointed.

While this small personal sample does not provide a representative basis on which to make sweeping generalisations, it does make me curious enough to ask the question: if, on objective grounds, women are indeed better placed than men to be better leaders, does that make the organisations they lead – better too?

Unfortunately I am not aware of any systematic studies that have looked objectively at this important question – and so we don't have a properly validated answer. But our daily observations on the institutional scene indicate – and my considered hunch is – that women-led organisations are not necessarily better performers compared to

male-led bodies. This is not surprising. Leadership is a personal attribute – whether you are male or female. And for women at top levels working in a predominantly male cultured institution, the challenges of gaining acceptance and even just surviving are so massive as to consume all their energies and abilities... with little spare to bring about other longer term changes.

Be that as it may, let me turn next to practical aspects of the challenges faced by women aspiring to be decision makers. Some time ago, the Guardian professional development network asked a group of women leaders for some practical tips. And here is my adapted version of their advice on seeking to make it to the top.

1. To get to the top, don't be afraid of starting at the bottom: Sometimes this means you must be willing to do something that you had never thought of before to do.

2. Find your voice while you are young: The younger you are when starting to speak up, attend board meetings, senior official gatherings where women are under-represented, the better it is: with time you get used to it and the men get used to it too, most of them will learn to focus on your added value and will see you, if not as an equal, at least as a trusted partner.

3. Being spontaneous and intuitive can lead to success: Most normal people – unless they are demonically driven – don't plan their careers carefully from birth to death. But if you have some ambitions, don't be afraid to pursue them. Don't say no to things you are secretly scared to do, and don't be afraid to make mistakes or ask 'stupid' questions. You can model yourself on some role models but don't copy them. Above all else, trust your own heart and your own inner convictions. In short, be yourself.

4. Make sure you are adaptable and invest in your own learning: In any field, you need to renew yourself constantly. This is especially so in humanitarian and development work. This is diverse, dynamic and constantly evolving because of its very nature so there is always room for innovation, learning and sharing.

5. Keep calm and stay healthy. As women scale new heights in the workplace, they pay a heavy price: women in stressful jobs have a nearly 40% increased risk of heart disease and a 60% increased risk of diabetes than their less-stressed colleagues. According to the American Psychological Association, women are more likely than their male colleagues to feel stressed during a typical workday, due to many factors, including feeling underappreciated in the workplace.

6. Emotions make a leader authentic: In many cultures women are branded as 'too emotional' — the implication being that emotions are a bad thing. But emotions are what make us human. They are part of being an authentic leader. You cannot succeed as a leader by being coldly clinical about it.

7. Learn to communicate your own vision in a human way. There's a real role for female creative thinkers who can tell a compelling narrative, or describe a future vision in order to get people mobilised around an idea. Men will also follow you if you get that right.

So these were the 7 top tips proposed by established women leaders to their sisters aspiring for leadership. The core message here is that women must overcome their own inner barriers that are at least as important as well-known institutional barriers.

Turning next to institutional barriers. I don't think we need to repeat them here – they have been well discussed in other sessions. Here are some comments and further tips proposed by women themselves who have struggled to overcome them.

1. The problem is not at the top, but at middle management level: The challenge is not having women in top positions (eg in the UN 40% of country offices are headed by women), and attracting women at entry levels is not too difficult either. The problem is the lagging numbers of women in middle-management positions.

2. Anti-discrimination laws need to be properly enforced: Otherwise only too often women have to rely on the goodwill, patronage and whims of men to have fair chances to make a contribution to the institution they work in and the society they live in.

3. Tailored programmes to allow women leadership emerge can be useful: While the debate continues on whether leaders are born or bred, a lot can be done to enhance women's capacities to take up senior positions, build strong networks and provide mentoring opportunities and resources to help women get plugged into power structures. Mentoring schemes are particularly useful.

4. Women working in the field face an additional challenge. The way decisions are made at the frontlines of urgent and crisis settings is often through informal structures, relationships, and networking. By and large women tend not be part of these boys' clubs and so can be excluded or marginalised – with impact on their career progression. Specific workplace policies need to address such exclusionary habits.

5. Organisational cultures are best challenged from within: While change can be incentivized from outside it needs to be owned inside if accepted norms are to be shifted and organisational minds opened to women playing their part in a creative manner.

6. Women need stronger support networks: Power networks are still largely male networks in the development community.. As a woman, when climbing the ladder you will be more isolated than your male counterparts so you need stronger support. Getting support from mentors, people more senior than you in the organisation you work in — good women or good men — is tremendously important.

Finally, please remember:

7. Success is not just about getting to the 'top': Not everyone has to climb the greasy pole of the executive ladder; we must respect all roles that allow women to make a significant contribution while also discharging family and other social roles.

Let me conclude by asking – why is a man presuming to talk about this matter? I have two reasons:

First, because gender discrimination is an issue that can only be addressed if men take responsibility to address it. As it is mostly men who create the problem, it will have to be men who are an essential part of the solution. Women-to-women approaches can do a lot in terms of solidarity and capacity building – but it is men who must look inside themselves and resolve to become different.

Second, as a man who has had the privilege to occupy quite a few leadership niches in the humanitarian and development system, let me note that the current system does not work for men either. We are surrounded by stressed out male leaders – in every sector – politics, business, etc – making terrible decisions that affect all our lives and even the planet we live on. Men having messed it up, I am hoping that women will make a better job of it.

Let me conclude by quoting Ariana Huffington:

“The world needs women to redefine success beyond money and power. We need a third metric, based on our well-being, our health, our ability to unplug and recharge and renew ourselves, and to find joy in both our job and the rest of our life. Ultimately, success is not about money or position, but about living the life you want, not just the life you settle for. Women need to lead the way to change that — both for their sake and for the sake of successful men who desperately need to learn how to lean back”

Dear women, we count on you to lead us all to that wonderful world.