

## Creating New Opportunities for Women's Leadership

Seattle Conversation, September 22, 2010

Twenty women gathered for this Conversation Circle, bound by their shared interest in the topic, "What is the Role of Women in Global Leadership?" Six of the women are iLEAP Fellows ([www.ileap.org](http://www.ileap.org)) from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Philippines. These experienced social change leaders are in Seattle for a three month intensive educational experience to enhance their leadership capacity, connect with professionals engaged in similar work, and develop on-going relationships with others committed to positive social change.

In the Conversation Circle women explored themes as diverse as the importance of deep knowing of self and leading from one's own center, to the challenge of shifting beliefs and patterns of behavior that are deeply embedded in cultural systems.

In fact, the undercurrent of the conversation seemed to be a consciousness about the need to create safe spaces for profound change to occur. Early in the evening, Madeline challenged us, "we must reconstruct the concept of power."

Rocio spoke about the difficulty of working with other women, especially those in positions of authority, "We are used to accepting that it is OK for men to have power over us, but it is hard for women to see another woman in a higher position or making more money. How do we get to a space of women helping other women?" And Colleen described how hard it was for her to transition from depending on herself alone, as a single Mom and caregiver for her own mother, to being part of a team. "I had to learn to collaborate," she commented. And Maria explained that in her work in micro-finance, "We have to teach the women how to work together, how to support and help each other."



Old patterns are powerful, often subconscious, and difficult to change. Madeline described a pattern familiar to us all. In a university class, in a group of six, with perhaps only one or two men, when it was time to choose a coordinator, the group chose the man. There was a clear sense in the Circle that -

*if we want more opportunities for women, we have to start with ourselves.*

“If you know who you are inside, that is a power no one can take from you,” Rocio observed. “When I am challenged by working with other women, I have to ask myself ‘What is it inside of me that is making this so difficult?’ In my heart, who am I?”

Part of starting with ourselves is being clear about our definition of success. The group acknowledged that it takes courage to define “success” for one’s self, and not accept others’ concept of success. Both those close to us, such as family members, friends, teachers, as well as the norms of our culture, prescribe what success should mean to us. We must know ourselves, and have confidence and bravery if we are to define success for ourselves. Our notion of success fuels our behavior. If we view success as achieving a certain position or level of income, that will probably prompt competitive behavior. If we view success as contributing to the common good, or as giving our unique gift or developing the talent we were given, different patterns of behavior are generated.

While the significance of the individual internal work of leadership was certainly clear, the Circle also focused on the importance of working collectively, through organizations and other systems to create more opportunities for women, to create safe spaces for profound change to occur. Some of the women work directly to create gender equality. They described eloquently the challenges of that. Women need training sessions and meetings that are for women only, to tell their stories, and to learn about their rights and about resources available to them. This may activate resistance on the part of men. Age-old hierarchical structures, and norms that teach us that “Father knows best,” that men should be the decision makers, that women should serve men - are incredibly powerful. They are embedded in our subconscious and influence behavior of both men and women.

How to change that? That is a question of the millennium!

*How can we change traditional beliefs and norms?*

Creativity, new stories, courage, collaboration and perseverance will be some of our most powerful resources. Group members shared some compelling examples:

- Era described how she used the influence of her position as chief of her tribe as she communicated with other chiefs and tribal elders. She

described radio spots that she helped to create that educated listeners about violence against women. She recognized that it is all the people in a community that shape what is acceptable behavior.

- Deborah shared a story about a group of Latino boys, the first of their families to attend high school, who self-organized around their intention to “make sure we graduate,” and committed to helping one another succeed.
- Madeline described a small group of men in Nicaragua who came together to reflect on the impact of their cultural norms on themselves. Trying to live the “ideal” image of a “real man” in their culture was keeping them from connecting deeply with their children, and keeping them from really experiencing their own emotions. They believe such traditional norms are not only harmful to women, but also to men. Becoming more conscious of social norms and examining their impact, is a powerful motivator for creating new behavior.
- Perhaps our mentors are our daughters. Several women in the circle described how their young adult daughters are looking at the world differently than women of their own generation - interacting in more collaborative, less competitive ways. They spoke about their daughters’ knowing who they are and living their lives with integrity. They are conscious of their relationship to the earth, intentional about the food they eat, aware of their role in the larger global community, and concerned about making a positive contribution to the greater good. Rocio noted that she was the first of her family to have received a University education, to learn a language other than her native language, to live in a different country. She spoke of the ways women in her culture are taught to be mothers, to serve the men. As she moves out into new experiences she has to teach herself new ways of thinking, new ways of being. What role models these young women are!

Increasing our consciousness of our behavior and what is driving it, aware of some of the alternatives to traditional norms that are emerging, supporting leadership that is inclusive, reflective and caring - - - these are all acts of leadership in themselves

Women bring new life into the world. As we gather in Circle, we encourage, challenge, and support one another in the many ways we are bringing new life into the world.