Strengthening Women’s Leadership: Using Best Practices to Develop a Leadership Training Model for Rural Women in Mali, West Africa

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Abstract

One fact that is too often noted about Mali, West Africa is that it is the fourth poorest country in the world. Reducing poverty in Mali, as with everywhere else, seems to be an inaccessible objective that requires significant resources. But history and experiences have proven that big changes often start out as the result of the passion of one individual leader or community (Horizon, 2006). All too often this individual could be, but is not, a woman. When women are deliberately included in family and community leadership roles, families and communities get great returns.

In an interview in Harvard International Review article, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said “Women tend to be the most marginalized of the marginalized. In fact, they also turn out to be those who possess the greatest initiative. It has been found that in almost every case, if you invest in women, they do not default. So they are a very safe investment” (2008, p. 76). One of the greatest investments in women could be made through educating women and offering them a better understanding of leadership processes. According to Robert Pringle, a former US Ambassador to Mali, while women still lag behind men in education and literacy especially in rural areas, “Malian village women are often talented organizers, and despite the hardships of village life, they are almost never beaten down or bereft of hope in a better future” (2006, p. 40). Most Malian women by nature are leaders, yet a better understanding of the leadership process could improve their leadership abilities and empower them.

The purpose of this poster is to demonstrate how knowledge about leadership models can be practically disseminated to rural women throughout Mali, and Africa for that matter, to help them use their natural talents and abilities and become true leaders within their communities. Women exhibit great leadership characteristics like Emotional Intelligence (EI) and great appreciation for relationships; these characteristics are vital for the success of many leaders. As Archbishop Tutu stated “There are attributes that distinguish women from men. The attribute of nurturing, the capacity to bring to life, are not masculine attributes. They are peculiarly feminine” (2008, p. 76). Women generally have a greater appreciation for relationships than men do, but sometimes they lack the education, self-confidence or an appropriate place in society to
offer their leadership capacity. It is important in capacity-building to focus on the current attitudes and skills of women and on what they are already doing to develop self-esteem and self-confidence (Greenberg & Okani, 2001).

At one point leadership scholars were asking “Can women lead?”, “but that is now a moot point… Increasingly, writers in the mainstream press are asserting that there are indeed gender differences in leadership styles and that in contemporary society women’s leadership is more effective” (Northouse, 2007, p. 265-266). While this point is directed towards women in American society the same is very true for women in Mali. “The ability of educated, middle-class Malian women to compete effectively with men is still limited, yet on balance it compares favorably with the situation in the United States and many other developed countries” (Pringle, 2006, p. 39). Because of this, leadership models and theories developed for women in developed countries should be scrutinized for transferable points to develop a leadership training model that could be disseminated throughout rural Mali to develop, educate and empower women in rural areas.

Relying on models such as the Autogenic Leadership Development model, developed by Lyons in 2007, and theories such as the transformational leadership theory that has been researched by many leadership scholars including Bernard Bass, a model for rural women in Mali could offer rural Malian women the opportunity to learn how to break the poverty cycle and be more influential in their communities.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) pointed out that, despite their overwhelming contribution to food security in developing countries, women are often invisible economically, statistically, and in popular culture and media. Winrock International, an NGO dedicated to reducing poverty and hunger, has advanced the fairly obvious notion that for women to become empowered, they need first to become educated. When women do not have access to formal education, offering them the ability to develop their leadership skills will help to empower them.

Given all of the research on leadership best practices and models, development of a leadership training model for women in rural Mali is well within reach. Understanding the culture and which points will be best received are crucial to the model’s development. Based on the literacy rate, available technology (or lack thereof), social roles and daily duties, rural women in Mali can gain leadership skills through simple training models and active training methods. The ADL model is based on the assumption that skills must be developed using a self-leadership or self-control regimen. The self-leadership strategies are useful for skill development in both self-presentation and tactics to influence others.

Keywords: Women, leadership, Mali, poverty, business