

Women Leadership and Community Development

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Abstract

Traditionally, community affairs and administration has been the domain of men. This is evident from the gender imbalance of leaders and office bearers across community, local council and associations. Women have not been active in local politics and are relatively inactive in public processes due to institutional, socio-economic and cultural constraints. However, times are changing. There is now an acceptance that women can and do play a vital role in community affairs, particularly in contributing to the achievement of community security, development and progress. This article documents the experiences of three female leaders in their quest to unite and lead their peers in the betterment of their communities. This qualitative research employed various methodologies such as in-depth interviews, observations and document analysis. Specifically, the research findings described and analyzed the leadership understanding and styles, reasons for becoming leaders, barriers of women leadership and strategies employed by these women leaders in developing the community.

Keywords: Gender and leadership; women leadership; community leadership; leadership and community development, Malaysian women

1. Introduction

Women have long been the mainstay of communities and are heavily involved in community initiatives in various forms. Though often the unsung heroes of community action, women's role in community development has become increasingly important. In some communities, they have established themselves as leaders in community development and acquired the skills that have brought positive change to their communities. Women leaders play key roles in establishing and maintaining important relationships and networks in their communities. They face cultural, economics, and social barriers in leading the community and in many cases overcoming those barriers become their motivation. While their comprehensive approach has influenced the evolution and nature of community development, women's contributions have been neither widely acknowledge nor explicitly credited. The results of this study provide deeper insights into women's thinking about leadership and community

development, the barriers they perceive to women's leadership, their leadership styles and strategies that should be undertaken to facilitate and promote their status and roles in community development. Therefore, the main objective of this case study is to document the behavior of women leader in community organizations, why and how they became leaders, challenges and barriers they have to face and how they contribute to the development of their community.

This paper begins with a brief review on gender and leadership styles and community development. It is followed by the research methodology, findings and discussion and finally the conclusion and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

Leadership is an inherently subjective subject with many definitions associated to it (Zaharah Hassan, 2004). Most of those definitions found in the literature agreed that leadership is mainly concerned with a person who tries to influence groups or followers to achieve certain objectives. The literature also indicates that there are various theories describing leadership such as the traits that leads to successful leaders (Stogdill, 1950), and the roles that leaders need to perform (Mintzberg, 1973; Yukl, 1994). The literature also points to the styles and approach that leaders need to adopt such as shown by early studies conducted by Iowa University, Ohio University and Michigan Universities (Nahavandi, 1977) and later studies by other researchers (Lewin and Lippit, 1938; Lewin et al., 1939; Blake and Mouton, 1964; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1973). Leadership theories also take into account of the contingencies and situations they face (Fielder, 1967; Hersey and Blanchard, 1988; House, 1971; House & Mitchell, 1974; House, 1997). More recent literature includes transformational (Burns, 1978) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1998).

Recent writings also noted that there are notions of leadership that are assumed either implicitly or explicitly linking leadership to gender (Zaharah Hassan, 2004). Various studies show that there are differences in the leadership styles of males and females leaders. Much of the discussion on those differences centers on what has been called concern for production and concern for people. Other ways of expressing this leadership dichotomy is through contrasting concern for tasks and concern for relationships according to situations as shown by various development levels of the subordinates, (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969, 1988; Hersey et al. 2001) or a focus on initiating structure as opposed to the focus of consideration for people (Stogdill and Coons, 1957). Tannenbaum and Schmidt's (1973) situational theory see that contrast as a continuum of autocratic or democratic leadership styles.

Literature on leadership and gender often pivots on whether or not gender gives emphasis on one of the above dimensions of leadership at the expense of the other. Some of the research findings indicate that female leaders tend to be more relationship-oriented and democratic and male leaders more task-oriented and autocratic (Eagly and Johnson, 1990).

In recent years, transformational and transactional leadership construct has become a popular theme in leadership literature in the general management domain. Unlike task versus relationship-oriented leadership, the transformational-transactional leadership notion is viewed as a continuum allowing for individuals to employ transformational and transactional qualities at the same time (Bass, 1985, 1990; Bryman, 1992). Transactional leadership is based on exchanges between the leader and followers where followers are rewarded for meeting specific goals or performance criteria. Transformational is seen to be charismatic and visionary in nature, and leaders lead and motivate followers in ways beyond exchanges and rewards. Transformational leadership is generally held to be a superior form of leadership, built on transactional leadership, but not vice-versa.

There is a line of argument in leadership literature contending that female leaders tend to be more transformational than male leaders (Rosener, 1990). This argument is based on the idea that transformational leadership emphasizes the nurturing of subordinates and the process of socialization. The nurturing qualities of women are particularly well developed in comparison to men. This leads to the adoption of transformational leadership style by female leaders and by implication, a tendency for

male leaders, who are not privy to this socialization process, tends to be more inclined to transactional leadership.

In leadership research, gender has been distinguished from sex. The former is viewed as a collection of qualities labeled male or female (Bem, 1974; Gray 1989) that are culturally construct, while the latter comprises of attributes that are the result of biological characteristics. Male gender qualities characterizes as aggressive, independent, objective, logical, rational, analytical, decisive, confident, assertive, ambitious, opportunistic and impersonal. These are distinguished from female gender qualities describe as emotional, sensitive, expressive, cooperative, intuitive, warm, tactful, receptive to ideas, talkative, gentle, tactful, empathetic and submissive (Park, 1996; Osland et al, 1998). The notion of male and female gender qualities facilitates the arguments that male gender qualities are oriented towards more impersonal, task-oriented or transactional approach to leadership, while female gender qualities tends towards more nurturing, relationship-oriented style of leadership that underlies the transformational leadership approach.

The idea that gender determines leadership style is by no means a unanimous view in leadership literature. Rosener (1990) for example, in a survey of male and female executive with similar jobs and education and of similar age, found that women tend to be more transformational in their leadership style than men. Kouzes and Posner (1990), using their version of transformational leadership model, found that female leaders were more likely than male leaders to practice “modeling the way” and “encouraging the heart”. A cross-cultural study by Gibson (1995) involving Norway, Sweden, Australia and the USA, found that male leaders were more likely to emphasize goal-setting than female leaders and female leaders more likely to focus on facilitating interaction than male leaders. This trend among women leaders was also emphasized in the Malaysian public sector leadership (Rafiah Salim, 2007; Halipah Esa, 2007)

However, other scholars such as Butterfield and Powell (1981), Campbell et al. (1993) and Ronk (1993) all have concluded that leadership style is independent of gender. Powell, (1990) in his analysis of a number of research studies, found that male and female leaders exhibit similar amounts of task-oriented and people-oriented leadership behavior. Kolb (1999) has asserted that two decades of research indicates few, if any, leadership differences in the leadership behavior of male and female.

2.1. Gender and Community Development

The word ‘community’ is an umbrella term that is defined and applied in a myriad of ways. For instance, it may be used to refer to geographic communities where members are based on region (Ife, 1997; Maimunah Ismail, 2001); unit of social organizations such as worker and community associations (Maimunah Ismail, 2001); cultural groups that can be identified through religions or races (Maimunah Ismail, 2001); or virtual communities, where members main form of contact is through electronic media (Ife, 1997). Communities of circumstance constitute another possible form of community. Such community might emerge, for example when floods occur across different regions and those most affected feel connected to one another (Marsh, 1999). Finally, there are communities of interest, where identity groups form to lobby government for some kind of policy change or sponsorship.

Various definitions of community development are available in the literature. They vary from one community to another, yet there are identifiable characteristics which all community development has in common. One of the early definitions that was widely accepted was developed by the United States International Cooperation (1956) as cited by Maimunah Ismail (1999). It emphasized the process where individuals in the community joined forces to plan and take actions regarding community problems. They identify community problems and needs, plan and conduct activities together using available community resources. They also sought outside help from government and private organizations. On the other hand, the United Nations (1975), indicated that community development is a process whereby the efforts of individuals in the community were combined with efforts of government and non-government bodies to improve and developed community socially, economically

and culturally. These efforts should lead to national development (Jones, 1982). Maimunah Ismail (1999) provided a more comprehensive definition of community development. It is a process of community activities that are planned and organized in such a way so as to raise the quality of life in the community in terms of economy, social, culture, spiritual and the environment through initiatives and active participation of the community members and with minimum outside help. This study also referred to definition forwarded by Ploch (1976). He defined community development as the active voluntary involvement of community residents in a process to improve some identifiable aspects of community life. Ploch further added that normally such action leads to strengthening of the community's pattern of human and institutional relationship.

Kirk and Shutte (2004) suggested a community development model that is more collaborative and comprehensive in nature that comprises of three components: Leading change through dialogue, collective empowerment and connective leadership. For Malaysian community, Abu Daud Silong et al. (2007) proposed a community development model using participative kind of leadership, where community leaders need to involve community members in the early stages of program planning and also in the conduct of the program.

Based on those definitions it can be said that community development efforts were conducted for the following purposes:

- To achieve social, economic, spiritual and cultural development
- To develop functioning community groups and organizations
- To develop community leaders
- To improve relationship and cooperation among community members
- To maximize utilization of community resources
- To increase capacity of the community to face challenges
- To encourage planning and conduct of programs at the community level

However, the authors observed that community development literature has generally excluded gender. They are more focused on the technical aspect of development or case study. Few studies that have been conducted in the past showed that women approach to community development is more "holistic" and "comprehensive". These studies also revealed that when women were in leadership position and comprised the majority of board members, development efforts were more comprehensive than male-led group (Gittel et al., 1994a, 1994b). This study is part of a continued effort to bring gender perspective in community development and leadership literature.

3. Methodology

This is a case study utilizing the qualitative approach. The researcher used three techniques for data gathering namely in-depth interview which represent the major source of data, observations and document analysis. An interview protocol that consists of 11 semi-structured open-ended questions was used. Interview protocol or interview guide ensured that the researcher asked the same questions to all participants. The main purpose of using in-depth interview is to gain insight of a phenomenon. As explained by Patton (1990) "the researcher wants to find out what is in and on someone else's mind". All interviews took place at the participant home where they are most comfortable and secure. Each interview lasted between two to four hours.

The researcher also observed the participants behavior during meetings and other social functions. Data from those observations represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest. During this time, the researcher observes aspects of interpersonal relation and behaviors with other members. Documents such as minutes of the meeting were also analyzed to seek information regarding activities, decision making process and problem solving techniques.

3.1. The Location and Setting of the Research

This study was conducted in one of the residential areas in the state of Selangor, Malaysia known simply as MB. It is a newly establish neighborhood in the greater area of a town known as BBB. It is surrounded by other residential areas that were developed since 1980s. The first resident of MB built his house in 2003. Since then the number has grown rapidly and now there are 47 bungalows with the total population about 240 people. Most of them are businessman and professionals such as engineers, professors, bankers and doctors. There is one Chinese family and the rest are Malays. In 2005 the neighborhood association was establish and was known as Neighborhood Association of MB (PPMB). This was done in response to two armed robberies that involved residents of the neighborhood.

The association is run by a committee system where there is a main committee and various sub-committees. One of the sub-committee is responsible to look into matters pertaining to women needs and welfare in the neighborhood. The sub-committee gets money and approval from the main committee of PPMB for their activities. The women have monthly meeting during which they discuss and plan activities. In early 2006 they decided to establish Women's Club known as KWMB. Now they raise their own resources and plan activities not just for women but for the whole neighborhood. Naturally, the most active member was elected as President of the Club until today. Other members were appointed through nomination. The President of KWMB is a member of PPBB main committee.

3.2. The Participants

Since the study is focused on leadership, therefore the researcher utilized the purposive sampling method. The participants of this research are two office bearers from KWMB and one committee member from the PPMB (Neighborhood Association).

4. Findings and Discussion

Data from various sources were analyzed using constant comparative method. The findings are presented according to several themes identified.

4.1. Profile of KWMB

The KWMB is a grassroots membership organization founded in 2006 under the umbrella of PPMB. Its main aim is "community organizing centered on building relationship between neighbors and empowerment of women". Members of KWMB run monthly meetings, set agendas, attend committee meetings, organize events and activities for the whole community.

Some of the activities organized by KWMB:

1. Fund raising for building of the 'surau' (Muslim localized place of worship which is smaller than the mosque) for MB residents. In March 2008, they raised fifteen thousand dollars through sales of second hand goods and home made food.
2. Collection of goods and donations for orphanage and flood victims.
3. "Gotong royong" (self-help community work) or bringing together community members to work together for specific purpose such as tree planting in the neighborhood, cleaning up the housing vacant lots, and preparation for weddings of members' sons and daughters.
4. Organizing talks on various topics such as health, grooming, cooking, and other motivational topics.
5. Weekly line dancing, tai chi and yoga sessions.
6. Weekly religious, folk art and ceramic classes.
7. Tuition class and holiday camp for neighborhood children.
8. Providing volunteers for hospitals (such as reading or shopping for patients)
9. Organizing family day and other neighborhood gathering such as *Hari Raya* (Muslim festival and celebration), annual dinner and breaking fast in the month of *Ramadan* (Muslim fasting month)

10. Organizing trips locally and overseas for members of the community.

4.2. Profile of the Participants

Three participants were involved in this study. A brief description of the participants is provided below.

Ana, the President of KWMB is 50 years old and a very qualified person with a PhD in Chemistry. She has worked as an academician in a local public university and also in a private Telecommunication company. She is presently retired and a full-time home maker. She is Malay, has two children and the fifth child among 15 siblings.

Nora, one of the Committee Member of KWMB is in her late forties. She has a Bachelor in Electrical Engineering and once served in a multinational company as a Senior Engineer. However she opted to retire early and decided to become a full-time home maker. She is a Malay, has seven children and the eldest among five siblings

Alia, also a Committee Member of KWMB is in her late forties and has a high school certificate. She has never work before and always been a full time home maker. However, she is also very active in voluntary work. She is also Malay with five children and the second child among four siblings.

Table 1: Profile of the Research Participants

Profile	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Age	Late 50	Late 40	Late 40
Qualification	Ph. D in Chemistry	Bachelor in Electrical Engineering	High school graduate
Present status	Retired and full time home maker	Opted for retirement and full time home maker	Full time home maker
Experience	Lecturer, Head of Marketing for Research in a Telecommunication company	Senior engineer at one of multinational oil company, Business partner.	Active in voluntary work
Number of children	2	7	5
Position in the family	4 th . Child among 15 siblings	Eldest among 5 siblings	Second child among 4 siblings
Race	Malay	Malay	Malay

4.3. Definition of Leadership

These women do not agree with present leadership definition which is usually used to describe the person who sits at the top of an organization, group or any other bodies that is pyramidal in nature. This kind of leadership implies a sense of control and a hierarchical power structure and carries with it a range of emotive notions such as responsibility, authority and power. They are very uncomfortable with the notion of leadership with authoritative connotations that reflects a commanding structure. They tend to shy away from these ideas when considering themselves as leaders.

Leadership to them has more to do with commonsense and helping others to understand their own situation, obligation and place in the world. It is clearly based on providing service to others, humanity, caring, compassion and modesty. It may even be apologetic, but it is very successful in generating enthusiasm and support of other women. The definition is very important since this is the starting point in their journey when they embark on leadership roles. It reflects more the democratic approach to leadership with building relationship through two-way communication and dialogue as key elements in their leadership approach. It emphasized more on connecting to others, especially people in the community.

4.4. Leadership Style

Since these women have experiences in leading other people, naturally they are quite comfortable and confidence in the present position. They are also well-qualified and thus possess the necessary

knowledge to be a leader. They know the decision making process and able to make a sound decision. Still they encourage others to be involved in the decision making process and avoid making all decision themselves. They view and believe that consensus is a very important element in reaching to a decision. They will give much opportunity for people to speak or give their opinion before decisions were made. Most of the time, they presented themselves as resource person to the community and not as decision-maker for others. Rather than emphasizing on duties they have to perform as office bearers of the Club, they emphasized more on their service to the community.

In leadership practices, these women are more egalitarian. They enhance the ability of the group without drawing too much of attention to themselves, thereby making people believe that their main role is to help the community members come together.

These women also believe that they operate differently than most men. The difference is a natural one arising from women's "nurturing nature" and from their motherhood experiences. This can be seen from their statements about women such as they are "more caring and "more sensitive" than men.

Further, they identify themselves as open and supportive and non-authoritarian to other people needs. This was reflected through their way of conducting meetings and organizing events. They insist on involving as many people as possible and giving every one a chance to learn different or new skills. They are more concern with consensus building and community participation. One of the participants said: "you have to compromise, adapt and adjust the way you work according to society need" (Interview, 2007).

They also maintain close relationship and open communication with community members and activities are planned and designed around community needs. They know everybody in the community and people address them using endearment term like *kakak* or sister. The women leaders are committed to facilitating community participation. Any member who shows any interest to do something good for the community is well encouraged and supported. As leaders they allow everybody to develop themselves in decision making and other aspect of self-development. A relationship based on trust and respect with the community members provides the foundation for community participation in the organization.

The leadership style that are discussed above has been call by a number of different names such as shared, participatory, collective, collaborative, cooperative, democratic, fluid and connective leadership. This style of leadership is often associated with women leaders. At the core of this style of leadership are practicing stewardship and service, supporting relationship, empowerment, and commitment to individual development.

Stewardship is the cornerstone of reciprocal or shared leadership because it turns hierarchical leadership up-side down. Stewardship focuses on ensuring that needs of people in the community are being served and not on exercising privilege, power and control. The leaders chooses partnership over hierarchy; empowerment over dependency and service to community over self-interest. The ultimate test of collaborative leadership is based on whether people's needs are being served. As people feel respected and valued as partners in community development they can create a community of shared responsibility.

Another distinguishing feature that reflects their leadership style is supporting relationship. In collaborative leadership, the relationship and interconnectedness of people become the major role of leadership. Values such as respect, honesty, expecting the best from others and the ability to exercise personal choice lay the foundation for relationship to emerge. These relationships are based on trust and mutual responsibility. Collaborative leadership focuses attention on building the individual's and group's capacity to live these values and to benefit from their interdependence. These behaviors and values were clearly exhibited by the participants.

4.5. Reasons Why They Become Leaders

All the women interviewed, are “passionate” about community development work. This sense of personal involvement and caring about community was often described as arising from sense of responsibility for the community. Different reasons were given by each participant but all of them mention some similarities as follows:

1. Desire to serve and to ensure the establishment of harmonious community by building a friendly, safe, sound environment and comfortable neighborhood where people are close with one other and have a very strong spirit of neighborhood. The end result is better quality of life because “This is going to be my home until I die.” (Interview, 2007).
2. Religious calling: Islam required that every Muslim to be good to their neighbors. Therefore these leaders feel that as a servant of God it is their duty to do this because they are given the opportunity. This reason is similar to a lot of women leaders in different countries and from other religions. This belief strengthened their commitment to their cause because to them it is a religious duty.
3. Time to give back: The participants felt that because of their privilege experience such as being mothers, career women, professional, organizational leader, wife and daughters and their present financial stability, they should share this with others. As clearly stated by one of the participant “I have so much to contribute and to share with other people because of my experience, and my *rezeki*, a religious concept related to belief that the wealth and other provisions acquired are gifts from God. It’s time to give back.” (Interview, 2007). One of the leader, voluntarily teach other members to read the Quran. She also conducts English classes and other science related subjects to neighborhood children and teenagers. The other leader sponsor weekly religious class at her home. All of them continuously donate large sum of money to various charity and orphanage.
4. These women also believe that by becoming a leader they are helping to empower other women to do something that is important to them by providing a platform and opportunity to develop themselves and to discuss and share their feelings and needs.

4.6. Challenges and Barriers

Women leaders in MB experience many challenges and barriers but the most cited are as follows:

1. There is a difficulty in getting younger people to participate and to take over the leadership role. The younger sets of residents are not so keen to take over due to other priority such as work and child care. They are not comfortable in giving full commitment to social work and prefer to participate in meetings or activities when they have the time.
2. Some of the other senior residents cited lack of confidence and skill to be a leader. Therefore they are more comfortable of being a follower and follow the majority.
3. There is a lack of fund to carry out more activities beyond MB to broaden the experience and exposure of the members. The main income is from membership fee and donation or sponsorship from people and organizations within and outside the community. The leaders themselves do not have adequate experience in large scale fund-raising.
4. There is a problem of sustaining participation of community members in all activities and programs conducted by KWMB. Recently, when KWMB organized a picnic and fishing competition only a handful of residents registered and in the end it has to be cancelled. The committee has to think harder to come up with activities that have a common interest so that more people can participate in the activities being organized.
5. There are some resistances from some members to participate in activities organized by KWMB. Some members of the community showed a very negative attitude. They always find faults with activities and programs being planned and conducted but they themselves never give ideas or suggestions to overcome those problems.

4.7. Strategies

Three main strategies adopted by the leaders to face the challenges and draw community participation and commitment are as follows:

1. Using participatory leadership style: These leaders ensure that KWMB as an organization practices a high degree of internal democracy that is horizontally structured so that it is better able to establish egalitarian relationships with community members. The rejection of barriers helps develop trust between them and the community. Their focus on human development and developing relationship further increases the level of trust and create a space for discussion of community and family issues.
2. Negotiating their leadership roles in their community: Issue of leadership relate directly to cultural ideas about women, allowing them to draw on a tradition of leaders or matriarchs in the community, but also forcing them to negotiate their roles within the community. As eastern women, to be well-known and becomes the center of attention is sometimes to be avoided. They have to down-play their contributions and their effectiveness by not drawing attention to themselves. Even though sometimes they have to do more than men, they have to be modest in their approach. One participant remarked “you can’t be loud in this society”. (Interview 2007)
3. Approach to community development: The participant approach community development in a holistic way. This broad view of community development integrates economic, social, spiritual and cultural needs at the community level as well as at the individual level. This approach is clearly described as “The Community Development Iceberg” where men see and address what is above the line, the visible part of the iceberg. Women see the whole thing, above and below the surface. When planning for community program or activities these leaders thinks and take care of every aspect and every group of people in the community. For example, in planning the economic activities such as fund raising, they also include the social aspect by planning the involvement of the whole family. Also the approach taken is based on good community development efforts through the “bottoms-up” rather than the “top-down” strategy. It has been proven this approach has better chance of success in achieving community development objectives. In an evaluation of a pilot government project, it is shown that it failed because it relies on the “top-down” strategy in planning community programs. By doing so they do not provide the opportunity for community members to participate early in planning and conducting the program. Thus the program failed because it lacks participation of community members in the decision making process (Abu Daud Silong, et. al., 2007).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study seeks to fill the gap that existed in the literature on gender and leadership behaviors in community development because women contribution is getting bigger but too often they are not documented.

Analysis of data showed that leadership understanding and style employed by women leaders is participatory or collaborative in nature and this is in line with some of the finding from other studies in women led organization in other countries. It was also found out that the desire to serve the community, to have better quality of life, religious calling and the need to give back are the main motives why they became leaders. They also face challenges such as resistance from some members, lack of funding, balancing role as women and leaders, dwindling interest in participation and because of these, they have to adopt several strategies such as using collaborative leadership style.

Women leadership relates more to a holistic and “bottom-ups” approach in developing the community. This approach has a greater success and impact on community development compared to the “top-down” approach commonly utilized by male community leaders.

To sustain the development of women leaders in community development, the researcher suggest the following actions:

1. Create opportunities for these leaders to document their experience and development as community leaders. Studies and report that include women telling their stories will raise awareness of women achievements and contribution to the field.
2. Through documentation and dissemination of information, the women can share the “best practices” and learn from each other.
3. Cultivate new leaders through training or mentoring
4. Integrate study findings in leadership training program.
5. Organize a dialogue session among women led organizations for sharing knowledge and resources.

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