

Feminist leadership and the 4W Initiative: reflections and implications for transformative praxis in higher education

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Abstract

What is feminist leadership? How can we practice it? How can we practice it better? And how can we practice it everywhere? To offer insights into these questions, we consider common themes in the feminist leadership literature and relate them to the experience of an interdisciplinary campus-wide gender and wellbeing effort embedded in an institution of higher education. We begin with a summary of feminist leadership principles, followed by an overview of the structure, core principles, and practice of the 4W Initiative (Women and Wellbeing in Wisconsin and the World) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. These summaries are followed by an exploration of consonances and dissonances that arise when feminist leadership theory is used to assess the 4W experience to date. We then present possibilities for integration and continued realization and expansion of feminist leadership.

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What is Feminist Leadership?

Feminist scholar Srilatha Batliwala insists that we must define and deconstruct feminist leadership in order to assess the virtue and efficiency of the leadership development practices that we employ (Batliwala, 2010). While there are many working definitions of feminist leadership, this discussion is based on that of Gerda Lerner, a pioneer in women's history whose knowledge and expertise led to the creation of the leading Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Lerner described feminist leadership as "...something that replaces and surpasses you, that has a life of its own because there are many people who will be drawn into it and who will give leadership to it as a group, even. The point is that wherever we are as women, wherever we are situated in our lives, we can advance a feminist agenda if we stop thinking about how to be leaders and think rather about how to be doers, how to be agents if you move on or go away" (Lerner, 1995). Lerner's definition incorporates themes of solidarity, inclusion, vision, and transformative agency - all of which Batliwala describes as "non-negotiables" in feminist leadership (Batliwala, 2010).

While there is not consensus about one unified framework for feminist leadership, there is great coherence among feminist leadership models. Figure 1 presents four ways of thinking about self-realization and leadership that, directly and indirectly, have informed the 4W Initiative and will frame this discussion of feminist praxis.

In addition to these frameworks, our reflection on feminist leadership is informed by the following theories and concepts.

Feminist Emotion: Is there a universal, innate feminist emotion or impulse towards gender justice?

Feminist emotion, though a complex concept, can be summarized as reflecting an innate rebelliousness or tendency toward gender-based justice, and the use of "primary affective forms of agency that otherwise would easily pass unnoticed, for the purpose of promoting women's empowerment within gender equity agendas." (Lange de Paz, 2016). Is this impulse universally present? If so, what are the implications for feminist leadership? And how can it be invoked without also invoking essentialist notions of women and the feminine? As we articulate these questions, we note that the concept has been useful in describing

Women’s capabilities and social justice: Martha Nussbaum	Feminist leadership diamond: Srilatha Batliwala	Strategies for building transformative and feminist leadership: Shawna Wakefield	Six life principles of positive womanist psychospirituality: Harrell et al.
1. Life 2. Bodily Health 3. Bodily Integrity 4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought 5. Emotions 6. Practical Reason 7. Affiliation (with others and with dignity) 8. Other Species 9. Play 10. Control Over One’s Environment (political and material) (Nussbaum, 2000)	1. Leadership as Power: direct visible power, hidden power, and invisible power must all be examined in light of their impact on priorities, practice, and dignity. 2. Leadership as Principles: feminist leadership should articulate explicit “non-negotiable” core principles. 3. Leadership as Context-Sensitive Politics and Purpose: must be contextually relevant and not based on any universals. 4. Leadership as Praxis: Leadership actions include all the ways in which we achieve our purpose. (Batliwala, 2010)	1. Modeling feminist purposes and principles 2. Inspiring shared vision based on personal and collective reflexivity 3. Empowering and enabling others to act 4. Challenging patriarchal norms and oppressive power 5. Encouraging integration of heart, mind, and body (Wakefield, 2017)	1. Extended Ways of Knowing 2. Spirited and Inspired Living 3. Interconnected Love 4. Balance and Flexibility 5. Liberation and Inclusion 6. Empowered Authenticity (Harrell et al., 2014)

Figure 1: Feminist Leadership Models: Key Concepts

and evaluating our 4W project, Health by Any Means, and holds promise as a theoretical tool to be utilized in our expansion of the HbAM model and other wellbeing efforts.

Embracing the LGBTQ+ Spectrum and Challenging Binary Thinking: How can we work toward human rights for all, and avoid the shadow of binary thinking that is encoded in language and persists in feminist discourse, praxis, and all aspects of life? Sparked by the central insights that gender is constructed, that gender and sex can interact in many ways to form identity, and that feminist analysis, when applied fully, challenges the singular focus on women that was its original reason for being (Butler, 1990); current conversations about gender, preferred language, and the range of nuance in expressing identity are continually evolving. The LGBTQ+ community is an important focus for feminist leadership – with basic human rights and safety being contested and fought for around the world. Central in this identity-oriented conversation is the importance of speaking to and about people in accord with their self-identification and preferences. (The OK2BME Project, 2018). Gender-binary thinking is deeply present in cultural concepts and habits of language and thought. Queer liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reed exhibits feminist leadership when she

posits that we must set this binary thinking aside and radically and lovingly embrace difference if we are to realize the full meaning of human community. She says “different ways of amatory knowing express themselves in different ways of befriending, imagining God and compassion and creating different structures of relationships” (Althaus-Reed, 2017).

Intersectional Feminism: Do these models truly reflect insights from intersectional feminism? Intersectional feminism (Krenshaw, 1989) highlights the ways that different kinds of marginalization accumulate and intersect. Dismantling the discriminations that intersectional analyses reveal is the central goal of feminist leadership, yet programs like 4W can lack a full perception of the nature and manifestations of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and their interactions with prejudice, and require tools for ongoing, education, critique, and action. Sensitization and awareness become more challenging as gender justice work extends outside of departments of gender and women’s studies, because leaders may not have the formal dialogic training needed to understand the framework and language being used within the discipline and may not have a commitment to the ongoing reflection and learning required.

Ableism: How can embodied feminism avoid ableism in practice and metaphor? While feminism in its most developed form aims to uplift all marginalized identities, extended metaphors of disability have often been used to expound feminism. Leading feminists have used terms like “crippling,” “wounding,” “paralysis” and “blindness” to connote states of unrealized humanity; places that we must move from (Schalk, 2013). Given that feminism desires to be embodied, it is challenging to find embodied metaphors that do not inadvertently exclude or demote differently-abled people. How can we develop our sensibilities so that we can embrace embodied ways of knowing and being, without inadvertently marginalizing or excluding members of the human family. One way to meet the challenge to truly value difference, is to use metaphors more carefully. Deficits should not be characterized with metaphors that negatively portray different ability. When we wish to characterize a positive trait, multiple metaphors could be used so that all those who experience the message can envision themselves on a growth journey in one of several ways.

Each of these concepts address what Batliwala calls “agenda-setting powers,” the hidden, indiscrete influences that shape our prejudices and determine what issues are addressed and whose voices are heard.

The 4W Initiative

The 4W Initiative is a higher education initiative for gender equity and wellbeing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. A collaboration of the School of Human Ecology, the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies Department, and the Global Health Institute, the initiative serves the entire campus to support education, action research, and advocacy (4W Initiative, 2018).

The stated goal of 4W is to make life better for women, and, in so doing, make the world better for all. Current programs in this relatively new initiative focus on women from historically marginalized groups in low-resource settings -- the “better for all” phrase of the mission opens a door to a broad range of issues and a full and truly holistic feminist praxis – including all people, all species, all places, and our planet. Grounded in human rights principles, 4W works toward equal rights for women and girls as an end in itself, while acknowledging the life-sustaining role that they play in the continuity of families, communities, civil society, local and global economies, and the earth. To achieve this, 4W works to understand, reimagine, and leverage the unique role of higher-education in global change. From this position, the 4W Initiative serves as a leading convener and catalyst for change in education, applied research, and impactful

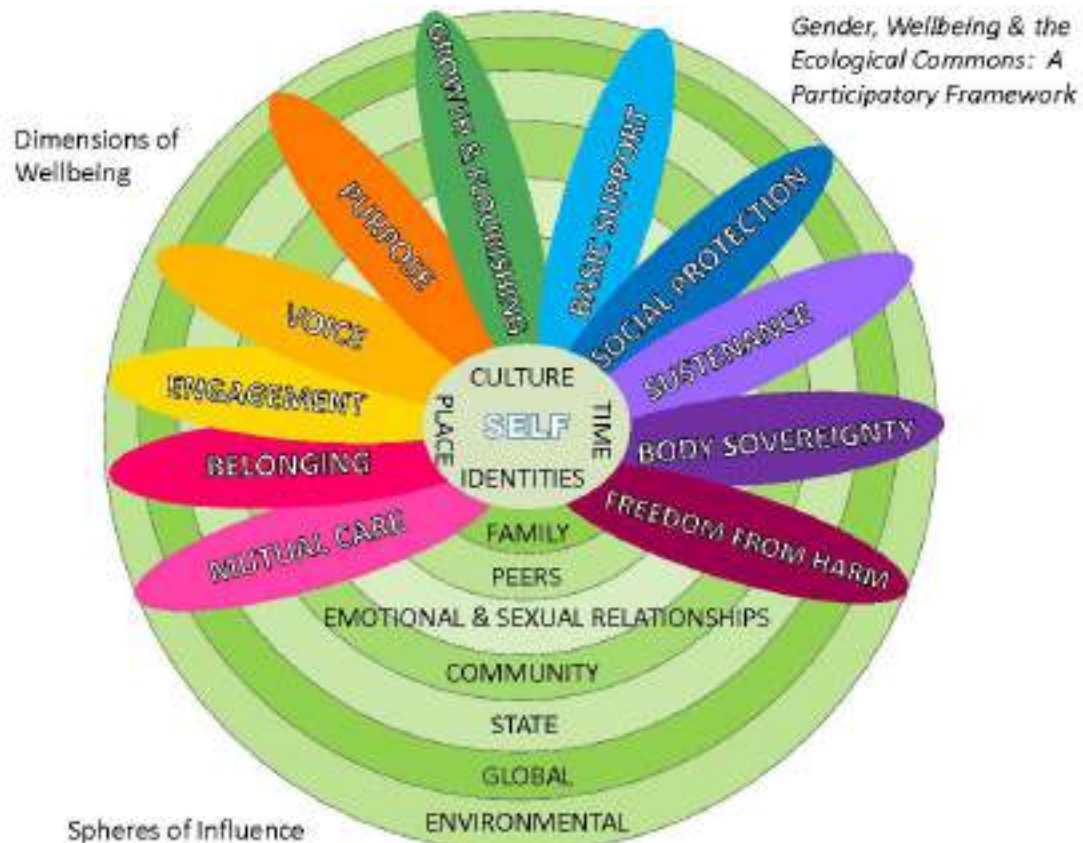


Figure 2: Gender, Wellbeing and the Ecological Commons

community engagement. Here we will discuss the 4W purpose, the criteria for selection of programs, the platform for exchange and advocacy, and the organizational strategy for the development of community and networks.

Purpose: Centering Wellbeing and Growth. All 4W projects are explicitly or implicitly grounded in a participatory, holistic framework for wellbeing, which is shaped by – and guides – our dialogue with women and girls from Wisconsin and around the world. The 4W Wellbeing model, Entitled “Gender, Wellbeing and the Ecological Commons is depicted in Figure 2. It employs many elements from the feminist leadership models described above, echoing Nussbaum’s central human capabilities; Batliwala’s ideas about power and purpose; Wakefield’s encouragement of synergies between mind, body, and heart; and Harrell et al.’s positive principles of psycho-spirituality. The 4W model goes beyond description of traits or qualities and considers these aspects of wellbeing in

the context of the social ecological model, extending from the personal and kinship space, to community, state, national, global, and environmental realms. Thus, it forms a framework for envisioning wellbeing and change strategies in all of these spheres, and is a supportive tool for individuals and organizations who want to center wellbeing in their work.

Programs: Taking Research to Practice and Practice to Scale. 4W programs address the needs and aspirations of women from a range of socioeconomic and social contexts, including women farmers in Kenya, Ghana, and Ecuador; artisans in Mexico, Ecuador, and Nepal; and women who have experienced historical or social marginalization in Wisconsin. In all of these settings, we work with women and communities directly to discover increased wellbeing. 4W programs must meet all three of the following criteria: 1) They address a compelling need related to the wellbeing of women; 2) There is strong, identified UW leadership, expertise,

and partners; and 3) There is potential for scalability and significant impact. These criteria ensure that programs are sustainable and impactful and leverage the strengths the University.

Platforms: Uniting Individuals Around Gender and Wellbeing. Voice and advocacy for change is a critical part of 4W. Each spring, 4W collaborates with the Women’s & Gender Studies Consortium to organize the annual 4W Summit on Women, Gender, and Wellbeing and the Wisconsin Women’s and Gender Studies Conference. This conference brings together over 700 participants—students, scholars, practitioners, community members, and activists—from across Wisconsin and around the world. These activities take place under the auspices of the UW-Madison UNESCO Chair on Gender, Wellbeing, and a Culture of Peace, which serves as a think tank and bridge between academia, civil society, local communities, research, and policy-making. In addition to this Annual Summit, 4W hosts fora which bring together global experts on a range of topics. These fora result in policy recommendations, scholarly publications, and practice-oriented collaboration.

People: Fostering Leadership Networks and Collaboration. 4W cultivates leadership in students and scholars who connect with one another through our 4W circles. The 4W Leadership Circle is made up of over 35 individuals from departments across campus, all of whom provide leadership

on 4W projects or other related endeavors, including internships, courses and scholarly publications. Similarly, 4W brings together graduate students and undergraduate students, in attempt to foster growth, collaboration, and synergy.

This 4W leadership circle is built on relationships and intention, forging a unique connection between individual and shared goals. Members must be committed to learning about themselves, one another, and the initiative as a whole. Leaders create meaningful titles for themselves and determine what values and principles are central to their work. The Leadership Circle employs a process of “co-leading” in which members practice ownership, affirmation, and growth, both individually and collectively. (Obscherning, 2015).

Confluences, dissonances and integration

Feminist leadership theories focus on equity, wellbeing, and growth of women, and recommend group dynamics that are egalitarian, relational, reflective, and transformative. They posit that feminist leadership must be included in purpose and in process. Further, there is an action-oriented and embodied element; in which knowing is a way of doing and doing is a way of knowing. Finally, the deconstruction and redistribution of power are essential, and while the term “empower” is controversial, creating conditions in which people come into their own power and use it in a liberating manner is not. By these measures, the

4W Initiative is a feminist organization. As Batliwala led us to expect, despite the strengths noted, dissonances and areas for fuller realization of feminist leadership are also in evidence.

First, the 4W Initiative has opted to create a secondary space for its work. While the expressed intent is to complement the institutional structure, it can also be argued that the model accommodates the institution, rather than transforming it. It is not clear what the most effective change strategy is. While many efforts to advance women in higher education focus on helping women to adapt and succeed on institutional terms, advocates for transformation of higher education are beginning to suggest that more effort to change institutions is also needed and perhaps should be the focus (Burkinshaw, 2017).

A second tension relates to the intensity and nature of the work, and the impact those have on workload and self-care for leaders and for all. The 4W model creates partnerships between scholars, practitioners, survivors, and community members who are living with historical trauma or marginalization. The work is meaningful and exhilarating. It makes change and saves lives. And overall, leading while healing and healing while leading can be a source of joy and growth. It is a way to have a voice and is a survival strategy for many. However, given the nature of the challenges we are addressing (extreme poverty, gender-based violence, and systemic sexism, racism, and more),

leaders have asked themselves, “When do leaders, especially survivor leaders, get to rest? When can they pursue aims outside of feminist transformation—if their talents incline them that way?” It is important to ensure that we support women on their personal journeys, even if at odds with the organizational aims.

A third tension is the tension between a safe space and a space that welcomes all. Scholars and students who are engaging with 4W have different experience and knowledge in relation to sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Rather than located within a Department of Gender and Women’s Studies or another discipline in which power is interrogated, our initiative is campus-wide. This means that not all people have explored gender equity and inclusion and the related ways of communicating and being together. As Batliwala makes clear, feminist leadership requires all participants need to continually work on their own growth and self-examination.

Feminist leadership is, and should always be, a continual work in progress. It may seem like we are going around in circles, and the good news is that we are! We form circles for shared work, shared suffering, shared joy, and shared learning. In these circles we achieve fleeting moments of belonging. We hope the circle can become larger and smaller as needed, multiply in ways that surprise us, and surpass us. Only in this way will we live our way into more fully realized and authentic patterns of feminist leadership.

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