

Feminist Leadership in Our World Today and Tomorrow *An interactive exploration on feminist leadership*

Summary Note

On 11 June 2020, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and TrustWorks Global convened an informal exchange on the concept and practices of Feminist Leadership, bringing together 16 individuals working in civil society organizations, think tanks, the United Nations and UN Permanent Missions.

For the Foundation, this exploration formed part of the follow up to its “The Art of Leadership: Framing What’s Blue” publication¹ of March 2020, which compiled thematic and personal perspectives on UN leadership, including a contribution on “Feminist Leadership” authored by Bela Kapur. For TrustWorks Global, to which Bela Kapur serves as a Senior Advisor, the participants’ perspectives provided the opportunity to further understand how it can implement the feminist ethos at the core of its mission and operations².

Instead of a chronological rendering, the following note summarizes the discussions by theme as discussed throughout, from the introductory remarks to the conclusion, and without attribution. The organizers apologize for any omission or misrepresentation of perspectives.

The objective/purpose of Feminist Leadership

Participants explored the purpose of Feminist Leadership, focusing on its ambition to **analyze and transform patriarchal modes of politics and power structures** at the root of inequality, discrimination and injustice.

Set against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the worldwide protests against racial injustice, many emphasized **the disruptive intent and imperative** of Feminist Leadership. Disruption is hard and risky, especially as it threatens existing power dynamics. It is also about **challenging comfortable or ‘status quo’ paradigms and convenient arguments**, for example those pretending that change requires time, or those that hide behind cultural defenses.

Feminist Leadership, and the disruption it embodies, also involves reframing the debate, focusing for example not just on women’s representation but also on **inclusive and diverse**

¹ <https://www.daghammarskjold.se/publication/leadership2020/>

² <https://trustworksglobal.com/>



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ownership and participation. Several participants offered that it also implies a move away from a binary approach to leadership (men versus women or masculine versus-feminine approaches). It is leadership that all must buy into, adopt and practice.

Finally, Feminist Leadership seeks to **acknowledge and nurture our multiple identities**, not just one that is gender based, race based, or UN grade level based only. As the experience of African young women leaders demonstrates, this recognition allows genuine

power to be grounded in the individual and her/his richness rather than in a status that derives from fundamentally unequal and patriarchal structures.

The attributes of Feminist Leadership

Throughout the exploration, participants shared their thoughts on core Feminist Leadership traits or attributes. Many emphasized the notion of **inclusivity**, in voices and perspectives, even those that offer alternatives that may be inconvenient, uncomfortable or contradictory to the leader's views. The willingness to broaden and extend the circle is linked, as participants noted, to **humility and fallibility**, and the acknowledgment of one's *vulnerability*.

One participant observed that a feminist leader is one who is comfortable with being **imperfect and incomplete**, as a foundation for other leadership values and for inclusive practices. Relatedly, another participant underscore that a feminist leader focuses on the **ship rather than the leader** i.e. they are focused on creating an enabling environment to unleash the leadership qualities in others. Another emphasized that part of being a feminist leader is being the same person in our private and public spheres.

Other contributors spoke to the importance of **empathy, courage** and **persistence**. These traits enable a capacity and willingness to analyze root causes, and make the invisible visible, even in the face of adversity and resistance, as demonstrated by the women peacebuilders who inspired the Foundation's Feminist Leadership piece.

Finally, participants discussed Feminist Leadership as **values based and intentional in impact** – this duality reinforcing each other, with principles finding their relevance in action, and with intent grounded in and legitimized by clear values. In this regard, many references were made to the effectiveness of women leaders in the Covid-19 response because their approach is feminist in nature - displaying empathy, vulnerability, honesty and inclusivity.

The challenges to feminist leadership

What makes Feminist Leadership hard to practice? Several participants stressed that while Feminist Leadership traits are very much actionable, current power habits, behaviors, and



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expectations within individual and institutions of civil society, UN and of states understand such traits as weaknesses and liabilities. As one contributor observed, principled arguments for Feminist Leadership will not suffice. The **evidence base of Feminist Leadership's effectiveness (including in foreign policy) is essential.**

Others mentioned that current entitlement structures, notably within the UN, serve as disincentives for the practice of Feminist Leadership. As one participant highlighted, the UN is a mirror of political, economic, social and cultural realities. **The UN too is in need of**

disruption. The opportunity for Feminist Leadership to remake and reinvigorate “multilateralism 2.0” was offered as a tantalizing possibility.

Beyond the UN, states and their leadership need disruption. While all agreed positive steps notably with the advent of explicitly feminist foreign policies by a few Member States, others asked how these initiatives can **close the gap between statements of intent and symbols on the one hand, and on-going regressive practices.**

What needs to happen?

Throughout the exploration, participants shared **specific strategies, practical measures and personal actions** that could be taken to inspire, advance and fully realize the potential of Feminist Leadership.

It was offered that at the individual level, **self-examination and reflection** are needed first steps, to identify and then accept biases and weaknesses, and to strive for balance between empowerment and being accountable for what is done with such power.

Furthermore, if Feminist Leadership engages curiosity and inclusivity, current political and social movements have much to offer, and the **UN world could learn from activists around the world** and how they go about building inclusive coalitions that challenge power structures.

Other means for the UN to exhibit greater feminist leadership attributes and incentivize honesty and empathy could include making meetings less public and less formal. Instead of formulaic approaches to meeting compositions and chairmanship (e.g. regional groupings, etc.), the **UN could look to engineer different models, where chairs with more feminist leadership attributes could feature more intentionally.**

Other participants stressed the importance of **recognizing and promoting youth leadership – and young women leadership in particular.** Mentoring young leaders and nurturing and enabling their potential is a “responsibility without a why”, consistent with one participant’s description of **genuine leadership as unleashing the leadership of others instead of focusing on oneself.**



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In this regard and building on earlier discussions on the Covid-19 response, one participant suggested using the **current disruptive moment** to identify the practices that we all should take into the future, and name the ones which should be discarded. To this end, we should **stop celebrating Feminist Leadership as practiced by women leaders in particular only in times of attention-grabbing crisis**. It is the day-to-day, under the radar and under the spotlight work of these leaders that also has transformational potential.

To disrupt at scale, proposals will also need to be articulated to support, and to capitalize on the new concern for **performance legitimacy**. Here as well, the use of **evidence and data**

to make the case for the effectiveness of feminist leadership practices, including the need for inclusivity at the table, will be essential.

The meeting finished with a question for participants to consider as they move forward: against the backdrop of the current disruptive moment how can we advance actions that seek to disrupt and transform power structures and politics and prove the naysayers wrong?