In the aftermath of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, the issue of ‘women’s leadership’ was placed on the agenda. It was to be found in the context of discussions on governance, or of ‘women in decision-making’. The assumption underlying these discussions was that if more women were involved in high-level decision-making – in particular in politics – states would be governed more fairly and efficiently, and in addition would make better and steadier progress towards achieving the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action, concerning equality between women and men.

This article focuses on a particular form of leadership, which advances the cause of justice for women, within the context of economic globalisation and fundamentalism. I am terming this ‘transformational leadership’. Debates aiming to clarify the concept of women’s leadership, what it means and why it is needed, have resulted in a distinction between transformational styles of leadership (which can be adopted regardless of the actual goal), and leadership which is not only transformational in style, but has economic, political and social transformation as its goal. This article focuses on the latter. In a special issue of Trialogue (the newsletter of the Association of Women in Development – AWID), which is devoted to the question of feminist leadership, Sharron Mendel defines the concept as follows: ‘Above all, transformative feminist leaders must actively work to eradicate inequalities, placing an analysis of gender relations at the heart of their actions’ (AWID 1999, 1).

This article is divided into three parts. First, I introduce three theories of social change which will assist us in understanding the process of transformational leadership; second, I reflect on my own experience of leadership, and that of a diverse network of women, to draw out some lessons; and finally, I suggest a way to proceed within the limitations of the current world order, in which global economic and political institutions seem to consider that ‘trade’ has largely replaced ‘development’ as the moving force in the achievement of the goals of poverty reduction, gender equity, and good governance.

Theories of social change and transformation

There are many ways of looking at the process of social change. Each perspective
leads us to consider different strategies to effect change, and the different types of methods and leadership that match each of these. In their review, Crowfoot and Chesler (1984) offer an analytical framework of social change. While it is clear that reality is more complex than such typologies suggest, I find this one particularly useful in understanding different approaches to development, and understanding what kinds of strategies are needed to effect transformation in the agendas of these organisations, in the interests of justice for women. The typology contains three approaches to social change: the professional-technical, the political, and the counter-cultural.

**The professional-technical approach**
The professional-technical approach to social change considers that society and most of its organisations and institutions are basically sound, but that they need to be enabled to cope better with ongoing change. This is the conventional approach to the project of ‘development’ in the South. A key aspect is the assumption that a certain type of person has the intellect, skills, and expertise to make decisions on behalf of others. This type of person may be from a developing country itself, or be a foreigner, but either way, he or she has been educated according to the dominant ideology of global development along capitalist lines, and subscribes to its values and dictates. This powerful perspective on social change is difficult to challenge, because it is backed up by a global economic system that is deeply entrenched, and constantly reinforced by the benefits it brings to those in power. It is also strengthened by the social, cultural, and political relations and moral obligations that are interlinked with the economic system (Crowfoot and Chesler 1984).

**The political approach**
The political approach to social change acknowledges the existence of ‘different groups, each defined by the uniquely shared interest of its members, each with different and often competing interests or goals’ (op.cit., 81). These groups may be based on race or ethnicity, class, gender, or location, and there are usually imbalances of power between them, leading to conflict as groups compete to control scarce resources. Proponents of this approach consider it essential for the state to intervene, in order to guarantee an equitable distribution of goods and services. However, when potential beneficiaries of the state system also operate the system, they ‘opt for stability rather than equality in regulating the relations among groups and resources. The result is a high concentration of power in the hands of a few people, or a few interest groups...’ (op.cit., 83), along with a neglect of the interests of marginalised groups.

Proponents of the political approach to social change consider positive change as only possible when this process is understood, and when those in power are willing to give up some of their privileges in the interest of the common good. The fact that gender relations are inherently unequal makes this approach essential in the struggle for women’s rights.

**The counter-cultural approach**
The counter-cultural approach to social change is one which is based on affirming the importance of cultural values – and especially those of marginalised groups or minorities – in shaping social change. Proponents of this approach are suspicious of technocratic and bureaucratic approaches, and concepts of ‘progress’, since they consider these to lead to the marginalisation of local or indigenous knowledge, a decrease in people’s initiative and creativity, and the inhibiting of women and men from marginalised groups from realising their full human potential. Proponents of the counter-cultural perspective place emphasis on the importance of individual change – in
personal values, lifestyles, and relationships with others – if wider social change is to be effected. They emphasise the important role played by community organisations in the building and re-building blocks of a new society, where no-one is alienated (ibid). To the extent that we recognise common ‘feminine’ traits, intuitions, and attributes among women of all cultures, we must acknowledge the legitimacy of this approach for women. We must also assert the importance of women’s perspectives in building a new society.

Assessing potential for transformation

Looking at the three perspectives separately helps us identify more clearly the different approaches to global change that different institutions adopt. This helps us understand what is needed to effect transformation of the global system to attain gender equality.

Inequality harms individuals, communities, and nations. Thus, women’s empowerment is central to development interventions. However, if we look at the mainstream institutions that distribute development resources, including governments and the United Nations, we can see they are dominated by ideologies and policies that are shaped by the professional-technical perspective. There is little chance that policies and programmes based exclusively on a professional-technical approach can lead to transformation, since they fail to acknowledge the implications of both power imbalances between groups, as well as cultural differences, in mediating or determining policy outcomes.

In contrast, the political perspective on social change would start by acknowledging the gendered imbalances of power between men and women and recognise the need for these to be addressed if change is to be equitable. The validity of feminist politics to the process of social change would be acknowledged. The political perspective highlights the fact that it is particularly difficult to promote transformation within institutions that are heavily professional-technical in their approach to development. This is because gender equality is not a technical issue, concerned only with gender roles and the sexual division of labour. Those who promote it are following a radical agenda, concerned with challenging the imbalance of power between women and men.

In addition, since the political perspective also emphasises the role of the state, it reminds us that our goals are harder to attain now that economic globalisation is increasingly undermining the ability of our governments to guarantee that the basic needs of their populations will be met, and are negating the links between economic, social, and political development.

The counter-cultural perspective reminds us that asserting women’s values and the existence of an alternative, ‘female’, culture is an essential part of the process of transformation. Those working within the institutional structures of the state and international agencies cannot be counted on to challenge the patriarchal culture to which these institutions belong. While women who are prepared to do this are a small minority, other women in formal positions of leadership and decision-making may be influenced to be more sensitive to gender issues, and more responsive to the needs and realities of women and their communities. Meanwhile, the small minority who dare to ‘challenge the given’ have exercised transformational leadership within these very institutions of the UN and national governments. Such women have found ways of combining professional-technical, political, and counter-cultural approaches in their own work, to ensure that they influence organisations that are male-biased and professional-technical in their approach.
**Transformational leadership in action**

In the next two sections, I will give two examples of ways in which women have worked together to pursue transformation. The first draws on my personal experience of the early stages of the work of the Jamaican Women’s Bureau. The second looks at the international level, focusing on women’s mobilisation and organisation prior to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994. The experiences discussed in this section have a number of lessons for those of us who are interested in promoting transformational feminist leadership.

*Transforming a bureaucracy from within - the Jamaican Women’s Bureau*

In 1974, I had no background in the women’s movement: I had never even heard the word ‘feminist’. Without the national or political affiliations to qualify for the post, I was invited to take up the position of Adviser on Women’s Affairs to the Government of Jamaica. Although the government of the time had a strong commitment to the principles of equity, social justice, and participation, I sometimes think it was my lack of qualifications that must have appealed to those within the bureaucracy whose intention was to subvert the process of women’s political empowerment.

The process of personal transformation that took place happened without the help of formal training programmes to give me skills in gender analysis, without significant financial resources, and without an enabling environment. What I did have was the support of a political women’s movement, which existed as a microcosm within the ruling party. These women were intent on ensuring that their party understood that its professed commitment to social justice would be meaningless without a commitment to women’s equality and women’s full and equal participation in decision-making. So, while the bureaucrats tried to undermine their agenda, the women within the party continued to monitor and press for real change. One of their first acts was to challenge the government’s sponsorship of beauty contests. Another was to change the name of their organisation from ‘Women’s Auxiliary’ to ‘Women’s Movement’. This change was not merely semantic; it reflected a shift from being an organisation that was assumed to give unquestioned loyalty and support to its political party (for example, in fund-raising, or persuading women to vote in support of the party and its male leadership) to one that claimed a share of the decision-making power on the direction of the party.

The women I worked with taught me where the real power lay; but they also taught me something about the limits of that power, and how a unit within the bureaucracy could facilitate a process of social change, drawing on the power of women within a political party.

*Transforming an international agenda: Women’s Voices for Cairo, 1994*

The second example of transforming leadership looks at the joint work of feminists, women’s organisations, and development workers from NGOs and governments, at the international level. All these brought formidable technical and professional skills to redrafting the Cairo Platform For Action, and influencing bureaucrats within the UN system, prior to ICPD. They also used their political skills to counter the work of fundamentalist alliances, which had formed for the purpose of derailing the conference. This interaction led to the transformation of the agenda at Cairo, from a focus on population control to a focus on women’s reproductive health, rights, and empowerment.

The story begins at the ‘Earth Summit’ – the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio in 1992. In the wake of that conference, women’s
health advocates realised that if environmental issues were linked to the population control agenda at the conference, this would have a devastating impact on women’s lives. The population control lobby were seeking additional resources for their programmes, and were seizing the opportunity presented by the concerns of environmentalists about population pressures on the environment to use the Malthusian argument about the relationship between population growth and environmental degradation. This argument ignores the inequality in consumption patterns between post-industrialised and Third World countries. It has resulted in the design of population control policies that target poor women in developing countries as the major culprits contributing to high birth rates.

The threat to women lay in the fact that this view was opposed by two forces completely opposed in their attitudes to women’s reproductive health and rights. These are the Vatican, and high-profile leaders in the women’s health movement. The Vatican argued, jointly with progressive NGOs, and Southern feminists, that the greatest threat to the environment was not the high fertility rates of the poor in the South, but the consumption patterns of the rich in the North.

However, Southern feminists also sharply criticised the abuse and coercion of women through imposition of harmful contraceptive technologies – a key feature of population control policies. This critique was used by the Vatican to add weight to its opposition to all forms of fertility control (except so-called ‘natural’ methods).

Together, feminist activists and women began to create a counter-strategy: one that would simultaneously challenge abusive population policies and assert women’s right to safe, affordable, effective, and accessible contraceptives. The result was a statement, ‘Women’s Voices for Cairo 94’, which provided a common foundation for lobbying at national and global levels throughout the preparations for ICPD. The network had a Herculean task: in addition to ‘neutralising’ the arguments of the Vatican (which, as the ICPD process moved on, was being joined by other conservative bodies), it had to appease the more radical fringes of the women’s movement (which condemned any interaction with the United Nations Fund for Population Action (UNFPA) and the traditional family planning system). The network also had to contend with misinformation from organisations whose vested interests were threatened by approaches that went beyond family planning, to focus on reproductive rights.

The network succeeded, through the most incredible combination of formidable professional knowledge, analytical and technical skills in research, writing and communications skills, political skills in advocacy, building strategies, building alliances and negotiating, and above all a ‘counter-cultural’ commitment to women, focusing on protecting women’s lives. In their own countries, members of the network worked with health-care professionals in ministries of health and in family planning programmes, and with NGOs in different constituencies.

In the First Prepcom (preparatory committee) for ICPD, held in April 1993, women in the network worked hard to reframe the document prepared by UNFPA, and to propose amendments to it. They followed the preparatory process at international level, throughout 1994, moving from a Strategy Conference in Rio in January, to the Second Prepcom in May, and finally to the Conference itself in Cairo in September. At the Conference, feminist health advocates worked with government delegations at the UN, and women’s movements in global capital cities. The result, against all odds, was the delivery of a document that adopted a new framework of human development approaches combined with a commitment to women’s ‘health, rights, empowerment and accountability’.
Implications for leadership

What lessons can we take from the above examples of women forging a path through the potentially disabling environment we live in, of economic globalisation, rising fundamentalism, and decreasing levels of state accountability to their populations?

First, as my first case-study shows, transformational leadership is possible within bureaucracies. It can be discerned when women who work within these apparently monolithic organisations step forward to challenge sexism and discrimination there; and when they are willing to risk their jobs, status or popularity, in the defence of women’s human rights.

Second, transformational leadership often seems to emerge as a response to crises, or events that present an opportunity. Yet success at these moments is founded on a much longer process of development and struggle. There must be resources available for building the capacity of women to lead transformation, so that organisations can be responsive to needs that arise at critical moments. Organisations and individuals promoting transformational feminist leadership within bureaucracies must be alert to the potential in women at the early stages of that process – women who are beginning to question patriarchal privilege, and challenge gender-based hierarchies.

Women’s leadership is a different concept from transformational feminist leadership – being a woman does not make one a feminist. My own transformation – personal, professional, and political – was influenced first by the working-class Jamaican women with whom I worked, and second by the intellectual leadership of the Third World women’s movement. My transformation resulted in a deepening feminist consciousness, and commitment to an agenda for social change. Without this process of gradual awakening to feminism, the professional skills and theoretical understanding that I now have would have been of no use. Certainly, they would not have led me to take the risks, or develop the strategies, that I now consider essential to the promotion of an agenda to take us to that world of which we dream.

The third lesson from the case studies discussed here is that in order to promote transformational leadership within the government bodies and international institutions that govern our world, we need strategies, including alliance- and coalition-building. These link the work of governments and NGOs, feminists and traditional women’s organisations, researchers and activists, parliamentarians, women who work within major bureaucracies at all levels, and the women’s movement, both locally and globally. The work of our networks should draw on the different strengths of women in all these areas of work, and needs to combine professional-technical approaches with political and counter-cultural approaches.

What is required to effect political, economic, and social change is a combination of qualities, including intellectual clarity and technical knowledge, political acumen, women’s spiritual strengths, and values of solidarity, caring, and co-operation.

How to proceed?

This article has argued that to seek to transform women who wear the title of ‘leader’ within formal bureaucratic structures is an important objective. However, as it has pointed out, ‘transforming’ women leaders in formal bureaucratic structures in the sense of influencing them to take up feminist goals is not adequate to bring about transformation of the structures and institutions that perpetuate women’s inequality, marginalisation, and powerlessness. Women in leadership positions within governments and development bureaucracies who take up the political struggle for women’s equality need also to
acknowledge the structural limitations of their position within these bureaucracies.

The introduction of gender-sensitive training and management systems has not resulted in agencies and governments standing up to assault by the forces of fundamentalism, determined to reverse gains for women negotiated in the UN global conferences of the 1990s. In addition to technical training, those who wish to further a feminist agenda require a commitment to the values of caring, sharing, and cooperation, rather than those of selfishness, greed, and competition. Women within the structures of government and international agencies need to recognise the contradictions inherent in international programmes that purport to promote gender equity, poverty alleviation, and an end to violence, while governments continue to pursue policies and programmes that take them further from those goals. One of the problems activists and radicals have faced over the past few years has been the tendency for words to be co-opted and taken out of context, to serve purposes that are the opposite from those for which they were intended. Such words include ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’, as well as ‘transformation’.

Building bridges is necessary, between women bureaucrats and those women working beyond the structures of government and international agencies, who are therefore better placed to challenge these institutions and to hold governments accountable. We also need to acknowledge limitations that exist in the NGOs that have adopted a commitment to gender equity, and even within the multi-faceted women’s movement, which seeks to incorporate women of different classes, races, political affiliations, sexual orientation, and ideological tendencies. The fact is that the women’s movement is far from monolithic, and if we are to move towards our vision, or advance the agendas we adopted in Cairo, Rio, Vienna, Copenhagen, and Beijing, we need to recognise this and distinguish between different strategies – those that lead to transformation, and those that are unlikely to do so – and between those women who are most likely to lead us on a transformational path, and those who prefer to remain within the status quo.

Peggy Antrobus has been a feminist activist in the Latin America and Caribbean region for over twenty years. She is a founding member of DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era). WAND/DAWN, School of Continuing Studies, University of the West Indies, Pinelands, St Michael, Barbados. E-mail: pan@caribsurf.com

Notes

1 This article is based on a paper prepared for UNIFEM.
2 With thanks to Audrey Roberts who helped clarify this distinction.
3 This phrase was the title of DAWN’s contribution to the UN Social Summit in Copenhagen.
4 See Correa 1994 for more information on Malthus and population control, and feminist responses to this theory.

References and further reading

DAWN (1994), Challenging the Given, Dominican Republic: CEREP.