

# A “Learning” Gathering of Women Civic Activists to Promote a New Concept of Leadership and Learning

“Women’s Learning Partnership’s dynamic and innovative Roaming Institutes have begun to shape the future of women’s leadership by empowering women in the Global South to play significant roles in their nation’s social, economic, and political development.”  
– Sakena Yacoobi, Afghan Institute of Learning

Imagine an advocacy coalition campaign to amend personal status laws in Morocco led by a women’s organization. Amina Lemrini, an activist in the Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc (ADFM), based in Rabat and Casablanca, gave a detailed account of how a civic organization led by women and dedicated to women’s issues successfully developed a coalition of nine organizations that legitimately put on the national Moroccan agenda the issue of the reform of age-old laws that restrict women and are basically unjust. ADFM led the “Le Printemps d’Egalite” (Spring of Equality) Coalition, a mobilization for the rights of women. Amina asked the participants in the “learning” gathering — Why should we reform laws? Laws are what govern our lives and when we have a discriminatory law, it prohibits women’s participation. So the coalition’s aim was a strategic one to reform the laws, and thus amend the mechanism that will ensure women’s rights and participa-

tion in civic life in Morocco. She outlined the strategy, vision, mission and tactics of the 9 - organization coalition. ADFM has been also successful in lobbying for the creation of 30 seats in the Moroccan Parliament for women members of Parliament. This will encourage Moroccan political parties to include women candidates on their electoral lists in the next elections in September 2002.

Women’s Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP) recently brought together 17 women leaders from Afghanistan/Pakistan, Cameroon, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Palestine, and Uzbekistan for a week-long conference on enhancing women’s rights, leadership, and political participation in the Global South.

WLP’s first Roaming Institute for Women’s Leadership was held at the Bolger Center for Leadership Development in Maryland from June 22-27, 2002. The Institute was a multimedia leadership learning meeting during which participants strategized about ways to empower women in diverse Muslim societies to take on leadership roles within their communities, and to develop the skills to become better advocates for women’s equal



participation in decision-making and civil society. “This was an excellent opportunity to network with other organizations, improve our facilitation and communication skills, and strategize about ways to collaboratively empower women in our communities,” commented Mishka Mojabber of Lebanon at the conclusion of the Institute.

WLP’s concept that inclusive, horizontal, and participatory leadership empowers women and leads to the development of gender equitable and democratic societies forms the basis of the Roaming Institutes for Women’s Leadership and is described in WLP’s collaboratively developed manual *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*. Trainers from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East simulated scenarios on conflict-resolution and negotiation, women’s political participation, and gender-sensitive leadership styles. The simulations enhanced participants’ facilitation skills and emphasized country-specific successes and challenges experienced when implementing this alternative leadership concept. For example, WLP’s partners in Afghanistan conducted a role-play scenario that encouraged participants representing diverse Afghan ethnic groups to communicate and negotiate across cultural barriers to achieve a shared goal for girls’ education and advancement. WLP’s Jordanian partners facilitated a session in which participants analyzed challenges to women’s involvement in local and national elections, and strategized on ways to motivate women at the grassroots level to become politically active.

The Institute also focused on skills training necessary to plan and conduct media campaigns, communications strategy development, and cross-regional democracy building. The communications training included conducting, critiquing, and evaluating individual simulated interviews with the media. Participants also learned from one another by sharing the strategies they use in grassroots advocacy campaigns, mobilization initiatives, and establishing community networks. For instance, WLP’s partners in Malaysia discussed their mobilization and advocacy efforts to raise public awareness and influence politicians in order to improve legislation on violence against women. WLP’s Moroccan partners discussed their initiatives in creating dynamic local and regional networks to change legislation governing women’s rights within the family. Following these sessions, Asabe Audu of Nigeria said, “I appreciated the comprehensive com-



munications and advocacy training— a number of strategies that were discussed will be useful to my organization’s campaigns.”

The Institute concluded with a session during which participants developed strategies to implement future national and regional Roaming Institutes. Participants agreed that the goals of future Institutes are to enable women in Muslim societies to claim their human rights, develop leadership skills, and become strong participants in the social and political developments of their communities and nations. Future Institutes will accomplish this by using a variety of methods, including organizational capacity-building, training of trainers, and the development of further collaborative leadership learning materials such as interactive videos, on-line training manuals, and distance-learning courses. National Roaming Institutes are being planned in Afghanistan/Pakistan and Morocco, and regional Roaming Institutes are being planned by WLP’s partner organizations in Jordan, Nigeria, and Uzbekistan. “Our experience here at the Institute with workshop simulations, development of communications strategies, and advocacy training will be extremely useful to my organization and others in my community,” commented Amina Lemrini of Morocco. Asma Khader of Jordan concluded, “I have a renewed sense of purpose and belief in the implementation of the women’s leadership program, and eagerly anticipate the Roaming Institutes to come.”