

CHAPTER 1

Women and Leadership: Reflecting Back, Moving Forward



Figure 1.1 The Sankofa Bird (artwork by Journey Allen, 2020)

A legacy, a lesson, a history, a dance, and a bird launch this partnership informing the preparation of women for critical roles as leaders, movers, and shapers of all elements of a society. The West African Sankofa bird carries an egg in her mouth with her head turned backward, representing both the future and learning from hindsight (Deterville, 2016). In the Swahili lan-

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guage, *Sankofa* means looking back to retrieve learning (gather information), to avoid the same mistakes of the past, and to build resilience through experience and education (Bordas, 2012). *San* means to go back, and *kofa* means to obtain. The bird in this sketch has a crown on her head, which reflects her internal royalty, intuitiveness, and courage. The Sankofa bird is often depicted with a round object or an egg in its beak, which symbolizes bringing forward or nurturing emerging future leaders. As she advances in leadership, she is careful to nurture and bring forward the next generation of leaders.

This rendering of the Sankofa bird, created by Journey Allen (2020), brings hope for the richness of the stories that empower and sustain women leaders. In African culture, the wisdom of learned elders and leaders was highly valued. Historically, African American people have also used the concept of Sankofa in everyday life, even when there was no clear language to define the process. Communities of color, including African American communities, relate to the past as the *wisdom teacher*, the source from which culture flows (Bordas, 2012). These communities embrace inclusive practices of leadership that are holistic, relational, and circular. A special emphasis is placed on telling the stories of the elders or sharing the wisdom with the next generation of leaders. Reflecting through the lens of Sankofa allows us to bring forth the voices of past, present, and future women in leadership. These women leaders are able to claim a seat at the table and share their voices through collective narratives that challenge male perspectives and make a positive difference. This difference requires movement that shifts the status quo as women are called to construct a more active and critical role in the process of political change. Women work to balance power relationships across social, economic, political, and environmental lines.

As the concept of Sankofa would have us understand, this movement originates and spreads across every continent from the motherland of Africa to the Pacific, land to the east-west and north-south. This movement of female energy as mentor, leader, and nurturer shares characteristics and traits that are cross-cultural, intersectional, multilingual, and transformative. Women today are claiming space more visibly and powerfully than ever. The face of women's leadership will no longer be denied, silenced, or closeted. The characteristics of this type of leadership include collaboration, partnership, interprofessional practices, and a focus on the future.

Setting the Stage

We must carry forward the work of the women who came before us and ensure our daughters have no limits on their dreams, no obstacles to their achievements, and no remaining ceilings to shatter.
(President Barack Obama, 2011, p. 11)

What does the past offer us in the way of learning and transforming? How has herstory shaped our narratives for the future? What does the concept of lifting while you climb mean? How does this parallel process afford women the opportunities of being supported while supporting others? *Lifting while we climb* was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women at the end of the 19th century (Tarr-Whelan, 2009). This phrase spoke to the higher calling of assisting other women and creating a space for women to move into positions of power and influence. This is the essence of women and their approach to mentoring and leadership.

For the past 40 years, bell hooks (2015b) has lived, written, researched, and advocated for women and women's issues. She writes extensively about the feminist struggle and the political components that reinforce oppressive practices. She affirms that the feminist movement is not just a women's movement but one of equality and justice for all. She is a radical visionary and a pioneer in recognizing the silencing and marginalizing influence of White supremacy and patriarchy. Each new generation picks up the mantle and moves the arc of social justice (M. Joyner, personal communication, June 9–12, 2019). These emerging young leaders are demanding real inclusion and equal spaces at the tables of power and influence. The current political arena has no choice but to accept this force of female energy, insight, and intellect.

Women are certainly not new to leadership, often leading from the collective. Throughout history, women have built and maintained organizations, created social justice movements, and brought structure to chaos, usually from a collaborative and interactive place of reference. With particular emphasis on interprofessional and interdisciplinary processes, women continue to sustain and attempt to bring order to dysfunction. This process happens across multiple professional disciplines as well as within the various professional disciplines. Women's voices historically, however, have been written out of the public narrative. History is told through a White male lens; therefore, the leadership roles of women and particularly women of color are either minimized or excluded from the narrative.

As the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment is celebrated, this phenomenon of women being written out of history with their voices devalued is particularly significant in today's fight against exclusivity and segregation. Though we celebrate women being granted the right to vote, the struggle for basic equal rights continues. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), first introduced in 1923 and passed by the U.S. Senate in 1972, was designed to protect the basic rights of women. The ERA is simple in its language: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex" (ERA, n.d.). Yet the ERA continues to be under attack by factions such as pro-life organizations that represent extreme conservative views (MacKinnon, 2014; Neale, 2013). Though it has

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been ratified by 37 states, nearly 100 years since its introduction, the ERA has still not become national law.

This is a critical point in history. Women are reclaiming voice in the public arena, taking agency to imprint their knowledge and experience. This critical transition is being honored through writings that strengthen and reshape the narrative around women and advancement. Leadership and mentoring are exhausting physically, mentally, and emotionally. Women who lead and mentor have the additional stressors of multiple roles and expectations that tend to be gender specific. As they juggle numerous caregiving roles, the support needed is often unavailable or inaccessible. Leadership fatigue, though not exclusive to women, brings a unique and complex array of issues that are specific to women who are socialized to put others' needs, problems, and concerns before their own (Gilligan, 1982).

Previous works by women authors have informed the positioning of narratives and vignettes that enrich the experience of developing women leaders. Women in the academy, women at the forefront of social justice movements, women who lead, coach, organize, and mentor organically while providing safe spaces for those who follow, are the natural teachers. For instance, Mallinger, Starks, and Tarter (2017) argued that mentoring is important in the creation of protective factors that are specific to women. They provide a road map designed for identifying barriers to leadership for female social workers and offer strategies for advancement. Countee-Gilliam (2016) in her dissertation on women and leadership discovered that those in administrative positions were more self-actualized than those in non-leadership positions. In *Critical Multiculturalism and Intersectionality in a Complex World*, Sloan, Joyner, Stakeman, and Schmitz (2018) presented a web of intersecting identities. The web is a tool for exploring power, privilege, and positionality across dimensions of identity. In *Women of Color as Social Work Educators: Strengths and Survival* (Vakalahi, Starks, & Hendricks, 2007), narratives inspire women to work toward collective unity and justice. Intersectional theory is brought to reality as women's stories are told. Although anchored in the context of the academy, the themes in these stories resonate and parallel those of women who are in the business and industrial arenas and in the social, health, physical, and biological sciences in the United States and across the globe. These women are struggling for equity and fair opportunity to lead and shape the social and political narratives influencing justice-informed outcomes.

Women in Political Power

Although leaders at the local level are more likely to be recognized, the context is global. Narratives from afar provide direction for moving forward. Women around the world share ways of knowing and doing that enrich the trajectory of humanity and bring needed change. This includes the increase

of women deans and presidents of universities, as well as the seasoned and emerging groups of women in the U.S. Congress. The finesse of seasoned politicians, such as Nancy Pelosi, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Hillary Clinton, Stacey Abrams, Mazi Hirono, Tulsi Gabbard, and Barbara Mikulski, paved the way for a new wave of powerful young women emerging in the political arena. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—known as “the Squad”—were all elected to Congress in 2018, bringing a progressive and outspoken approach to politics. These committed legislators, diverse by race, ethnicity, and religion, are advocating for the most vulnerable and speaking truth to power. These women are linking social issues and leading the way from oppression to opportunity for women and the disenfranchised. In many ways, they mimic the energy of one of the original female political warrior groups of the Civil Rights Movement—Barbara Jordan, Shirley Chisolm, Betty Shabazz, and Dorothy I. Height—who fought for voice and visibility despite being under intense public and political scrutiny. Building on the historical contributions of women leaders in the past, this critical and poignant point in time must be captured, examined, replicated, duplicated, and reinforced. Stories, metaphors, vignettes, and questions are used in this book to frame and support this dialogue.

Although there has been an increase of women in positions of power across the spectrum, the demographics for women in governmental leadership positions continues to lag behind that of men. Such governmental leadership representation is critical because of its micro- and macro-level impacts on all people and communities. As of September 2019, 47 women made up 23.7 percent of congressional representatives. In January 2020, nine of these women were women of color plus three who represented the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. As of this date, there were four women of color in the U.S. Senate and 43 in the House of Representatives. According to the Center for American Women in Politics (CAWP), 300 (or 22 percent) of the 1,366 U.S. mayors with populations over 30,000 are women (CAWP, 2020). In 2021 Kamala Harris became the first woman to serve as vice president of the United States (CAWP, 2021). Nine women are currently serving as governors of states, along with the mayor of the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. These women, though small in numbers, continue to provide leadership that is transformative, powerful, and effective and are a true reflection of women in leadership globally.

New Zealand provides us with a recent example of a young woman, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who represents a change in the global conversation sparked by female leadership. She is a leader who responds with empathy, fairness, compassion, and immediate action. In 2019, following the attack on two mosques in New Zealand that killed 51 and injured 49, Prime Minister Ardern immediately responded by attending to the public reaction, exhibiting cultural awareness by donning the appropriate head covering,

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participating in community grieving ceremonies, focusing the media on the injured community rather than the perpetrators, and overseeing the recognition of loss by publicly speaking the names of those targeted. Her response was strategic, empathic, and persistent, and the ensuing gun law reforms that she championed were a formula for effective and meaningful leadership (Luscombe, 2020).

Women in the social and political arenas are not a new phenomenon, but recently, the volume of their numbers and active presence of their voices has increased. Patrick Meehan (2018) conducted a study of women running for political office following the 2016 presidential election. He discovered that women were more interested in running for office at the local level, but unfortunately, they often doubted their qualifications. Data were also collected from women who were students in MSW programs and other professional disciplines such as law. Findings showed it was critical that MSW programs provide opportunities for political field placements and internships, thus indicating the importance of growing and mentoring the next generation of powerful, committed, and informed women leaders. To ensure that potential female pioneers of tomorrow do not doubt their qualifications, leadership development for women across all disciplines must start early and continue to be nurtured throughout their academic, social, and emotional development.

Leadership: Woman Claiming Space

When women speak the truth about what they see, women, organizations, and the world reap the rewards. . . . Organizations access fresh ideas and perspective by learning to value intuitive insight along with analytical skills. (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010, p. 14)

The social work profession, among other human service and health care professions, has always proposed the agenda of building on strengths. However, it has many times failed to recognize the strengths and value of women's work and voices. Given that women have always provided leadership, both formally or informally, as social justice warriors and change agents without recognition, this omission is critically damaging and dysfunctional. The names and stories of powerful women in academia, social work, the social and political sciences, and beyond, in sports, media, government, arts, and financial systems, must be recognized and honored.

From Althea Gibson to Serena Williams, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Michelle Obama, from Shirley Chisolm to Hillary Clinton, from Barbara Jordan to Barbara Lee, from Dorothy I. Height to Stacey Abrams, women's impact is legendary. Their stories of leadership and heroism have been passed down through the ages and have had far-reaching impact. Examples of such modeling for leadership and mentoring include the powerful opening statement by

Barbara Jordan at the House Judiciary Committee hearings during the impeachment of Richard Nixon. She was the first African American and first woman to deliver a keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention (Biography.com, 2020). When Barbara Jordan and Shirley Chisolm decided to take their civil rights and social justice movements into the political arena, they did not go alone. They were surrounded by the power of supportive voices from other women. Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman to serve in Congress and eventually ran for president in the 1972 Democratic primaries. At the party's national convention, she garnered 151.25 delegate votes before Senator George McGovern won the nomination.

Eleanor Roosevelt, as a first lady, diplomat, and activist, used her platform to advocate for expanded roles for women in the workplace. Her leadership was notable in liberal political circles as well as in the public, where she used her newspaper column, articles in the popular press, books, and public appearances to increase visibility for women's issues (Beasley, 2000; Rung, 2017). Much like Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, Roosevelt used her position as first lady to increase awareness of women's issues such as equal wages and employability. What these women had in common was a sense of belonging to the agenda for change and transformation. They were pioneers who built on the legacies of other women who had served as their mentors. They were on a mission to transform systems that were outdated, oppressive, and sometimes dangerous for women. A strong belief in bringing women's voices to the forefront guided their energies and their messages. They are representative of legions of women who operate from a framework that has dynamics of courage, integrity, strength, insight, and persistence.

Recognizing the value of feminist and relational theories that inform leadership and mentoring, women have persisted across the intersections of gender, age, race, and culture. Women often bring a broader understanding of the many faces of identity and gender. The oppression of all women, whether straight, gay, bisexual, or trans, creates cultural biases that are increased when merged with other identities, including race, ethnicity, age, class, religion, disability, and national origin. In particular, the 21st century is experiencing an increasing awareness of the impact of these intersectional variables (Butler-Mokoro & Grant, 2018). The book and the movie *Hidden Figures* highlight the key roles Black women filled as the intellect behind the race to space. Without their expertise and willingness to take risks, the U.S. space program would have no doubt been significantly delayed (Chernin, Gigliotti, Topping, Williams, & Melfi, 2016; Shetterly, 2016). This is an excellent example of the concept of *lifting while you climb*, or lending your strengths and resources to promote and improve the quality of life for all. In 2019, these women—Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Christine Darden—were finally recognized and awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor. And in 2020, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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(NASA) named its headquarters after Jackson, which is located on the re-named street “Hidden Figures Way.”

Leadership, both formal and informal, requires courage. In *Dare to Lead* (2018), Dr. Brené Brown wrote about the courage to stay in the arena and rumble until clarity, skill, and understanding occur. She advocates for bravery, courage, and tough conversations as we mentor and lead from a place of whole-heartedness. Courage promotes and supports the continued growth and creativity that is required for effective leadership. Courageous conversations are extremely difficult but necessary and expected in the negotiation of change. These difficult conversations require compassion and empathy as each party struggles to be authentic and understood. Leadership and mentoring are often pathways to sustaining one’s spirit (Bailey, Koney, McNish, Powers, & Uhly, 2008). Bailey and others suggest that listening to the whispers of the quiet voice inside is key to sustaining the necessary energy for leadership and mentoring.

When we think about leadership in its totality, the overall umbrella encompasses strengths and empowerment. The strengths approach to practice, including advocacy and development, has been central within the social work profession. The strengths perspective as outlined and developed by Hill and Saleeby (Hill, 1972; Saleeby, 2013) highlights the importance of empowerment and self-determination. Strengths-based practice is a social work theory that focuses on an individual’s self-determination and strengths (McCashen, 2017); it has a much broader application across the social and human sciences. Empowerment is a perspective as well as a goal, informing a process facilitated through leadership and mentoring. The development of skills, strengths, and resources that are produced when we support individuals as they come to believe in and validate themselves is empowering. This step is a critical component in the mentoring process and is highlighted in this book.

Leadership: Challenges that Grow Us

As the face of leadership is changing, so are the challenges that are presented. When these challenges are reframed into opportunities for growth, women transcend obstacles and use these obstacles as stepping-stones to power, influence, and change. These challenges are expected elements of the journey and often keep the process organic in its transparency. Listed below are some of the expected challenges to leadership for women:

- Lack of confidence
- Fewer opportunities
- Insufficient preparation
- Difficulty balancing commitments
- Threats to health and well-being
- Toxic masculinity

- Guilt
- Inadequate mentoring

Women often find their confidence has been challenged throughout their lifetime. Certain words and phrases are used to give subtle hints that women are not good enough. The “weaker sex” and “you’re acting like a girl” are just a few examples of how semantics are used to diminish a sense of power and competence. Gaps and blocks to opportunities begin a cycle of closed doors and glass ceilings. Many times, women are not offered the opportunities that best prepare them to assume leadership roles, setting them up for failure. *Toxic masculinity* refers to repressive and limiting ideas about the male gender role. The result of such thinking is that forceful dominant men with sexist ideals of masculinity are more likely to abuse and oppress women (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013; Jenny & Exner-Cortens, 2018). This ideology supports the emergence of abuses such as microaggressions that are designed to keep women “in their place.” These statements and gestures of oppression represent real threats to women’s careers and to their physical, emotional, and sexual safety. Balancing the typical responsibilities of child rearing, extended families, and community responsibilities renders women with less time and emotional energy to juggle what is expected, resulting in threats to both their physical and mental health (Vakalahi et al., 2007). Women are socialized to feel guilty and responsible for everything and everyone. Studies show guilt is a variable affecting women’s movement to leadership and even their hesitancy to acquire mentoring (B. Brown, 2018; Schaumberg & Flynn, 2012).

Mentorship: Process, Reciprocity, and Self-Care

As women, we understand and appreciate the importance of lifting while we climb. It is our responsibility to bring others along. We must mentor, support, guide, and protect the spaces that allow women to develop and grow their leadership skills. With knowledge comes power, and with power comes responsibility; this seems to be an unspoken but well accepted norm for women who lead effectively. This also includes sharing potential risks and challenges inherent in the mentoring process. Recent studies have shown that 75 percent of professional men and women wish they had a mentor, whereas only about 37 percent find themselves in a mentoring relationship (Woolworth, 2019).

From traditional to nontraditional, peer to sponsorship, and other types of mentoring, the value added is immeasurable. Stacey Abrams (2019) wrote about “situational mentors” who have the needed insight for a particular project but are not meant to be in it for the long-term. These mentors are in our lives for a reason and a season. Barsh and Cranston (2009) described a situation at Morgan Stanley Company where the use of sponsors (mentors) was critical to the process of professional development and leadership functions.

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This speaks to the importance of the roles, rules, and rituals of the various types of mentoring and situation-specific responses to needs (MacKinnon & Shepley, 2014).

This decade has witnessed an increased understanding of the need for and practice of self-care. Across the spectrum of helping professions, businesses, and the sciences, the media and the scientific literature support the importance of intentional responses to the needs of mind, body, and spirit (Griffiths, Royse, Murphy, & Starks, 2019; Starks, Vakalahi, & McPhatter, 2014). Leadership brings with it both expected and unexpected challenges and the critical need for self-care. Grise-Owens, Miller, and Eaves (2016) provided many examples of what graduate social work students say inform their need for and practice of self-care. Among these examples is supervision, peer mentoring, and gratitude. For many, gratitude is connected to spirituality and to what gives meaning to life. Spirituality and spiritual practices are considered by many as a form of self-care that is sustaining for women of color in leadership in the academy (Starks et al., 2014). Self-care is a common theme throughout the literature on mentoring. Responsible mentoring requires the ability to demonstrate and not just articulate the process of individualized self-care practices.

Launching the Process: An Overview

As you move through this book, you will discover the style and issues of women and leadership through the use of mentoring, as well as the integration of narrative and metaphor in leadership development. You will also discover the uniqueness in the mentoring process required for women, as well as the concepts of women's leadership fatigue and the imposter syndrome. Each chapter encourages reflection and application of the content.

As we move from this introductory chapter, which provides an overview and backdrop, to the final chapter, which shapes a vision for the future, an array of narratives, profiles, strategies, and tools are featured. These tools along with questions at the end of each chapter can be creatively utilized in developing individual responses or team dialogues regarding professional development needs. A range of resources is provided for support and to further enhance the experience of mentoring women toward leadership. Appendix A has a list of resources, some of which support the material in this chapter, others to support future chapters.

Chapter 2 provides the economic and sociopolitical context followed by models and frameworks for the examination of leadership and mentoring. Chapter 3 presents empowerment and relational theories that frame the reflection and analysis. Chapter 4 addresses the types and provides examples of mentoring that are effective for women. Normalization of the imposter syndrome and leadership fatigue are clarified as the discussion moves to strategies. Case examples of mentoring students and emerging young female

leaders are presented for review and discussion. Chapter 5 reflects on models of leadership, the history of women and leadership, and an exploration of lifting while we climb. Chapter 6 examines and considers contemporary leadership for women, reflecting on contextual and generational elements, recognizing that lessons for mentoring are shifting in these rapidly changing times. Finally, chapter 7 offers a glance into a trajectory that dances toward the future based on political insights blended with sound social justice values, ethics, and principles.

As you move through this book, a historical lens provides the base for exploring change and understanding the dynamic nature and changing face of women's leadership. Diversity occurs as a point of contact and a source of strength. Understanding the role of mentoring and learning from the past is part of the developmental process. Be aware that it is not just a moment in time but a movement. This work provides a focus on mentoring women leaders for the multicultural, global era that warrants leaders who are collaborative and committed to positive peacebuilding.

These are exciting times to be a part of the empowerment of women, the mentoring of women, and women's leadership. The authors share not only insights and strategies but also a challenge for bringing forth the following questions: Where do we go from here? Who will emerge as the critical thought leaders, advocates, mentors, and change agents of the future? How will this affect the direction of the future? What can be made of legend and legacy? What happens when women are empowered? In summary, these narratives suggest that

1. The face of leadership is changing.
2. History/herstory is valid and necessary.
3. Theories and frameworks of intersectionality, feminism, Africana womanist, and ethics of care are lenses by which models of leadership should be examined.
4. Intersectionality and gender and race bias are significant challenges to women in leadership.
5. Toxic masculinity is a real concept that is destructive for males and females.
6. Mentoring is a critical component for supporting women as they move to leadership.
7. Women can and will transform leadership for the future.
8. There is power in owning and honoring women's influence.

Exploration (Discussion Questions)

- Explore your experience of leadership: What has shaped your perspective?

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- What has been your experience of female leadership?
- Identify your experience of great leaders. Name a few of these.
- What role has mentoring played in your professional life? How important has this been?