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Women, Power, and Partnership

Elizabeth Graham Cook

As women in a community move into senior positions from which they can influence the economic advancement of women at all levels, commentators have examined factors contributing to their advancement. This article outlines data about the Women's Economic Forum, a Boston group formed in 1985. The degree to which interdependence or "partnership" is a positive element in achieving the group's objectives suggests that other communities could adopt the WEF model.

We have no reason to expect that men will write women's history, and women should not wait to write it until it has all taken place. When individuals band together, they create events that deserve to be recorded. Carolyn Heilbrun, Avalon Foundation professor in the humanities at Columbia University, noted in a *Boston Globe* interview discussing her latest book, *Writing a Woman's Life*, "Women have a genius for forgetting our own history. We pay very little heed to women who have won victories."¹

I personally have felt the impact of Heilbrun's astute observation. Over the past thirty years, as I looked for role models and mentors, I found none. As a single mother of two, MBA student, independent career woman, community leader, and bank director, I most frequently found myself alone, the only woman.

Since 1985 I have been a part of a small group of senior professional women, the Women's Economic Forum, which meets regularly to discuss the economic and political advancement of women and provide personal and professional support for its members.

As I have participated in the growth and development of WEF and experienced the value of the organization in my own life, reading Carolyn Heilbrun's study inspired me to write a history of the WEF.

This article presents that history, examines data collected from replies by group members to a questionnaire, and suggests that the Women's Economic Forum is a model of female partnership that could be followed in other communities to advance the objectives of its members.

As of June 1989, WEF numbered twenty-three members. Of the nineteen members who responded to my questionnaire, fourteen (74%) are in business, three (16%) are

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academics, three (16%) are professionals, two (11%) are in government, and one (5%) is in a nonprofit organization. Our ages range from thirty-five to sixty, with seven members (37%) in the forty to forty-five age group. More of us are married than not — fourteen members (74%). (When I shared these statistics at one of our meetings, a member speculated that in a similar group of men, 100 percent would probably be married.)

History

In March 1985, a vice president of an investment company organized a breakfast for business and professional women. The intent was to raise money for Evelyn Murphy, a candidate for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts. That effort represented the seeds of an idea for an organization for senior women. By January 1986, twelve of us met for breakfast every other week, and we eventually named ourselves the Women's Economic Forum. Our mission statement, formulated in December 1985, lists the aims for the Women's Economic Forum.

1. To promote women in all segments of community and economic activity in the Greater Boston area;
2. To develop an awareness and understanding of issues affecting women;
3. To produce, publish, and disseminate an annual report relating to the status of women;
4. To serve as a women's resource for the community;
5. To communicate, cooperate, collaborate, and coordinate with existing women's groups.

We meet from 8:00 A.M. to 9:30 A.M. every other week. One member hosted our 1985 gatherings at her home on Beacon Hill; since the beginning of 1986, a Boston law firm conference room has been our regular meeting place. One member, a lawyer, and her able secretary have taken charge of our food, notices, and general "housekeeping."

We devote the first few minutes to "schmooze" time, an opportunity to catch up informally on individual items of interest, but by 8:15 to 8:20 we take up a more formal agenda. Since April 1986, with the visit of Nicki Nichols Gamble, executive director of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, we have had at least one speaker per month. Gamble presented the background for the "Vote No on Question #1" campaign, which resulted in keeping abortion in Massachusetts a safe and legal right. Since mid-1989 the commitment of WEF to safeguard abortion rights for women under *Roe v. Wade* has been our top priority.

Our discussions span the gamut from national to local issues. Our speakers, who have covered a wide cross section of political, economic, and social concerns, have included U.S. Senator John Kerry; City Councilors Maura Hennigan Casey and Rosario Salerno; Eleanor Smeal, former president of the National Organization for Women; Janet Short, principal of the Tobin School in Roxbury; and Susan Estrich, then a Harvard Law School professor, who was manager of the 1988 Dukakis for President campaign. (Estrich is among the contributors to this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*.)

Reports have included the status of the Tobin School and our special supportive association with Janet Short and accounts of the activities of traditional business organizations in which several members participate.

The Tobin School has provided an opportunity for many actions and discussions. Several of our members have become pen pals with sixth-graders. On one occasion, Short told us that what she needed most was gloves for some of her students. A member, president of a retail business, provided the gloves with great alacrity. Our group has also listened to the frustration an urban principal experiences as Short related how drugs affect the students and families of the Tobin School.

Issues are the next items for discussion. Areas of special interest are:

Directorships/Awards/Jobs

For more than six years, one WEF member has chaired the Corporate Board Resource Project of the Boston Club.² (See Dell Mitchell's related article in this volume.) From that commitment, a continuing concern has been placement of women on corporate boards. Some directorships of WEF members are listed in Appendix A. The 1988 Korn/Ferry International Study of 458 corporate boards revealed that women served on 58 percent of boards surveyed, up from 45 percent in 1984. Locally, suggesting possible female candidates to appropriate chairmen or nominating committees has been key in this slow success story.

It is no accident that the presidents of two major corporations participated in a luncheon discussion about female candidates for corporate boards a year or two before they appointed WEF members to their boards of directors.

Members have received key awards and leadership posts. For example, one member is president of the National Council for Urban Economic Development, another was elected treasurer of the National Council of Savings Institutions in 1988, and another is chairman of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, of which several other members are also directors. Additionally, several members have received honorary degrees from institutions of higher education.

Job leads and changes receive group support. For instance, one WEF member changed law firm partnerships in midcareer. Other members have discussed the possibility of change, secure in the knowledge that the WEF group environment is safe and protects confidentiality.

Press coverage about members, positive and negative, is brought to members' attention. I can testify from personal experience to the support and honest feedback received after an unfavorable mention in the press. Several of us have used the WEF as a sounding board for honest comment and support when a position of leadership has brought one under attack.

Boston Public Schools

In July 1986 we took one of our first collective actions with a letter to Superintendent of Boston Schools Laval Wilson supporting comprehensive health education, including family planning. Our interest and support of the Boston public schools has ranged from time spent with school committee women to participation in the Mayor's Advisory Committee on School Reform.

Day Care

We see this issue as central to the changing times in which we live. As women and employees, we are aware that concerns of the economic well-being of families and corporations demand that we continue to inform ourselves about success stories in this area and brainstorm new possibilities. In 1989 WEF nominated Stride Rite Corporation of

Cambridge for the International Women's Forum Corporations That Make a Difference Award for its day-care center for employees.

Elections

Support of Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Evelyn Murphy has been a priority of many members from our inception. Fund-raising and advice, supervised by two members, have been our major actions. Three members played key roles in the Dukakis for President campaign; one of our group traveled with Kitty Dukakis from the beginning of the campaign, advising on issues and raising campaign funds, while another played a key strategy role and coauthored a book with Michael Dukakis that outlined his economic accomplishments and philosophy. Members have also identified significant legislators and legislative races as worthy of support. Pro-choice, equal rights, equal pay, and child care are deemed pivotal issues.

Central Artery Project

A WEF member has taken on a key role in informing the group and others of the facts of this major undertaking, which will deeply affect Boston's business and social climate. The \$4.3 billion project will add a third harbor tunnel to Boston as well as depress the Central Artery. Its short-term implications involve disruption of daily traffic flow; long term, it augurs a favorable impact on the urban environment, especially traffic flow.

National Partnership

In late 1987 one of our members forged a connection between WEF and the International Women's Forum. This organization, whose national offices are located in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1981 to create opportunities among women of achievement for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and resources and to enable members to reach greater heights of excellence in their leadership responsibilities. At the June 1989 business meeting of WEF, we determined to maintain the Women's Economic Forum as a separate entity while fostering the growth of the Massachusetts chapter of the International Women's Forum.

Our association with this group has already served several members. From a chance meeting with a member of the Missouri chapter, a WEF member formulated a venture capital business deal that allowed her corporation to establish a European identity without sacrificing the company's bottom line. A report on this innovative financing approach was the cover story in the September 1989 issue of *CFO* magazine.

Female Power and Partnership

What is remarkable about this group of women? What is worth noting?

For years there has been speculation that as women achieve a certain degree of power and status in business, they effect a shift and expansion, a difference of some sort in the business and civic environment. Part of this speculation has centered around Jean Baker Miller's thesis about women's relationship to power.³ Miller states that women define power as the responsibility to help others, primarily their children, to develop their talents and abilities. Carol Gilligan has called it the feminine morality of caring "to do unto others as we would want them to do to us."⁴

Further, Miller sees men as socialized to pursue their own ends; they tend to perceive service to others not as something central but something a man “may desire or can afford only after he has fulfilled the primary requirements of manhood.”⁵ Women, on the other hand, are socialized to see themselves primarily as responsible for the welfare of others, even at the expense of their own well-being. This idea translates into a “win-win” rather than a “win-lose” view.

A central theme of Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* is that “women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and maintain affiliation in relationship.”⁶ The concept of the “self-in-relation” entails the recognition that, for women, the primary experience of self is relational; that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships. How do these ideas about women’s psychology translate into reality in the Women’s Economic Forum?

“The special dilemma for women today lies in the fact that their ‘core relational self’ exists in the milieu of western industrial society, which is predicated on disconnection, autonomy, and individual achievement,” state Judith Jordan and Janet Surrey.⁷ They claim that women’s basic sense of self-worth and self-esteem are closely linked to the establishment of mutually empathic and reciprocally empowering relationships.

While it may still be too early to form a concrete thesis, I propose that the Women’s Economic Forum leadership group is breaking new ground in interdependence, partnership, and empowerment.

The Research Data

Although statisticians would probably say that my polling sample is too small to be meaningful, the findings from the questionnaire submitted to WEF members indicate some direction as to the shape and use of power and partnership among senior women.

These respondents have assumed power at a personal and professional level.

- Average length of current affiliation with institution is 10.5 years.
- Average number of hours worked per day is 10.5.
- 58 percent serve on corporate boards from Texas to Massachusetts.
- 21 percent serve on the Boston Chamber of Commerce.
- The majority are between forty and fifty years of age.

They have achieved a degree of balance in their personal lives.

- 68 percent have children — natural, adopted, or step.
- 58 percent have natural or adopted children.
- 42 percent had no personal role models.
- 21 percent mentioned their father as a career role model.

The WEF survey respondents are achievement oriented and self-initiators.

- The primary career motivator for 68 percent was the opportunity to learn and use new skills at the beginning of their career.

- 89 percent listed commitment as a key attribute to success, with 74 percent noting perseverance as well; no one considered mentors essential to success.

Most important, these women use their power and associations with one another to further their own interests regarding the status of women in the community.

- 79 percent saw WEF as a place to realize personal concerns, with 47 percent noting social or personal collaborations resulting from participation in the organization.
- 95 percent said the desire to contribute was the primary motivating factor in their careers.

Interdependence and Five Other I's

Why is the Women's Economic Forum model important?

Matina Horner, former president of Radcliffe College, proposed that we have entered an age when the recognition of interdependence is critical. She has called for the creation of workable structures to support this interdependence.⁸ I suggest that the Women's Economic Forum is one such structure. Others agree.

The creation of a group of women leaders in a region or urban area allows women to build on their strengths while fostering society's as well as women's development. WEF is a model of women of power and influence supporting one another and endeavoring to exert positive community change.

It is striking to note how few WEF women had mentors or role models for their primary goal. For me, the lack of a mentor or role model highlights the loneliness I have experienced, the contribution WEF fellowship makes to my life, and a pathway to contribute to others, especially women. One definition of *contribution* is a giving with others for a common purpose, sharing in effecting a result. It could be that women feel more effective when contributing in the company of other women.

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, Diane Eisler articulates the opportunity we have for a partnership society, a more feminine society rather than a dominator, masculine-oriented one. Eisler maintains that as this more caring labor, which nurtures and helps others, is fully integrated into the economic mainstream, we will see a fundamental economic and political transformation.⁹

In her much acknowledged *When Giants Learn to Dance*, Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter speaks of "putting power into partnerships" and describes successful alliances as having the "six I's" in place.¹⁰ She refers to corporations, but I think the concept is relevant to the partnership represented by the WEF and similar groups. The six I's are: the relationship is *Important*; there is an agreement for longer-term *Investment*; the partners are *Interdependent*; organizations are *Integrated*; each is *Informed*; the partnership is *Institutionalized*.

As the Women's Economic Forum moves into the 1990s, I predict that we will continue to leverage our individual resources by partnerships formed in this group, both for our own individual concerns and causes and for the common good of the community in which we live, with special emphasis on the economic well-being of women. Women in other communities may find this model of female partnership an effective means of influencing the same directives in their own community. ♪

Appendix A

Directorships of WEF Members

The American Express Funds	New York City
American Productivity and Quality Center	Houston
Bank of New England	Boston
Bay Bank Harvard Trust Company	Cambridge
Boston Edison	Boston
College Retirement Equities Fund — TIAA/CREF	New York
Cowles Media Company	Minneapolis
Dayton Insurance Company	Ohio
General Insurance Guaranty Fund	
Dennison Manufacturing	Waltham
John Hancock Insurance Company	Boston
Liberty Bank	Boston
Liberty Mutual	Boston
Lotus Development Corporation	Boston
Massachusetts Industrial Finance Agency	
Massachusetts Technology Development Corporation	Boston
Monsanto Company	St. Louis
New York Mercantile Exchange	New York
Newworld Bancorp	Boston
Norton Company	Worcester
Progressive Company	Cleveland
Putnam Fund Groups	Boston
Saatchi and Saatchi Consulting Group	Washington
Scudder Stevens and Clark	Boston
State Mutual Investment Trust	Boston
Stride Rite Corporation	Cambridge
Time, Inc.	New York
Wainwright Bank and Trust	Boston

Notes

1. Carolyn C. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), cited in *Boston Globe*, November 18, 1988.
2. The Boston Club for Business and Professional Women is an organization of women who hold senior positions in a variety of fields, including finance, law, government, and academia. This organization, founded in 1976 when many of its original members coordinated the campaign to approve a state Equal Rights Amendment in Massachusetts, now numbers over 200 women.
3. Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).
4. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
5. Miller, *Toward a New Psychology*.
6. Ibid.
7. Judith V. Jordan and Janet L. Surrey, "The Self-in-Relation: Empathy and the Mother-Daughter Relationship," in *The Psychology of Today's Woman*, ed. Toni Bernay and Dorothy W. Cantor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).
8. Matina Horner, "The Changing Nature of Relationships in an Independent World," *Radcliffe Quarterly*, December 1986.
9. Diane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
10. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *When Giants Learn to Dance: Mastering the Challenge of Strategy, Management and Careers in the 1990's* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).