

Rivers run and I am dancing under trees
And I...I am the river swimming, swimming from roots
digging, and clinging to the earth
Because hearts never break to die
Hearts never break to weep
Hearts break, like tree bark
Because our bodies give shade and make the heat
Worth bearing

-Erika Abad

Erika is a queer Boricua born and raised in Chicago. She recently completed her PhD in American Studies at Washington State University. Politically she remains invested in working to address socially and institutionally imposed silence on disenfranchised populations. When she is not writing or performing, she is gardening or catching up with friends who work with PNW Jericho or NHBRN. Though her favorite time is cooking for food bank fundraising at her local catholic church every other Sunday. A queer friendly and immigrants rights centered Catholic church is a beautiful place to be.

Gender/Leadership by Emily

Often I hear men I work with talking about the need to be "developing capacity" within our collective, mentoring newer or less-experienced members to take on more leadership, sharing skills and power more equitably within the group. This understanding of equalizing power among collective members is a well-intentioned idea, based on our desire as radicals to create organizations that disrupt the power dynamics we understand to be so oppressive in the world at large. In practice, however, this effort to mentor members in a collective so often fails. This is not for lack of effort but because of the way this practice of leadership development reinforces patriarchal relationships and doesn't acknowledge the intimate connection between leadership and masculinity. This problem is complicated because leadership is important to organizations, and many of the skills associated with leadership are important to develop among members.

Most of the time, men who hold leadership are not aware of the larger cultural factors that imbue them with leadership, and so teaching leadership to others is not working. How can we untangle the relationship between leadership and masculinity to find ways to nurture and develop more equitable and feminist power within our organizations? Masculine cultural values include a sense of urgency, willingness to make decisions for others under pressure, worship of the written word, physical strength and bravery, and strategic thinking. These traits are associated with power. They aren't good or bad, and taken individually can be useful to revolutionary work, and can be learned and enacted by people of all genders.

In my experience, collectives have attempted to engage in skill-building through formalized mentoring relationships, trainings, rotating positions, post-meeting debates, and study. However this "development" is attempted, there are ways in which male power and dominance subvert these efforts, because power is often held informally by men. Clearly, feminist leadership does not mean simply plugging women in to positions in our organizations, nor is it about creating a more lady-friendly version of leadership. It's funny to me that as radicals, we understand that power is not indicated by position but by social and capital relations, yet we expect that we can just create feminist power just by putting women into positions of power within our organizations. There seems to be this assumption that if women are in elected positions with decision-making or

other power, that they are necessarily in positions of leadership. I would suggest that this assumption is incorrect and belies the true power within organizations, and tokenizes women to make the men in the movement feel like better feminists. Elected or appointed positions are not where real power is concentrated, it is instead enacted through a network of social relations based in part on gender and gendered socialization. **Leadership is not about who does the work, it's about who has influence.**

Many of these dynamics of social influence and patriarchal networks of power have been solidified over time, through different incarnations and organizations, and therefore appear as legitimate experience. Authority and power gained in one organization is carried with a person, and while that does not always align with a person's gender, it does explain why many men in organizations seem to have more natural leadership and power. These men do have knowledge and experience, but women cannot step into those relationships and be mentored into that network of power, so instead we attempt to set up systems of proving worthiness or put women into elected positions without first admitting the underlying power dynamics that already exist. If we can remove the gendered barrier to participation, it will have good effects for organizing. There is a problem of entrenched experience. I don't mean that experience doesn't matter- but how do we work towards equalizing it?

As I have become more embedded in leftist political practice here in Portland, I have learned ways of being that allow me to be seen as someone with authority and cred, but I have had to work really hard to develop that, and I have seen many other brilliant and powerful folks (women and gender-queers especially) opt out of political spaces because they haven't learned the language, because they don't want to, or because their work and power is invisibilized by patriarchal social dynamics. As these folks exit organizations, we tell each other our membership is declining because folks can't show the discipline and commitment necessary to our work, and rarely do we look deeper to examine the conditions that have created untenable environments for women especially. My collective began the year with seventeen members, 8 women, and 7 men, seventeen people in all. Over the year, four of those women have left (and one man has joined), and I suspect that this has less to do with new jobs, and more connection to feeling unable to develop and participate in ways that feel comfortable. One of these women wrote that she felt like she was always faltering in meetings to express herself, and often felt shut down as she tried to communicate

and take strong positions on issues. She also wrote that she was stepping back due to "a lack of confidence and language to craft proposals that express which direction I think we should go". This woman held one of the three elected posts in the organization, but clearly she didn't see that as an avenue for development, or cred. Another woman I spoke with said, "I know I will never be able to use theoretical knowledge in the ways X can, and that makes me feel like I'm not good enough at activism."

These examples are not meant to demonstrate that women have less confidence, but that they feel that there are certain traits they see as linked to success as an activist, and they are traits they don't feel they can attain or learn quickly enough. I think this problem has a lot to do with some confusion around influence versus experience. Obviously there are ways in which experience is important, especially when we are engaging with state power and putting our bodies on the line. More commonly, however, "experience" is code for: have you been in a national organization? Have you written something important? Have you read and discussed Hegel at an invite-only retreat? Even when women do have these experiences, they still are less likely to have influence.

As many feminist writers and thinkers have already discussed, one way in which men typically hold power is through monopolizing relationships to other organizations and spontaneously emerging projects. Often men are put in these positions because others contact them because they "seem" like leaders from the outside, or because they simply are leaders. One comrade recently told me a story about how the men in her organization were contacted regarding a private meeting about feminist organizing, solidifying leadership and dominance of men within her collective. She had to then email the organizer and ask to be included, and the well-meaning organizer invited her in, but this situation echoes so many other seemingly uneventful ways that women are treated as less serious political comrades. This is a story that I have heard repeated many times, and it is a perfect example of the ways in which well-intentioned men hoard and consolidate power and then explain the behavior as a case of valuing experience instead of influence.

Recently, in a conversation with a comrade, I asked him to comment on the ways in which he sees himself enacting and enforcing patriarchy within the left. He did not know how to answer, but instead talked at length about women who had inspired him, and what he learned from them. He talked about trying to build capacity within membership so that

we could begin to share decision making and leadership. I wondered about why it was so important for him to work hard to ensure others are taking on leadership roles, and I realized it was because regardless of the work of others around him, he is often both pushing (and getting credit for) many projects and campaigns the left has engaged in recent years. He has a lot of experience and is charming and strong and brave. When people want historical context or strategic advice for a project or action, they go straight to him and he has the skills and knowledge to give great suggestions and perspective, and because he continues to be able to answer these questions well, we are reticent to have these discussions without him. I deserve a way to work within the left that supports me in developing my abilities, but this man will never be able to teach me his magnetism or power.

No matter how many wonderful, feminist men I am informally mentored by, I find that I can neither embody nor learn to hold the power and leadership that they hold more easily. Not because they are not making enough space for me, or because they are not attempting to teach, but because they often can not see the way male privilege has allowed them to achieve their positions of influence. They can't teach me how to be viewed as a leader, or how to hold power in a way that seems entrenched and appears authoritative to men. The one area I am allowed and expected to have true knowledge and influence is around feminist issues. I am often the first person called when men around me want a "feminist perspective", or when our study group is discussing feminist (women) writers. On one hand, this makes me feel like I have influence and value to my collective, but on the other, it often feels like men are using my assumed expertise in order to further their own cred as good feminist radicals. If the men of the left were truly interested in delving in to the work of feminism, I believe they would be less likely to call on me to give them the right answer.

Nowhere in this piece am I attempting to diagnose or solve a problem. Instead, I am attempting to pose a question that I want some answers to: **How can I become a leader in a way that feels authentic to me, and will project my position of power to others? How can we begin to reconceive of leadership in ways that makes it attainable, effective and recognizable for people who do not conventionally hold power?**

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