



STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S CAPACITY TO INFLUENCE HEALTH POLICY MAKING

HOW COACHING HELPS TRANSLATE LEARNING INTO ACTION

Brief

Photo by: Health Policy Project

Women's perspectives are too often absent from policy making, even in areas like family planning and reproductive health (FP/RH), which directly affect them. For example, Beatrice Rwakimari, a former Ugandan member of Parliament (MP), recounted, "The biggest challenge was the insensitivity of the executive about reproductive health. Most male ministers were not as passionate about reproductive health as we women were. They would say, 'That's not our priority.' Their focus was on roads or production of electricity."

Many women leaders would like to become stronger champions for policy change, and capacity development efforts can help them achieve their goals. Training workshops are seldom enough to sustain motivation and momentum when participants return to their demanding workloads. However, offering them a year of post-workshop coaching can be an effective strategy to extend the benefits of training and help translate learning into action.

Coaching Women Leaders

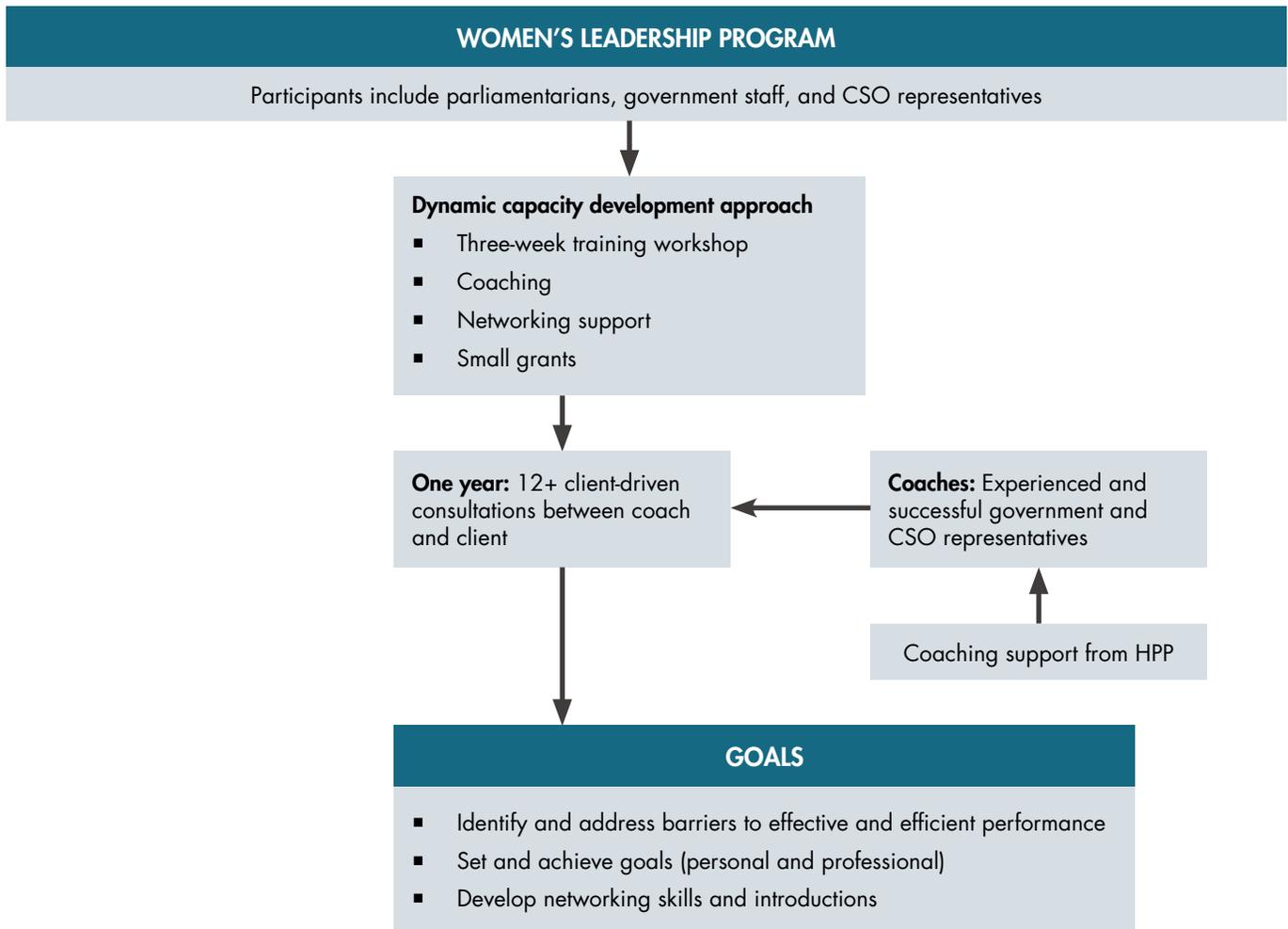
The Empowering Women Leaders for Country-led Development program, managed by the Health Policy Project (HPP) and funded by USAID, strengthens the

"My coach is an expert in the RH [reproductive health] field and respected When I have requested information and linkages with people I need to meet with for my work, she has provided me with the relevant information and contact. She also provides me with invaluable personal and professional growth advice."

—Coaching participant from Kenya

capacity of women leaders from six African countries to advance policy initiatives in FP/RH. Participants include parliamentarians, government officials, and leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs). Coaching is an important component of the program's overall capacity development approach, which also includes a skills-building workshop, networking opportunities, and a competitive small grants program (see Figure 1). Each participant in the three-week training workshop is offered the opportunity to work with a coach—a specifically trained leadership program

Figure 1



alumnae and senior FP/RH champion. To date, two cohorts of women leaders have participated in the program—one in 2012 and another in 2013—but the history of this program spans longer than two years. The project builds on a women’s leadership training approach developed by CEDPA (now Plan International USA, an HPP partner) that first incorporated coaching in 2005.

Participants who accept coaching commit to working with a coach at least once a month for a year following the training. During the training, participants prepare for their coaching by attending a special session that describes the roles of coaches and clients, helps set participants’ expectations, and clarifies potential misperceptions. Past experience suggests that some participants may initially believe coaches are akin to organizational consultants or specialized technical advisors; others may think their coach will help with fundraising. Additionally, participants may not understand their responsibility to move the process forward, both during and outside of coaching sessions.

After completing a year of coaching, the 2012 training workshop participants can provide insight into the experience. At the 2012 workshop, all 24 participants opted to work with a coach. The program assigned participants to 10 coaches who worked in the FP/RH field in the participants’ countries or regions. In follow-up one year later, the coaches reported monthly (or more frequent) communication with nearly all of their clients. Additionally, they reported that virtually all clients achieved various goals attributable to coaching, including making new contacts or gaining exposure to new networks, improving performance in a particular area, and identifying or achieving a professional or personal goal.

Nearly all the 2012 participants who reported back to HPP after one year indicated that coaching had been valuable for them, with advocacy and personal leadership cited as the most valuable. Participants commonly reported that coaches helped them prioritize, follow through on goals, and network effectively. One participant from Ghana noted,

What is coaching?

- An ongoing relationship that aims to improve performance
- A process of helping a participant clarify her own issues, brainstorm options, and select a course of action
- A process by which the responsibility for improvement and forward movement lies with the person being coached (the client)

Source: CEDPA. 2008. *Sustaining Professional Growth: CEDPA's Model for One-on-One Coaching*. Washington, DC: CEDPA. Available at www.cedpa.org/content/general/detail/2030/

“The coach has supported me in reviewing my priorities as a gender advocate and facilitator of FP.” A participant from Malawi reported that her coach inspired her to realize her goals: “The workshop sharpened my skills in advocacy as well as in being a leader. The coaching program ensured that I met the set goals without backtracking on them.” A Kenyan participant highlighted the value of a well-connected coach: “Networking facilitated by HPP and assigning me a coach both helped me to approach individuals and institutions necessary for me to achieve some of the professional and personal objectives; hence these have been the most valuable interventions for me.”

Many coaching participants reported active engagement in policy-related activities.

- “We launched the national population policy after meeting with members of Parliament and the vice president, and when we took the issue to the London Summit [on family planning] ... the vice president promised to adopt the policy.”
- “I participated in fast tracking the adoption of the National Population policy...”
- “[We conducted] advocacy to [successfully] achieve the inclusion of family planning in the National Health Insurance Scheme.”
- “I am working with an American organization ... in designing a panel at the November [2013] family planning conference in Addis to demonstrate the utility of civil society organizations and community monitoring of family planning services.”

In at least one case, a coaching client was able to help expand and improve FP/RH services within a new sector.

- “Reproductive health has been given more attention in the army, and services are better than when I started because [of our advocacy].”

The training and coaching experience often produced a ripple effect as participants reported coaching others. For example, one Kenyan participant reported, “I am currently coaching and mentoring two project staff in advocacy activities [who are] officers working in a family planning project.”

Becoming a Coach

Coaching requires a broad array of skills—personal, political, managerial, and strategic—because coaches must do more than just transmit information or advice. They act as sounding boards, guides, networkers, facilitators, and even as personal or career counselors. Because their primary function is to support their clients’ efforts to build the skills and confidence needed to achieve real change, they must be able to identify and deliver any form of support a client needs.

The program selects coaching candidates from a pool of women’s leadership alumnae in lower-income countries. Selection criteria include years of professional experience, depth and range of technical abilities, interpersonal and communication skills, and commitment to coaching other women leaders. Interested candidates participate in a week-long workshop that covers the coaching process, techniques, and responsibilities. Case studies, coaching aids, and monitoring tools are introduced during the training. Each trainee practices her coaching skills with other workshop participants and receives feedback from fellow participants and the trainers.

For the 2012 participants, HPP made a special effort to identify coaches from the participants’ home countries. The seven new alumnae coaches selected for this cadre completed their training via distance learning rather than in person. Limited bandwidth, however, made it difficult to conduct live online training so HPP produced training videos to distribute to coaches via flash drives. The videos included sessions on communications skills, coach-client interaction, and the coaching process.

Developing the Coach-Client Relationship

To create effective pairings, the program considers the coach's strengths and the participant's needs and interests. A common location and shared language are important factors to enable face-to-face interaction and discussion in the client's preferred language. Once coaches and clients are introduced, they discuss their respective responsibilities and establish a year-long schedule of monthly meetings—in person or by phone or Skype—and begin to build a working relationship, setting both short- and long-term coaching goals.

During sessions, coaches help clients identify issues and challenges in their advocacy work and professional development, offer encouragement, and build confidence. Coaches keep the information and skills acquired during the workshop fresh and relevant to each client's situation. They also alert clients to resources and additional contacts who can offer support or provide more detailed advice on a particular subject.

Nearly all coaches who worked with 2012 workshop participants described their relationships as successful. One coach from Malawi said that her clients, "... both call me mum and I am happy to have work children; I am their 'go to' person whenever they have professional or sometimes personal problems or just issues to share." Coaches typically reported a number of additional benefits to themselves, including learning about new professional areas of interest, improving communication skills, making new contacts, and developing further as a coach. According to an Ethiopian coach, "The benefits of becoming a coach are both personal and professional. Be prepared for surprises in the way your whole life will change as you integrate coaching into your life."

In addition to its many benefits, coaching does involve some challenges. In the case of the 2012 Women's Leadership cohort, the primary issue was client responsiveness. One coach noted that her client, "... didn't really get into the relationship at all. Her communication was generally reactive or just not there!" The importance of client motivation was highlighted by a coach from Ghana:

Ingredients of a Successful Coaching Relationship

- Structured approach based on clear objectives
- Shared understanding of coach and client roles
- Face-to-face contact, in addition to phone and digital communications
- Significant investment of time and effort from client
- Consistently positive and encouraging attitude from coach
- Foundation of mutual respect

Source: Adapted from CEDPA. 2008. *Evaluation of the CEDPA Alumni Coaching Program*. Washington, DC: CEDPA. Available at www.cedpa.org/files/2024_file_Evaluation_of_the_CEDPA_Alumni_Coaching_Program.html

"It is so good when one has a client who is very responsive to the coaching process. This is why I recommended that only those interested should take part in the process."

The program has two highly experienced advisors ("coach coaches") who help support the coaches. These advisors monitor the coaching partnerships through quarterly reports from coaches and provide guidance as needed. The advisors may work with coaches to correct problems, brainstorm strategies, and address potential client challenges.

Strengthening women's voices for family planning and reproductive health helps ensure that the perspectives and priorities of women are reflected in policies. The coaching program has demonstrated the distinct value of this approach in supporting women's capacities by drawing upon the wisdom and experience of others.

For More Information

More information on Empowering Women Leaders for Country-led Development is available at www.healthpolicyproject.com/index.cfm?id=topics-EmpowerWomenLeaders.

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