



## THE WOMEN'S PROJECT—A POWER BALANCE ISSUE IN THE CORE OF A SPANISH FEMINIST ORGANIZATION

*A Case Study Inquiry Through the Lens of Servant-Leadership and  
Feminism*

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**T**he Women's Project (TWP) is a Spanish based non-profit organization that hired an external consultant to analyze its organizational conflict between the main leaders and its members. TWP requested consultancy services to present a background case study about the organization through the lens of different philosophical approaches that can pose a series of reflective questions that may be used to initiate an internal dialogue towards practicing conflict resolution and a healing process of self-care.

The consultant presents the final report with a background case study called The Women's Project—A power balance issue at the core of a feminist organization with two philosophical analyses. The first analysis uses a servant-leadership lens, which is a new philosophical perspective to TWP. This analysis focuses on the ideas of using power, practicing trust, and applying the 10 characteristics of the servant-leadership. The second analysis uses a Feminist organizational lens following the organization feminist self-identification. This analysis focuses on a feminist leadership process of distributing power based on the idea of the organization's



collective way of leading. The consultant concludes with a brief reflection on the intersection between servant-leadership and Feminist analyses regarding the organization's background and conflict. This paper suggests that servant-leadership and Feminist lenses are compatible approaches toward creating a practical inquiry that may help this women's organization in facing its internal conflict scenario while encouraging sustainable growth.

## CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

The Women's Project is a non-profit organization created in 2015 by a group of Latin American women who shared interest in participatory spaces to strengthen the visibility of Latin American women's political, social, and cultural capabilities in Barcelona, Spain. The organization was created in a Spanish national context where even though many Latin American immigrant women are dual citizens, there is still little visibility and recognition of their contributions in their host countries (European Anti-Poverty Network, 2015, p. 83). Foreign women in Europe are almost an "anonymous subject" many times not acknowledged or recognized by governments and society. They are offered mainly entry-level jobs or minimal wages (at niche markets) and subsidized programs geared towards welfare.

In this context, TWP work to highlight and emphasize the roles of these women, who in their daily lives, develop political, social, and cultural contributions not only to their social environment but also to the entire European society. Since its first meetings in 2015, the organization has been gradually consolidating in the process of multidisciplinary combining several cultures, knowledge, and perspectives and in a collective creation promoting global citizenship. The organization also adopt an intercultural approach when promoting interaction among women from different cultural



backgrounds and cultures and an intersectional approach recognizing differences among women, especially considering their race, sexuality, class, and nationality. TWP work from the city of Barcelona as a meeting place for women. The group was established as a non-profit organization with a rotating election system for a president, the main coordinator, and multiple group leaders (including employees and volunteers). The members are all women from diverse nationalities and backgrounds. TWP work with and for migrant women from Latin America in Europe.

According to a feminist leadership process, the organization was created based on the idea of the collective way of leading in the community. This means that each woman who is part of the group displays leadership skills and practices according to specific moments and projects, always with the dynamic of dialoguing and sharing the “leader” role in synchrony with the organization’s values. Following this collective feminist philosophy, the election of a president, a coordinator, and group leaders is a formal procedure; but, the hierarchical legal structure (requested per law) is not supposed to be taken as fixed or to create dynamics of superiority and subordination inside the organization.

The main objectives of the organization include create training areas and promote initiatives that amplify the voices of women as political actors; provide financial credits to women’s projects in Spain; build bridges and networks among women from different contexts; develop advocacy work from an intersectional, multidisciplinary, creative and advocacy perspective; and create a learning process in collaboration with organizations and institutions while fostering bonds of sisterhood in harmony with peace, equality, and justice.

The feminist values of the organization are: collaboration, sisterhood; horizontality in dynamics of power; communication, and



group care; shared commitment against mechanisms and structures of oppression and domination; recognition and respect for diverse capabilities and skills; collective and individual empowerment; professionalism, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work; respect; visibility in transnational reality; and collective financial decision-making processes.

In 2017, two years after the group's creation, the organization was already well established and recognized by Spanish society. TWP was managing various projects for the community and the Catalan government. This resulted in unexpected financial increases. The management of the budgets and the expenses that were usually discussed during meetings in a democratic decision-making process (by vote) started to follow a different system. The president of the organization canceled most of the budget assemblies, justifying that the members were extremely busy with their new projects, and no members were openly questioning or complaining about the new unilateral decision-making system.

A year passed, and in 2018, the main coordinator started to openly question the new system and the president's decisions regarding the budgets. She revealed that the organization's annual report was not specifying the projects' expenses and that the final numbers were ambiguous. During a general assembly, the president explained that she was doing her best according to the organization's values and that the credits issued to women's projects were not always paid back as the organization expected. Following this explanation, the main coordinator started to demand meetings to openly discuss the annual report and the budget numbers that were supposedly not correctly justified. She argued that the TWP feminist leadership process was not being respected; that the president was not following the values of horizontality in dynamics of power as she



was taking important decisions without the member's consultation and voting. Moreover, the coordinator declared that the budget and financial decisions' lack of clarity was not acceptable in a feminist collective organization.

A month later, a series of assemblies took place to audit the organization collectively. On one side, the president was continuously posing her justifications around the lack of support when she was working with budgets and making financial decisions. She affirmed that nobody in the organization had the time or desire to work with her when asking for help, and for this reason she had to make many decisions by herself. On the other side, the coordinator continued to demand clear and detailed explanations about budgets and the president's financial decisions. After noticing an open conflict between the president and the main coordinator, many members started to develop a narrative of confrontation, affirming that the president was creating excuses that could not justify the lack of financial clarity the organization was facing. Finally, after two months of assemblies, the organization met a divided climate, with half of the members supporting the coordinator and the other half supporting the president. The lack of trust, accountability, and horizontality in power were the main issues discussed inside the assemblies/meetings and outside the organization.

## SERVANT-LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

The servant-leadership philosophy emerged in the 1970s when Robert K. Greenleaf initiated a discussion about the need for "a better approach to leadership, one that puts serving others—including employers, customers, and community—as the number one priority" (Spears, 2011, p. 10). Greenleaf (1977/2002) highlighted the focus on the developmental needs of followers and the community first. In this sense, Spears (2011) affirmed that "Servant



leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and the sharing of power in decision making” (p. 10).

Organizations that apply a servant-leadership approach view people as the priority over organizational issues (Reynolds, 2014). Greenleaf (2002) referred to a servant-led organization as one that serves and focus on the growth of its people first. According to Greenleaf, the first impulse of servant-leadership practice is listening and serving. The ultimate goal is to transform the ones being served: a transformation in the lives of the less privileged in society. Ferch’s (2004) interpretation of Greenleaf’s sense of the person and the community first “places servant-leadership firmly in the contemporary landscape of the family, the workplace, and the global pursuit of social justice” (p. 235). In this framework of pursuing social justice, we consider the application of a servant-leadership philosophy in a feminist organization such as TWP because, as Reynolds (2014) explained: “servant-leadership has potential as a feminism-informed, care-oriented, and gender-integrative approach to organizational leadership” (p. 36).

Women’s orientation to care and support of others first (Gilligan, 1982) illustrates a servant-leadership practice, but it is essential to recognize that women are expected by society to place the needs of others before their own (Gilligan, 1982). Servant-leadership has not yet developed a critical feminist discourse that deconstructs women’s expectations and traditional feminine essentialization in society. However, its genuine commitment to the use and sharing of power for good and the advocacy for dynamics of full participation at all levels of organizations (Tilghman-Havens, 2018) is compatible with feminist principles of transforming social relations of power in societal structures (Batliwala, 2013). Furthermore, servant-leadership



foundational principles espouse “a non-hierarchical, participative approach ... that recognizes and values the subjectivity and situatedness of organizational members” (Reynolds, 2014, p. 57) and model a “self-examination and action on behalf of those who are unheard or underrepresented by traditional power structures,” (Tilghman-Havens, 2018, p. 88) which shows compatibility with feminist ideals that advocate for the need of hearing and amplifying the voices, understandings, and experiences of the most subjugated and invisible in society (McClish & Bacon, 2002).

Even though TWP formally has a president as the main leader of the organization, in its essence, the group question a hierarchical leadership structure and refuse to have a leader that dominates and exercises cohesive power. Their leadership is based on distributing power according to the idea of the organization’s collective way of leading, with its members displaying individual leadership skills and practices according to specific moments and projects. Regarding this, Showkeir (2002) affirmed that “central to servant-leadership is power and its use” (p. 153). According to Reynolds (2014), servant-leadership implies “the notion of the leader serving others, regardless of status or structural power, challenges culturally persistent norms of leadership as a manifestation of hierarchies” (p. 41). In this sense, TWP advocates for a horizontal structure and collaborative leadership that include individual initiatives. These are practices that promote a shared and people-centered leadership which coincides with servant-leadership ideals that focus on the development of its members while strengthening the entire community (Spears, 2003).

Regarding the issues of power, the consultant starts a series of reflective questions asking: how TWP could use power as an instrument “to create opportunity and alternatives so that individuals may choose and build autonomy?” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, p. 41). What is the organization doing to avoid the practice of “coercive



power used to dominate and manipulate people?” (p. 41). What are the mechanisms the organization can develop to be more alert in detecting covert and subtly manipulative coercive power in their practices? These questions are framed towards incentivizing reflections regarding the practices of coercive power that create organizational conflicts.

In contrast to coercive power, servant-leadership focuses on “persuasive power [that] creates opportunities and alternatives so individuals can choose and build autonomy” (Showkeir, 2002, p. 153). Servant-led organizations rely on persuasion practices, where the servant-leader seeks to convince others through building a consensus (Spears, 2010). Servant-leadership practices the distribution of organizational power while believing in the need to keep individuals’ rights and responsibilities connected to the accountability of the entire community. In this sense, it is necessary to invite and engage individuals in conversations toward the decision-making processes. Thinking about distributing power, the consultant asks TWP: How is the organization changing the underlying assumptions and beliefs they hold about an individual’s contributions towards achieving collective goals? How is the organization expecting personal accountability towards the purposes of the group? How do the organization support freedom and accountability in the sense of people being free to choose how to serve the group?

Regarding the trust issues, Greenleaf (1977/2002) affirmed that “everyone in the institution has a share in building trust. The administrators have the major responsibility for institutional performance that merits trust” (p. 115). Trust and respect are higher ethical factors that give strength to all institutions (Greenleaf, 1977/2002). Therefore, the consultant asks TWP: What are the





personal values, convictions, and ethical positions that drive trust for the organization? What are TWP beliefs about motivating trust while leading their people?

While thinking about how TWP will create a dialogue to answer all the previous questions, the consultant suggests a reflection based on servant-leadership's 10 characteristics (Spears, 2004). The consultant believes that the development of these characteristics by TWP leadership can create a servant-leadership approach to positive change, appropriate use of power, and improvement of trust and accountability within the organization. The characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to people's growth, and building community.

### *Listening*

According to Greenleaf (1991), "true listening builds strength in other people" (p. 8). Servant-leaders, in their deep commitment to serving first, emphasize the need to practice intentional listening toward identifying people's will (Burkhardt & Spears, 2004). According to Spears (2004), "Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice and seeking to understand what one's body, spirit, and mind are communicating" (p. 13). Hence, the leadership of TWP should reflect on how communication with its members is developed. The questions to TWP are: Is TWP leadership listening attentively to the ones they serve? How can TWP create dynamics of listening and reflection?

### *Empathy*

Greenleaf (1977/2002) explained empathy as "the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness into another being" (p. 33). It is through practicing authentic listening that the characteristic of empathy will emerge. Spears (2004) stated that "Servant-leaders



strive to understand and empathize with others” (p. 13). A servant-leadership organization should emphasize developing leadership that is empathetic to the voices and needs of its people. Therefore, the consultant asks: How is TWP listening to the beliefs and expectations of its member? What are TWP’s beliefs about the morale and motivation in the group? What can TWP do to develop empathy among its people?

### *Healing*

Spears (2004) stated that “heal[ing] is a powerful force for transformation and integration” (p. 13). The emphasis on the need for healing individually and collectively is considered a strength of the servant-leadership philosophy. Burkhardt and Spears (2004) explained that “servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to help make whole those with whom they come in contact” (p. 72). In the conflictive context of TWP, applying a healing process while listening and being emphatic can help TWP find reconciliation and wholeness again. Thus, it is important to ask: How can TWP claim a healing role while serving its member and mission?

### *Awareness*

Spears (2004) stated that “general awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader” (p. 14). Achieving awareness helps to understand power, ethics, and values in a more holistic way and throughout different situations (Burkhardt & Spears, 2004). Regarding TWP background and conflict, it is important to look towards seeing things as an interconnected system of relations, values, power, and ethics. Therefore, the consultant asks the following questions: How does TWP create and practice awareness in its organization basis? How can TWP develop an awareness of its



essential interdependent values while considering its connection and disconnections to their problems?

### *Persuasion*

Servant-leadership relies on persuasion while convincing and building consensus in the decision-making process. Burkhardt and Spears (2004) explained that “Greenleaf uses this term to distinguish between leadership that relies on positional authority and coercion, in contrast to leadership that works through a process of influence, example, and moral power” (p. 78). In this sense, the consultant asks: What can TWP do to create an attitude of persuasion? How can TWP practice persuasion in its organization basis?

### *Conceptualization*

Spears (2004) explained that “the ability to look at a problem or an organization from a conceptualizing perspective means that one must think beyond day-to-day realities” (p. 14). Servant-leadership emphasizes practicing a balance between broader-based conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach (Burkhardt & Spears, 2004). In this sense, the consultant asks: How is TWP balancing its conceptual feminist framework with their day-to-day operations?

### *Foresight*

Spears (2004) explained that “foresight is a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future” (p. 15). This characteristic is directly connected to conceptualization ideas and highlights the capacity to relate the actions of the present time to the future. Regarding this, the consultant asks: How is TWP balancing its core purpose with the construction of meanings and practices beyond its daily routines to move towards a sustainable future?



### *Stewardship*

Burkhardt and Spears (2004) stated that people “play a significant role in holding trust for the greater good of society” (p. 73). Spears (2004) also affirmed that “Servant leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serve the needs of others. It also emphasizes the use of openness and persuasion rather than control” (p. 15). Hence, the consultant asks: What are TWP leadership members doing to create a dynamic of trust within the organization? Is TWP assuming first and foremost a commitment to serve the needs of its people using openness and dynamics of trust?

### *Commitment to the Growth of People*

Burkhardt and Spears (2004) affirmed that a “servant leader is deeply committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of everyone within an organization” (p. 73). This commitment to people’s growth means focusing on improving their lives through the provision of opportunities, recognition of capabilities, and maximization of potentialities (Burkhardt & Spears, 2004). In this sense, the consultant asks: How is TWP taking an interest in its members’ personal and professional growth? How is TWP truly encouraging members to be involved in the decision-making process throughout all leadership levels?

### *Building Community*

Burkhardt and Spears (2004) stated that “no organization could be oriented to serve if it lacked its own sense of internal cohesion and purpose” (p. 87). Therefore, servant-leadership emphasizes a strong sense of community, and the need to seek community from within the organization. Hence, the consultant finally asks: Do members of TWP feel a strong sense of community? How can TWP



leadership develop a sustainable community connection that can remain strong, even when facing conflictive situations?

## FEMINIST PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

While reviewing different feminist approaches, the consultant identified that Feminist Poststructuralist and Postmodernist perspectives consider “organizing as the discursive mobilization of power/knowledge resources” (Gherardi, 2003, p. 215). These feminist approaches emphasize critiques about the ideas of knowledge constructions and the role of discourse in sustaining hegemonic power in societal structures (Gherardi, 2003).

Frost and Elichaoﬀ (2014) affirmed that poststructuralism perceives “knowledge as socially produced, unstable, and contextualized, [and] an emphasis is placed on language and discourse” (p. 44). Poststructuralism challenges universalistic ideas, the idea of “a truth,” the social male constructions, and the power of patriarchy in language, discourses, and social practices (Frost & Elichaoﬀ, 2014). Post-structural feminism explores how multiple intersectionalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality, among others, co-construct one another (Collins, 1998). It is a conceptual framework that helps uncover the subjectivities and hidden dominant practices in organizations (Holvino, 2010).

Frost and Elichaoﬀ (2014) explained that “postmodernist thinking proposes that instead of the existence of one essential truth, there are multiple subjective, relative truths of personal construction” (p. 43). Postmodern feminism questions the concepts of rationality and knowledge and the existence of universal values (Alvarez, 2001). Thus, it questions the universal category of women (Gherardi, 2003). Postmodern feminism highlights the plurality of women’s experience resulting from different intersectionalities that led them to various social understandings that create different ways of producing



knowledge. This approach claims there is no unique woman's voice and focuses on deconstructing power inside discourses while claiming attention to voices that otherwise would continue marginalized.

Applying a poststructuralist and postmodernist feminist lenses, the consultant proposes that TWP first should inquire about the discursive mobilization of power/knowledge inside the organization. In this sense, it is significant to explore the organization's knowledge regarding their feminist values of sisterhood and shared commitment against mechanisms and structures of oppression. TWP should ask their members: how is the organization adopting these values? How is the knowledge of their feminist values and practices being constructed and mobilized inside the organization? These questions consider the assumption that sisterhood is based on the idea of women joining in action and banding together to support one another while committing to fight domination and oppression and respecting the diversity among them.

Moreover, using the assumption of how power is distributed in an organization plays a significant role in organizational complexity. The power balance in a feminist group should guarantee its equity, fluidity, and flexibility. Thus, TWP should ask itself: how is the organization discussing and practicing the ideals of mobilization and distribution of power? How do the members and leaders assess that their values create or not create arenas of power inside the organization?

In approaching collaborative organizational practices within The Women's Project, it is important to inquire if and how members' multiple social identities may intersect with power relations and how this may impact or not impact internal collaborative practices. In this sense, the consultant asks: Do women members from different backgrounds, experiences, and previous collaborative practices help



to shape how the organization decides to organize and share dynamics of power? How does the organization respect and create a positive legitimization of diversity and difference among its members? And how does the organization uncover privileges and discrimination and oppressions among its members? This intersectional approach questions an essentialist and universal collective experience of “woman” focusing instead on the importance of recognizing and uncovering women’s complex realities, which are shaped not by a single axis of social inequality but by many axes that co-construct one another through relational processes organized by power relations (Acker, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Thus, a postmodern feminist approach with intersectionality is applied to “understand[ing] all dimensions of power relations” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 3) intersecting with women’s social identities and affecting women’s collaborations within the organization. It is about determining how members of this organization understand their individual and collective identities, challenge the status quo, and if and how they aim to transform power relations among themselves and across systems of power. This means looking at transformative possibilities arising within their collaborative phenomena (Collins & Bilge, 2016). A feminist intersectional praxis provides a framework to make visible the inequalities and differences in power relations within the group and among its members (Collins, 1995). It helps uncover the privileges and oppressions that shape individual and group experiences (Goikoetxea, 2017). It also provides a tool to highlight the similarities that diverse people and groups share which also helps establish alliances and coalitions (Goikoetxea, 2017).

Finally, while looking towards analyzing how the organizational conflict starts with the confrontation between the president and coordinator and ends by dividing the organization into two sides



creating conflict among all members, TWP should ask its members: to whom do both the leaders and its members speak and are accountable? Which voices of the organization (with its leaders and members) are acknowledged or silenced? These questions are based on the assumption that all members while sharing the value of horizontality in the dynamics of power, should practice accountability and communication all times. However, as the case presents, both the president and coordinator's particular discourses were constructed using the specific knowledge and power of their positions. Positions that were legitimized by their access to mechanisms like the budget and financial reports, while other members supposedly should have the same access to these mechanisms were somehow passive agents. Based on these facts, the consultant believes the organization must answer the question: which steps should TWP follow to ensure that communication and accountability are assured during all stages, especially during decision-making phases? Finally, the consultant asks: how does TWP plan to manage the access to mechanisms that can eventually create or legitimize discourses and practices that promote the construction of coercive and conflictive structures?

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the Women's Project case study conflict scenario, the application of a servant-leadership perspective first highlights how TWP's values and practices are in synchrony to this philosophy. Second, its inquiries about organizational practices to avoid coercive power and develop persuasive power to achieve collective goals first. Third, its inquiries about the values, convictions, and ethical positions that drive trust in the organization. Finally, it asks questions to TWP based on the application of 10 characteristics of the servant-leadership philosophy.





Using a Feminist perspective, the case study inquiries about the discursive mobilization of power/knowledge inside the organization while considering sisterhood values and shared commitment and how members' multiple social identities may intersect with power relations. Besides, it asks about accountability and the matter of which voices are acknowledged or silenced during all processes, especially during the decision-making phases. Finally, it emphasizes the need to explore the issues of accessing mechanisms that can create coercive or conflictive discourses and structures.

In conclusion, to initiate an internal dialogue towards practicing an internal conflict resolution and a healing process of self-care among TWP members and its leadership, the organization can apply an inquiry praxis intersecting both servant-leadership and Feminist lenses. The servant-leadership approach to power practices, organizational values, ethical positions, and the 10 characteristics of servant-leadership can complement an in-depth internal critical thinking analysis using the Feminist lens. This intersection may help TWP explore the roots of particular discourses of knowledge and power that create conflict among its members.

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