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Author

Blackwell, Maylei

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RESEARCH REPORT EXCERPT BY MAYLEI BLACKWELL

Farmworker Women's Organizing and Gendered Grassroots Leadership

Líderes Campesinas (formally known as Organización en California de Líderes Campesinas) is the only statewide women farmworker's organization in the country. With historical roots stemming back to a 1988 Coachella Valley organization called Mujeres Mexicanas, Líderes Campesinas gained nonprofit status in 1997. With headquarters in Pomona, California, the group has more than five hundred members who are organized through twelve local committees throughout the state. The organization works to improve the dismal working conditions in the fields and packing houses and also educates women farmworkers on pesticide exposure, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment and assault. Further, they use theater and popular education tools to bring awareness about domestic violence, lack of adequate housing, and basic transportation, and women's health and well being. Líderes Campesinas has also been

challenged to become more inclusive of indigenous migrants from Mexico whose numbers are near 70,000 in California and are expected to account for 20 percent of the farmworker population by 2010. Its program for indigenous women is designed to build leadership, hold meetings, and conduct outreach to the largely Mixtec-speaking population of rural California. Critically, the daughters, granddaughters, and nieces of Líderes Campesinas are also on the move and have been organized since the Second Convivencia in 1994. In fact, one of its former statewide representatives, 17-year old Hermelinda Guzman, is currently the chair of the Board of the Directors (*see photo at above right*). The mission of Líderes Campesinas is to train farmworker women, or *campesinas*, in California to advocate for their own human rights and to work collectively to solve the problems of injustice in their own lives and communities. Líderes Campesinas' model for so-



cial change is grounded within the lived experiences and cultures of its members and measures change by the transformational impact on *campesinas*, their families, and their communities.

My recently completed ethnographic study, entitled "Líderes Campesinas: Grassroots Leadership, Community Organizing and Pedagogies of Empowerment," is a documentation project of the Leadership for a Changing World Program at NYU's Warner School. I was invited to become the ethnographer for the project in May of 2005 by Executive Director Mily Treviño Saucedo, who won a Leadership for a Changing World

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My life had changed. Now I have more knowledge. I learned to discover my leadership strengths; currently I am representing [the organization] nationally and within binational organizations in which I am participating. I also represent California, especially women who work in the agricultural field. This for me is something very, very important.

– **MARIA INEZ CATALÁN**
(shown far right with the author)



Award. I chronicled its history, developed a model that would capture its leadership practice, and studied Líderes Campesinas' innovative pedagogical strategies.

How do organizers create innovative forms of leadership and empowerment among California's most marginalized of the marginalized? Líderes Campesinas has created a model of grassroots leadership based not on individuals but on a collective notion of leadership. Their idea of leadership is based on both individual and community empowerment and on a cooperative leadership model. In essence, what we have found is that leadership according to Líderes Campesinas is deeply embedded in community organizing with the goal of increasing the skill base and access to resources and knowledge that the members and their communities have. For example, many of the women describe their leadership and measure its

efficacy in terms of how it affects their families and communities. In this model, leadership is based on a radical learning and pedagogical tradition where information and learning is part of the processes of empowerment and collective action. The link between transformative learning and action is where Líderes Campesinas builds its model of pedagogy.

Individual and collective empowerment through knowledge and learning are the first two steps toward collective action, community organizing and further community education. These modes of collective action and organizing have led to social change and broader transformation. When our team asked several members of Líderes Campesinas about the philosophy and model of leadership they had developed, they first described the profound work of inspiring self-esteem by teaching women about their own "inher-

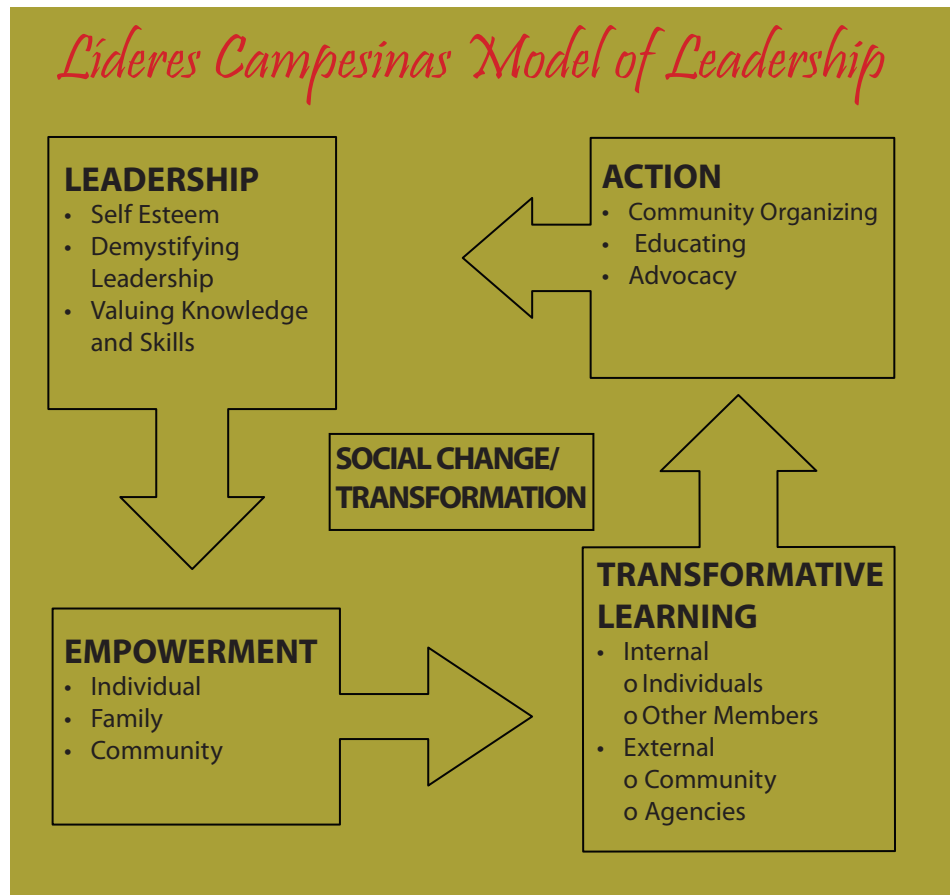
ent" leadership skills. They demonstrated their "values of leadership" by explaining how they show women new to the group that they are already leaders and how to value the knowledge and skills they already possess. For example, at a house meeting or when they encounter potential members, they ask, "who here in this group is a leader?" When the new women do not respond or identify themselves as leaders, then a facilitator will ask the women, "well, have you organized a quinciñera?" Inevitably, they will affirm that they have organized a quinciñera (or large family event) and the facilitator will say, "well, then of course, you are a leader, you have already demonstrated your leadership skills." Together the group will go on to identify the leadership skills necessary for organizing a quinciñera and thereby affirm and value the knowledge and know-how the women already possess and use

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everyday. By lifting the self-esteem of women through identifying their daily practice of familial and community leadership, they demystify leadership as well as start women on the path toward valuing their own ideas and organizational skills. Such exercises open the door to showing women how to view themselves differently. Facilitators will also ask new women to recall a time when they helped out a neighbor, co-worker, or family member. Through this exercise, they explore the values of advocacy and reveal to the women how they are already leaders because they have advocated for others and helped their own families and communities.

Demystifying leadership in this way naturalizes it in the women's own social worlds and lives. While many of these leadership qualities are attributes associated with the construction of gender roles within families and communities, *Líderes Campesinas* takes women's "traditional" family and community roles as a point of departure for empowerment and transformation. They illustrate how women demonstrate leadership "naturally" through their material, affective practices of everyday family and communal life and as mothers, sisters, *comadres*, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

The *Líderes Campesinas* model (see chart above right) of how to create leaders for social change and transformation starts with empowerment. Rather than just focusing on individual leadership development as if women are actors who operate in a social vacuum, as other models of lead-



ership development assume, this model assumes women will begin their own leadership and organizing experiences within their own immediate social contexts of families and communities. As you see in the graph above, empowerment is conceived and practiced at the individual, familial and community level.

The next aspect of leadership in the model is empowerment through knowledge—based on popular, grassroots models of pedagogy that create new contexts of learning on levels both internal and external to the organization. The internal level of learning occurs inside of the organization and is twofold: first, the work of building individual members capacity, skills and knowledge; and second, member education on a range of

issues that may include issues like domestic violence, organizational development, HIV/AIDS, pesticides, political issues, labor and immigrant rights, women's rights, and women's health.

A second layer of learning and knowledge sharing is external to the organization and will be further explored in the next section of this report focusing on pedagogy. The external layer involves two aspects as well: 1) teaching and educating community members and 2) working with agencies and service providers to teach them how to actually be effective in working with *campesina* populations. In pedagogical strategies used by the organization, we found a pedagogy of leadership that has taken the best of many traditions and looks part Mary Kay® (minus

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the pink Cadillac), part Tupperware® party, part *teatro campesino*, part neighborhood association, and part family dinner or community potluck.

Empowerment is not measured in the women's lives through the conventional ways power is measured in our society—political, electoral, or monetary. We saw a close relationship between collective empowerment and learning, which is measured by how women can provide their children with different options, counted by every new word learned, read and written, and tallied in every new voice they help raise in their ongoing efforts as community organizers. In terms of pedagogy, it is important to speak of the learning that the organization imparts to the community but also the palpable ways in which women learn and build capacity within the organization. The last part of the leadership model involves putting empowerment and learning into action through organizing, educating and advocacy. Acquiring knowledge and passing it along has transformed Maria Inez Catalán, one of the first Latina organic farmers (see photo on page 16), leading to her empowerment and the empowerment of others. These testimonies of transformation illustrate the relationship between leadership, empowerment, learning and action.

Grassroots Gendered Leadership builds on traditionally gendered roles as a basis to organize families and communities but at the same time, challenges the ways these structures may limit their participation, agency and em-

powerment as women. It is critical to mention that while Líderes Campesinas uses family structures to organize, they have also challenged patriarchal norms and expectations of family that have limited their participation or enforced their oppression as women and as farmworkers. This is most evident in terms of their right to live free of violence but also revealed in the layers of familial expectation that lead them to believe that they were born to serve others, be submissive, endure abuse, and work at the cost of their own health, education, and full development as human beings.

The farmworker movement has been facing a multitude of challenges including a different worker population that is largely undocumented in the face of heated debate on immigration reform as well as an anti-immigrant backlash. While, the UFW has been criticized recently by the press for abandoning their original organizing mission, Líderes Campesinas offers an important model of grassroots mobilization that takes a multidimensional approach to addressing the issues, challenges and problems farm worker women face in their work places, communities, and homes. (See, for example, the four-part series published by the *Los Angeles Times*: Miriam Pawel, "UFW: A BROKEN CONTRACT," *Los Angeles Times*, January 8–11, 2006.)

This does not mean there are not new organizing challenges. For example, Líderes Campesinas will need to create deeper bridges among the growing Mexican indigenous population in the state.

To avoid the ethnic discrimination and competition growers use as they attempt to substitute and pit one labor group against the other, this organization, along with many social justice groups, will have to find new ways to combat racism and sexism that is both external in the larger dominant society as well as internal to their community. Given their vibrant record of creating leaders for the twentieth century, they have a strong tradition and effective models to draw upon to create a new generation of leaders to meet these continuing challenges.

Maylei Blackwell is an activist scholar and an assistant professor in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies and affiliated faculty in the Women's Studies Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her current research and teaching examines how racial and sexual differences shape the challenges and possibilities of organizing by transnational women in the Americas. She is completing a forthcoming book on early Chicana feminism tentatively entitled, Contested Histories: Chicana Feminisms in Movement. Her work with Líderes Campesinas began in May of 2005 when the organization invited her to lead an ethnography to document their history, leadership models and pedagogy strategies.