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THE GREAT COMING TOGETHER

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Commoners | Occupiers | Transformational Leaders



Khadija Moalla (middle) receives the 3rd annual Global South-South Development Award for the CHAHAMA initiative (Network of Multi-Faith Based Organizations in response to HIV)

transformational leaders series – part three

Transformational Leadership in the Arab Region

Khadija T. Moalla

On November 26, 2010, HE Mr. Joseph Diess, the President of the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, delivered to me the world renowned 3rd Annual Global South-South Development Award for the CHAHAMA initiative (Network of Multi-Faith Based Organizations in response to HIV). Receiving this award affirmed to me that large scale change in the Arab region depended on the active engagement of religious leaders, the guardians of values and cultural norms. Could we engage them and pull them forward towards modernity while respecting their commitment and ethical views? Could we move them beyond their religious belief systems to discuss sensitive sexual issues and deepen their access to the commonality between the committed human rights activists and fundamentalist Religious Leaders (RL)? I held fast to the confidence that we could, but only if we used a new approach. I would need the courage forged out of deep compassion and a fierce will to persist in the face of all the obstacles that I was sure to encounter.

Background

I was raised in a big Tunisian family enjoying a strong culture of respect, love and freedom. My father was an exceptional figure who enjoyed an unusual ability to embrace others with genuine unconditional love. I was raised to be sensitive to any kind of intolerance or injustice, but even more, I had an inner prompting whenever I sensed that this norm was violated. My father showed great appreciation to whatever I ventured into. I still recall his fascination with me reciting ancient Arabic poetry when I was seven. This kind of fatherly admiration still inspires the little girl with great courage and self-confidence. Thus was born the compassionate courage that was needed for the transformational work I was to do in the world.

After my studies in international law I went back to Tunisia to work with women in slum areas. I dared to be the lawyer for some of the most notorious dissidents of the fallen regime. Later I defended People Living with HIV (PLWH), motivated by the compassionate awareness that if I had to go through what they did, I would love to have someone at my side. I then advocated for their rights both in my country and in Sub-Saharan Africa. Through this HIV involvement, I soon found myself as a consultant with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). I got in touch with Dr. Monica Sharma who mentored me in the Transformational Leadership methodology and its application, as well as in designing programmes. A few years later, I was in charge of the UNDP Regional HIV Programme in the Arab States.

HIV Initiative Transforms the Arab Region

The main HIV challenges in the Arab region were the strong stigmatizing attitudes that keep people from being tested and from joining treatment programmes even when the medicine is offered for free. The fact that little or no outreach efforts exist in the region to intravenous drug users, men having sex with men and sex workers can again be traced to these attitudes.

The highlight of my work was the pioneering of a unique Multi-faith Network responding to HIV in the Arab region (20 countries). Through this, preventative and treatment services were delivered to thousands of PLWH, drug users, sex workers and men having sex with men.

We enrolled top religious leaders including the Grand Imam, several Muftis, Ullamas, Patriarchs and Bishops, as well as the leadership of the Muslim brotherhood. These impactful leaders

shared the vision and internalized the transformational leadership methodologies. With a critical mass of sympathetic RLs growing and a core leadership team developing, we were able to call a historical meeting in Cairo in December 2004 using transformational approaches, methods and tools, resulting in a historic Regional Colloquium in Cairo. Eighty first-rank RLs signed the progressive Cairo Declaration and shared in drafting a Muslim and Christian training manual. Tens of thousands of RLs were then trained in all Arab countries. A “Women RLs Tripoli Declaration” was issued in 2006. The Declaration condemned female genital mutilation and demanded sex education for girls.

A shift swept the Arab world, transforming the religious discourse. As a result of our program hundreds of thousands of Imams and priests delivered compassionate and respectful messages about HIV, instead of the usual doom and gloom messages. A number of countries, notably in Djibouti and Yemen, enacted progressive laws protecting the rights of PLWH. The HIV initiative with Religious Leaders in the Arab region (2004 to present) led to a measureable decrease in stigmatizing attitudes. It achieved a 24-fold increase in access to treatment in Yemen and an 8-fold increase in the use of voluntary counseling and testing in Morocco.

The diversity and synergy of the network was further reflected by other activists who established outreach programmes transforming the lives of tens of thousands. Much still needs to be done, but a major shift took place in the last few years.

A former drug user who engaged with us in our learning-in-action programme started an HIV and Drug Recovery programme in a prison in Bahrain that benefited hundreds of prisoners. Other Gulf countries invited him to share the programme that reshaped policies in these countries.

A proud owner and driver of a taxi jubilantly received us in Sana’a airport a couple of years ago. He had to convince me that he was the same depressed and emaciated man living with HIV who sat silently in the back corner of one of our workshops. Now a daring activist and a proud bread winner, his life had transformed.

Our work with media leaders on HIV anti-stigma messaging resulted in literally thousands of programmes at the national and regional levels. One participant in our “Independent Media and Bloggers Workshop” wrote the script and directed the blockbuster and multi-award winning film, “Asmaa: An HIV Patient's Struggle Against Social Stigma in Egypt.” The superstar actress from Tunisia who played the leading role was introduced to the importance of working against stigma through a number of personal interactions with us.

Imams in Morocco listened to testimonies of PLWH. A woman living with HIV told them how she got it from her husband. A drug user shared how he was infected. Then a lady shared the



The main hall of the League of Arab States received Religious Leaders and People Living with HIV at our 2006 meeting

death of her husband, leaving her with three children and no support whatsoever. She confessed she worked as a sex worker and told the Imams that now she is in a later stage of AIDS. She asked God’s forgiveness and would like them, as her religious leaders, to forgive her. One of them stood up and told her, “It is you, dear lady, who needs to forgive us for allowing society to do this to you.” Another, who was an ardent preacher of ‘the wrath of God’ theory stood up after that, but could not utter a word! He choked with tears and sat down again. Morocco was transformed forever.

A Sudanese lady religious leader who was very enthusiastic in defending ‘girl circumcision’ spoke out and said, “I see now that this is really genital mutilation.” What had kept her from recognizing this was, “I could not accept that I suffered all this and it was not even God’s will.” This kind of courageous self-awareness and daring public sharing mark much of the response to our initiative.

Former drug users shared their stories. Judges listened and confessed they made big mistakes when they sentenced drug users to prison without considering what their life potentials could be.

In all these actions the warm space provided to all leaders to explore their positions was also energized by my own passion and belief in the possibility of change.

Trusted Allies and Oppositional Figures

In 2004, I was challenged and pressured with increased doubts and reluctance from many colleagues and superiors when I was organizing a series of crucial events. I overcame these obstacles not only through a series of phone calls to secure appropriate approval and funding, but through a constant search for alternatives, sometimes through the enrollment of new leaders. But my persistence was mainly through my commitment to the importance and possibility of convening key religious leaders from the entire Arab region to transform the religious discourse on HIV. Having said this, it is important to reiterate that I did not do this alone; I was deeply supported both by my mentor and the transformational leadership methodologies. Dr. Ehab El Kharrat needs to be mentioned in particular, as a representative of a great team composed of both men and women.



(left to right) Two hundred fifty Religious Leaders became HIV activists and established a unique network in 2006; Building trust with priests and

The experience did not go unopposed from within the ‘institution.’ The head of one multilateral agency, who comes from a country where homosexuals are sentenced to death, objected to the wording of the Cairo Declaration, on the basis that it encouraged the ‘treatment’ of gays. In actual fact, the wording can be interpreted as just enforcing their integration into society. The same person abruptly cut the funding based upon the belief that the Grand Imam would never endorse a declaration mentioning ‘condoms.’ The Grand Imam had signed a document indicating his support, but the head of the agency did not waver. With Monica’s support, I contacted other friends within the system, friends who filled the financial gap, stood by me through the false accusations, and arranged a meeting to address this issue. After that, the head of the agency gracefully apologized in public and hopefully became a supporter of our initiative. Enrolling trusted allies within and outside the system is one of the main strategies to deal with obstacles like this one.

Methodology: A Transformational Architecture for Large Scale Change Inviting RLs from all denominations and religions within the Arab States to a colloquium that would discuss sensitive issues such as sexuality and AIDS was extremely tricky. The Colloquium adopted the motto: “Responding to HIV requires a human accord that surpasses all religious and denominational variations. It must be an accord that derives from spiritual heritage and creates courageous responses to the problems posed by the epidemic. It is an accord that inspires something greater and deeper than any challenge!”

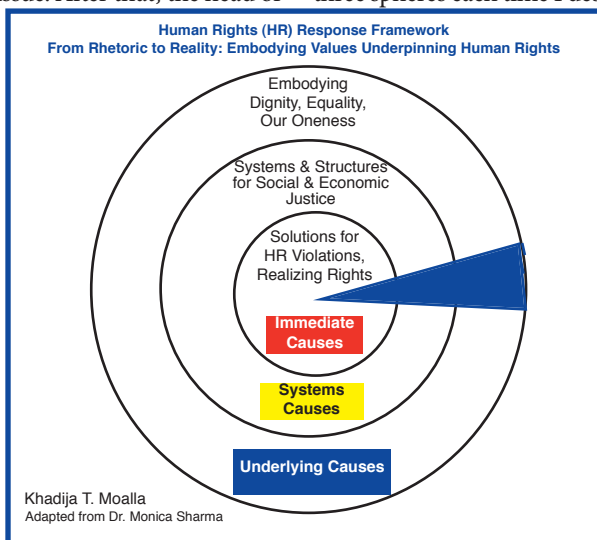
The major methodology used for our programme was based on the Conscious Full Spectrum (CFS) approach. This leadership methodology sources people’s wisdom and structures a space for system shifts while solving problems. Monica Sharma introduced the CFS model to us in 2008. We worked with Monica on the basic components of the idea through other Transformational Leadership Development tools and frameworks, like Likert-Emberling for organisation and implementation, Daniel Goleman for emotional intelligence competencies, Ken Wilber for analysis and the experiential learning group exercises specially designed to address HIV-linked biases and prejudices.

The value of the CFS model is that it differentiates and then synergizes solutions, system shifts and oneness values of any response. We used other frameworks as well to enhance understanding, facilitate implementation, and to dive deeper into ourselves through process work. The CFS asks generative questions and initiates deeper commitment. It is a framework that focuses on embodying Human Rights values while manifesting and scaling up action.

The CFS framework helped me to consistently source my own inner space and the wisdom of individuals in the group. It helped me to check out whether I appropriately addressed all three spheres each time I designed an intervention. It allowed me to

take it to scale and to systematize my thoughts and those of the group.

We used many transformational leadership tools in Damascus with a group of Muslim and Christian Religious Leaders to lay down the foundation of what became the world celebrated Religious Leaders Initiative. Now we understood what we intuitively had applied before we were introduced to CFS. The framework was also essential to my recent work with civil society in Kuwait where I designed a long term strategy for the country and also in working on HIV in Gaza.



I learned important lessons from the Arab States HIV initiative about the value and methods of building trust, the importance of an empathetic and motivational listening approach, the importance of inclusion and for the more secularly inclined activists, learning to break out of our own denial to recognize the effectiveness of RLs in either promoting or hindering developmental approaches. I found that transformation was often gradual and tacit, requiring infinite patience with sometimes repetitive details. I learned the value of a warm and safe space in discovering new virtues and spiritual values even when you put people from different paths of life together. Who would have imagined that a priest from Syria would spend six weeks in a drug rehabilitation centre in Cairo to learn more about the lives of addicts? Then to sing songs in the streets of Damascus to reach out to these vulnerable groups?



Drafting progressive HIV laws in Yemen; An anti-stigma HIV blockbuster movie; Interactive leadership tools with a passion

Beyond Common Ground to Ground of Being

The change of heart among RLs takes place not only through sharing information and the sensitization that occurs when RLs meet face to face with PLWH and hear their stories, but also through learning to co-create a new reality together based on individual commitment and shared goals. Undoubtedly, embarrassment of appearing lenient, morally loose and too liberal played a crucial role in creating exaggerated rigidity and unbalanced viewpoints. But the root of the condemnation that religious leaders exercise towards PLWH and most-at-risk populations lies in their attempt to sustain 'the principled majority' and 'the purity of the moral code.' Usually when people work with RLs from multiple faith backgrounds, they try to seek the 'commonalities' between religions. Instead, we challenged the RLs by asking them evocative questions: What do I stand for? What am I committed to? What is happening today that is not in line with my principles? What is missing? What actions do I need to take in order to change the situation? From the strategy of seeking common ground of most interfaith groups to seeking the ground of being (ie. What do I stand for?), we evoked the love and compassionate courage to act. The RLs independently reached the conclusion that we tapped the true principles called for by every religion.

This approach necessitates a gradual uncovering not only through direct encounter with PLWH and most-at-risk populations, but also with a direct encounter with our souls' highest aspiration as well as facing our fear of death, sexuality and intimacy. A warm but genuine atmosphere is needed to achieve this.

A Tunisian Muslim Theologian woman, after participating in our HIV workshops, embarked into a series of publications about Human Rights and gender equality by interpreting holy texts in a new light. An Imam rephrased not only his weekly sermons but also the curriculum he teaches theology students. Both worked far beyond the HIV issues, among many others. They attributed the shift to their participation in the HIV transformational leadership workshops.

After engaging in HIV learning in action programmes of Leadership for Results together and visiting PLWH, a Sunni Imam from Syria worked regularly with a Catholic priest on many other developmental challenges. An unforgettable moment for me was when both of them chanted to Mary in the Cathedral of Damascus. It is usual to hear Christian songs there, but the extraordinary thing was that this was followed by beautiful chanting of verses from the Quran.

In answer to a questionnaire we developed in 2006 we found interest among the RLs in engaging in other developmental issues, particularly in education and environment, less in good governance. Their reluctance to get involved in governance may reflect the 'political' shadows involved in the terminology and the mystification around the term in our region. Their keen interest in environment was unexpected and may reflect an unnoticed awareness about issues of real but subtle cosmic significance. A cultural shift may be well at hand if similar breakthroughs are achieved in these other areas.

The United Nations: A Place for Sustainable Change only if we Dare to Challenge its Ways

To me, the UN universal core values revolve around **Service to All People**, not interest groups or governments, businesses, civil society or people with whom we have a special interest or liking. This implies a commitment to serve rather than to achieve 'a successful career' or please 'your superiors.' We need to provide a space for all to take the lead according to their capacities, to facilitate change and explore unfamiliar areas of concern.

To me, the UN is about **Respect**. Self-respect and respect of others. This includes respecting their cultures, respecting where they are and respecting where they want to go, without compromising Human Rights. But respecting other people's culture does not mean condoning practices like female genital mutilation or honor killing. On the contrary, it naturally puts a decisive wedge in the vicious circuit of 'cultural' violations and allows true access to the common human core, where dignity and equality are not empty words.

To me, the UN is about **Integrity**. This goes beyond accountability as in the ability to match your financial accounts with the required rules and regulations. It has to do with serving the people, not exploiting them for gain or just being indifferent to injustice and suffering. *What the UN system now lacks most is the presence of individuals with integrity and a group milieu that values integrity more than rules and regulations.*

To navigate the current system, one should have a deep sense of **Stewardship**. You have to become conscious of the way you deal with funds, time and energy to produce meaningful results. This means being responsible rather than just accountable.

The UN does not require programming that listens to and is genuinely **Responsive** to real people with real needs and real



Khadija returning from voting for the first time in her life, October 2011

aspirations. It only requires that you conform to 'guidelines' centrally set. Many times, these are set through listening to the lobbies of multinationals and corrupted governments, though paying lip service to Human Rights slogans, or listening to international isolationist elites in the West who seldom listen to the people. To navigate the system, you need to carefully discern what you are doing to break through the false layers into core values and be aware of what norms and legal systems you try to shift as you implement your UN system approved plans. Again, the CFS comes in handy here.

The UN needs the mechanisms, policies and relationships reflective of principled leadership. Guarantees of effectiveness should be based upon an intrinsic sense of stewardship and a work environment that fosters creativity and initiative rather than compliance to rules and regulations.

The value of the UN system is that it can be a platform for generative conversations. Development as freedom is the core of what the UN can do and was created to do. Diplomatic work is about finding a workable compromise between parties, a sort of 'finding a middle ground.' But I like to think that this is not the essence of

what we do. Rather, we can use the UN to shift the way people, particularly people in leadership, see reality. We can move towards new ground and new worldviews. I like to see what we do as 'shifting the middle ground.'

Conclusion

The impact of Transformational Leadership on my life and work goes far beyond providing approaches, methodologies, tools and skills. It has to do with my own self-awareness and the emergence of group consciousness in contrast to team building. The CFS approach is the epitome of Transformational Leadership. It synthesizes the best tools and puts us face to face with the necessity to access the ground of our being in measureable action and, at the same time, to continually and creatively shift the system. I believe that the minds and hearts of the leaders of the South have the answers and that the South will, with the rest of humanity, go beyond technology transfer towards creating new ways of thinking and action based on innate wisdom.

My hope is to create a new reality that will provide a soil where this new reality can take root, grow and bring forth the fruit of peace, justice and prosperity for all.

Dr. Khadija T. Moalla is a Tunisian international law, gender and Human Rights expert with an impressive record in academia and civil society. As UNDP HIV Practice Leader in the Arab States, 2003-2011, she coordinated initiatives with Religious Leaders, legislators, media and NGO leaders that catalyzed the enactment of progressive laws, nation-wide trainings and top level policy change in Morocco, Yemen and other countries. Khadija is a recognised Transformational Leadership Development expert, a highly in-demand speaker in many countries and the author of a number of books and papers. She was recently chosen as one of the 500 most influential Arab personalities and elected one of the most powerful 40 women in the Arab region.