

# Women Leading Through Reading: A Guidebook for Discussion and Action

Promotional Packet / September 2011

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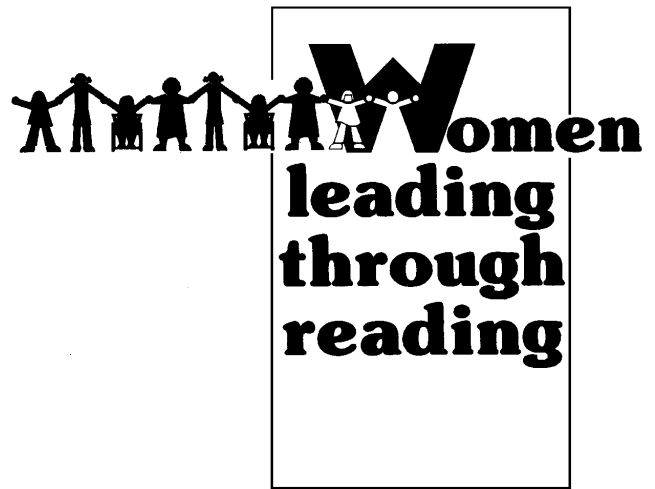
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**Prepared by WE LEARN**

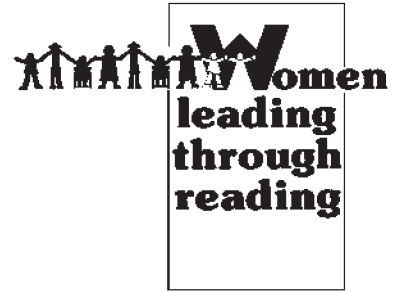
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# Introduction

## WE LEARN and the Origins of Women Leading Through Reading

WE LEARN (Women Expanding Literacy Education Action Resource Network) promotes women's literacy as a tool for personal growth and social change through networking, education, action, and resource development. Through conferences, publications, research, special projects, and a website of resources, WE LEARN seeks:

- To increase general awareness and support of women's literacy issues and basic educational needs,
- To assist adult literacy practitioners (teachers, tutors and educational professionals) to support women's learning, and
- To provide opportunities and resources for literacy learners to engage with women-centered materials and to develop their powerful woman-selves.

WE LEARN supports a diverse membership of adult basic/literacy education (ABE) learners and alumni, literacy teachers/volunteers, authors, researchers, professionals, community activists, and other supporters of women's equity.

Women Leading Through Reading originally developed in 1995 by Mev Miller, Ed.D. with colleagues located in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. The collaborative partners included Amazon Bookstore Cooperative, the Minnesota Literacy Council, and ten area literacy programs that wanted to address the specific literacy needs of women. The Women Leading Through Reading initiative had a two-fold purpose:

- To raise awareness about the particular challenges women face as they seek to enhance their literacy education, and
- To explore innovative learning opportunities for women to improve their literacy skills.

Between 1996 and 2000, Women Leading Through Reading (WLTR) sponsored an average of six concurrent book groups in ten different literacy centers, trained close to 25 volunteer facilitators, and served 70 women learners. In follow up interviews, ABE/ESOL program staff indicated that WLTR positively supported learners in educational gains, personal confidence, and self-efficacy. The facilitators reported learning more about the issues and realities faced by women disadvantaged by limited education. That initiative also produced a best practices manual titled *Women Leading Through Reading Book Groups: Making a Difference*.

Women Leading Through Reading provided early impetus for the creation and development of WE LEARN. By revitalizing this program integral to our history, WE LEARN not only provides a flexible project well suited for local community-based organizations to advance women's

literacy, but also strengthens important components of our mission. These areas include the development and promotion of women-centered literacy materials and resources, opportunities to raise public awareness on women's literacy issues, and, most importantly, opportunities to encourage and support low-skilled, low-income women learners in ABE as they broaden their education and develop their leadership capabilities for themselves as women. We expect WLTR to contribute to building alliances and collaborative efforts for women's rights organizing among women across all educational capabilities as general awareness about challenges faced by women with limited literacy proficiencies deepens.

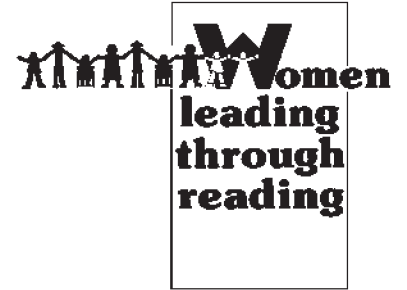
In 2006, WE LEARN modified, updated, and reintroduced this initiative with a new name, Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles. With funding from the Women's Fund of Rhode Island, WE LEARN piloted Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles in Rhode Island in 2006-2007. That grant also supported the development of this updated training manual. Additionally, WE LEARN received multiple year grants from the Boston Women's Fund to sponsor WLTR Circles in the Boston area between 2007-2010. WE LEARN plans to continue to provide training and support so that organizations and literacy programs in many communities can develop and host their own collaborative circles.

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### WE LEARN Programs & Activities (2008 -2011)

- ❖ **(Net)Working Conference on Women & Literacy:** In addition to speakers, workshops, exhibits and sharing events, this (inter)national conference also includes the Annual Membership Meeting and the *Women's Perspectives* Celebration.
- ❖ **Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles™:** Through Women Leading Through Reading™ (WLTR) Discussion Circles women learners experience broader learning, fun, support, and affirmation through reading and discussion focused on issues and concerns relevant to their lives as women. In 2009, we have also created Women Raising Voices: From Reading to Writing by adapting WLTR to extend reading to writing activities for *Women's Perspectives* (see below).
- ❖ **Publications:** WE LEARN develops women-centered adult literacy/basic education reading materials and curriculum resources. *Women's Perspectives*, published annually in March, showcases writings by literacy learners on a designated theme. We have collaborated on several other publications, including ***The Change Agent #19: Women & Literacy*** (with New England Literacy Resource Center) and ***Empowering Women Through Literacy: Views from Experience*** (2009) and ***Our Stories, Ourselves: The EmBODYment of Women's Literacy Learning*** (2011), edited by Mev Miller & Kathy King (Information Age Publishing).
- ❖ **Student Leadership Development & Support:** Through special fundraising efforts, WE LEARN provides stipends and awards (as funding resources allow) to learners in adult basic/literacy services who participate in various WE LEARN leadership projects and student-focused activities.
- ❖ **Website ([www.welearnwomen.org](http://www.welearnwomen.org)):** WE LEARN maintains and continues to develop a content-rich website including literacy resource materials, web links, research, and other interactive spaces.
- ❖ **Professional Development:** WE LEARN has a growing portfolio of presentations and training related to our work on women's literacy issues. Our members present at numerous national conferences. We offer specialized consulting/training services.



# Section 1

## General Information & Goals

### General Purpose

### Goals for Participants

- Learners
- Volunteers
- Teachers
- Literacy Programs / Services

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Section1: General Information & Goals

**Materials Required**

Section 5 - Training Toolkit: Handouts

H1: Research Base for Women's Literacy

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## General Purpose

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Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles™ (WLTR) provide an alternative learning environment using group reading, facilitated discussion, and reflective writing for women needing or using adult basic/literacy education services. Based on the experiences of “book clubs,” women learners connect their reading and discussion to issues and concerns important for their lives as women. The Circles are co-facilitated by trained women volunteers from the local community. In this setting, women learners have the opportunity to identify topics and select reading materials focused on their experiences and concerns as women. Women Leading Through Reading provides a unique opportunity to address gender-based barriers to women’s lives and learning.

Through Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles, WE LEARN hopes to facilitate on-going discussion between our constituency of literacy learners and ABE educators and the larger community of feminist activists and scholars pursuing justice for women. Women with access to feminist and women’s literature and print resources have found sustenance and strength in these materials for many years. Book discussion groups, consciousness-raising groups, and study circles have often been used by feminists and social justice activists to strengthen critical/political analysis as well as to provide personal support and empowerment.

However, women with limited reading proficiencies have generally been left out of feminist or women’s equity discussions because so much of it happens in print. Print resources focused on women’s issues and containing information or personal enrichment are largely inaccessible to women with low reading proficiencies. Yet literacy learners do have opinions and are quite capable of entering into discussions on women’s issues, given the opportunity. The assumptions of literacy, complicated by social, economic, and political factors limiting women’s literacy, deny non-reading women access to feminist or women-centered materials, and frequently omit their issues and analyses from the political discourse.

Conversely, the realities, needs, contributions and experiences of women in adult basic and English literacy programs are generally invisible to the larger women’s rights and social change movements. As the identity and leadership of women in ABE grows through their participation in Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles, WE LEARN will facilitate stronger alliances with the larger women’s rights movement. As a result, women’s basic literacy/education needs and issues will inform and impact the larger context of feminist organizing, community building, legal rights, and other social change work.

Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles also builds on the research on women’s learning has found that women of all backgrounds benefit from life-based educational approaches integrating relationship and inter-connectedness.

This research asserts the need for teaching/learning methods that recognize and address the links between women’s learning and social contexts, self-esteem and identity, voice, and transformation.

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~ SEE TRAINING TOOLKIT: HANDOUTS ~

H1: Research Base

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## Goals for Participants

Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles (WLTR) include and affect three key groups of participants: 1) women learners using or needing adult basic/literacy education (ABE) services; 2) teachers, literacy programs, and/or providers who offer services to ABE women learners; and 3) women from local communities who volunteer as facilitators for the WLTR Circles. Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles have been developed using the principals of popular education and feminist/womanist participatory educational models. They are learner-centered and woman supportive, and potentially a source of transformation for all Circle members. In this way, all participants in WLTR are peers, women collaborating together as both teachers and learners. WE LEARN has identified a list of goals relevant to each of the key groups of participants.

### Learners

Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles address the barriers for women in literacy/basic education through a contextualized learning setting that assists each student to develop her confidence, leadership, and critical thinking skills through education in the broadest sense.

Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles are designed to provide an alternative and life-enriching learning environment. They are not classroom instruction, or a therapy group, but rather a gathering of peers. The Circles supplement the formal reading/literacy instruction women learners receive in their educational programs, AND encourage women to connect their reading and discussion into directly affecting, informing and transforming their lives. In this setting, women will also experience broader learning, fun, laughter, excitement, and joy through reading and discussion focused on their lives as women.

Many low-skilled, low-income women who participate in WLTR have limited experience with directly discussing women's issues. The Circles provide the opportunity to discuss topics women learners may not normally speak about, especially what one learner called "women-stuff." Through participation in WLTR, women learners have a chance to speak up, sometimes for the first time, thus bolstering self-esteem. Circles encourage women to share their viewpoints and ideas or to have their own thinking confirmed and expanded. Women become agents for their own learning as they identify and articulate their own reading interests and select their own reading materials. Learner participants are encouraged to read materials they may not have realized they could, or to have access to materials they do not know exist. Not only do women improve their reading and speaking proficiencies but also diminish their isolation, increase their self-confidence, and expand their understanding of the capabilities of women. These are critical first steps in finding their voice for women oppressed by cultural practices, political systems, and economic and educational inequities. In some cases, these Circles provide the only time learner participants have time to stop and think about something for themselves. Learners begin to understand education and

"Women may just be a word, some would say, but to me woman is what I am and what someday my daughter will be. It's important as women to know that as women we need to be strong. We need to learn [from] and to teach other women, and to have education in our life."

– Excerpt from student essay about Women Leading Through Reading, Rhode Island, 2007.



learning as something they can do for themselves as women, beyond why they pursue it to serve others (children, family, job, etc.).

By participation in the weekly sessions, women learners will have the opportunity to:

- ✧ Identify their own reading priorities and topics of interest, especially as they relate to women's lived experiences, and choose their own reading materials (leadership & decision-making);
- ✧ Read more regularly & recreationally (improve vocabulary & comprehension);
- ✧ Read a variety of genres: biographies, oral/histories, poetry, fiction, local research, community papers, opinion pieces, etc. (broad purposes);
- ✧ Consider their own opinions (critical thinking);
- ✧ Talk more openly than they might otherwise (communication skills);
- ✧ Persist in their learning (motivation & retention);
- ✧ Develop friendships (community-building); and
- ✧ Gain the benefits of each other's experience and life knowledge (diminishing their sense of isolation).

"In this group we're able to 'let out' and talk about all the issues that be both-erin' us. It's not comfortable in front of the teacher but in this group we find out what we have in common even though we're all different and from all different backgrounds and stuff....What is women leading through reading? We can make the group our own – whatever we want it to be."

– Student participant, Central Falls, RI, 2007

Learning objectives for women learners include:

- ✧ Increase their self-efficacy as learners, readers, and as capable women
- ✧ Broaden their awareness of women's issues
- ✧ Develop responsibility for learning through goal-setting and self-defined reading priorities
- ✧ Identify reading as a place for access to information and problem-solving as well as an option for personal interest, self-reflection, and entertainment
- ✧ Improve reading comprehension
- ✧ Broaden and apply critical thinking to real-life situations
- ✧ Practice writing through journaling
- ✧ Expand their conversational abilities and comfort level with speaking in a group
- ✧ Develop leadership skills
- ✧ Understand ways to engage in community research, action, and civic participation on women's issues of importance to them

## Volunteer Facilitators & Wider Feminist Communities

Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles explore the barriers and realities faced by women challenged by literacy in print-based cultures, and brings attention to their strengths and resiliencies. Generally, the feminist movement has assumed levels of literacy and discussion that do not exist among the most disadvantaged women in our communities. In WE LEARN's experience, many educated women have limited awareness of the realities faced by women in adult basic/literacy education. By working closely with women literacy learners, WE LEARN provides an opportunity for volunteer facilitators from the local women's community to better understand the challenges faced by women with limited literacy, and become better prepared to integrate realities of disadvantaged women into their larger scope of feminist social change activism. Facilitators, as well as students, have much to gain from their experiences with the Circles.

Learning objectives for women/activist facilitators include:

- ✧ Understand more clearly the realities, needs, contributions and experiences of women who use or need adult basic and English literacy programs or services;
- ✧ Become aware of the particular barriers women face as they seek to enhance their literacy proficiencies and basic education;
- ✧ Increase awareness of social, economic, and cultural issues affecting low-skilled, low-income women with limited education or English language proficiencies; and
- ✧ Articulate concrete steps to include adult students and their issues in women-centered groups and feminist/womanist activism

"I think I have trouble communicating in these kind of groups, I don't know how to phrase what I want to say in such a way that will be relatable and understandable to the women.... Though I do feel slightly more confident when speaking in groups elsewhere.... I do feel like I can relate to the women in our groups, and appreciate them and genuinely want to help them. One of my goals was to educate myself about women's issues and class issues and all that, and I really feel like that goal was achieved in a really amazing way. I got to work with and see the struggles of women involved in some of the issues."

– *Facilitator, Rhode Island, 2007*

As general awareness about the barriers and challenges faced by women with limited literacy proficiencies deepens, WE LEARN anticipates that WLTR will contribute to building alliances and collaborative efforts for women's rights organizing among women across all educational capabilities and achievements. Over time, we hope individual Circles regionally located will have opportunities to gather together, both participants and facilitators, to share their experiences and learning. In this way, WLTR may begin to (or more deeply) develop dialogs between women in adult basic/literacy education services and women in various professional, business, social service, and academic communities.

## Teachers and Literacy Programs / Services

WE LEARN has been fortunate to work with some amazingly innovative and creative teachers and programs that have helped us to successfully develop WLTR Discussion Circles over the years. In most cases, teachers and program directors understand the value of WLTR though some express concern about how they might actually provide the services within the context of their programming, especially those that serve both men and women. However, teachers and program administrators enthusiastically find ways to use and offer WLTR as an additional opportunity for their students. Their own frustrations with various restrictions (time, space, availability, curriculum, standardized assessment measures and procedures, mixed-gender classes) have helped them to identify and articulate some creative ways to offer WLTR. Each program situation is different so programs decide how to best use the Circles in their own contexts, which include both scheduling as well as focus and purposes to serve their women student's needs.

Women Leading Through Reading explicitly remains flexible to allow each program to adjust to its own needs, either by offering WLTR as an extra choice opportunity for women, or scheduled as a section of a regular class. In this way, each group has its own "personality" within a basic framework.

Programs that integrate WLTR as a component of their overall curriculum structure or service plan, gain benefits in these areas:

- ❖ Enhancement of students' outcomes and attainment of their educational goals, especially in reading comprehension, writing, speaking English;
- ❖ Increased opportunities for contextualized learning for life skills, workplace, citizenship, and other student goals; and
- ❖ Encouragement for students in areas such as peer mentoring, leadership development, critical thinking, and civic/community engagement.

Section 2 of this manual describes in greater detail ways in which literacy/basic educational and other service agencies might integrate Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles into their overall programming.

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~ SEE TRAINING TOOLKIT: HANDOUTS ~

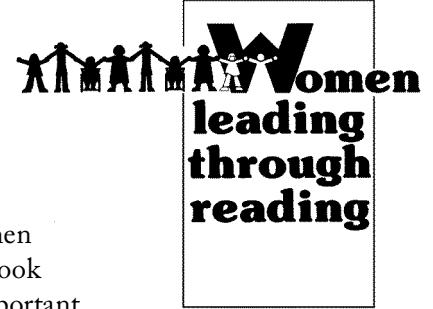
H1: Research Base

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I hope [WLTR returns] to our class next year. I know that it was a positive experience for all. It can be a creative outlet for students to express their feelings through writings and discussions. The readings bring the students to ask questions about their own lives, and they are able to express those feelings, frustrations, questions, and concerns in a non-threatening, comforting environment. So often these young women have very low self-esteem. It certainly had them thinking about their roles as women.

– *Teacher Evaluation, Rhode Island, 2007*

# Women Leading Through Reading: A Guidebook for Discussion and Action



Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles provide an alternative learning environment using group reading, facilitated discussion, and reflective writing for women needing or using adult basic/literacy education services. Based on the experiences of "book clubs," women learners connect their reading and discussion to issues and concerns important for their lives as women. The Circles are co-facilitated by trained women volunteers from the local community. In this setting, women learners have the opportunity to identify topics and select reading materials focused on their experiences and concerns as women. Women Leading Through Reading provides a unique opportunity to address gender-based barriers to women's lives and learning. This Guidebook provides valuable information for programs and communities that would like to initiate Women Leading Through Reading Discussion Circles in their area.

|  |   |          |
|--|---|----------|
| Please send _____ # of Copies of <b>Women Leading Through Reading - A Guidebook for Discussion and Action</b>                        | <b>\$20.00 ea</b>   |          |
| <b>CD with reproducible Word docs from Toolkit (Free to organizational members)</b>  | <b>\$5.00 ea</b>  |          |
|  | <b>SUBTOTAL</b>   |          |
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Payments accepted in U.S. Dollars only. Please make checks & Money Orders Payable to WE LEARN.

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