

# Women on the Ropes: Change Through Challenge

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**SUMMARY.** Although the ropes course has been used for many “special populations” it can be used as a powerful tool for learning and increasing self-awareness and esteem for many women in our society. Sexism and oppression of women create internal and external fears and mistrust. Leadership development is stifled in some women while others feel the pressure of having to lead. The all-women’s ropes course experience presents opportunities for women to explore these fears, build trust in themselves and others, and try out their leadership skills within a safe and supportive environment. Women gain a new sense of possibility through the experience of seeing other women do what society says we should not be doing.

The development of the challenge ropes course as a tool for change was introduced to the United States by Outward Bound in the early 1960s. An experiential learning program, Outward Bound originally was designed in England as a survival program for young sailors (Schoel, Proudly, & Radcliffe, 1988). The U.S. Outward Bound programs of the 1960s and 70s originally focused on ser-

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The activities described within this paper should not be attempted without appropriate training.

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vices for adolescents and young adults, and soon began work with “special populations” of young people in a variety of training and treatment centers (Gass, 1993). Across the U.S in the 1970s and 80s “wilderness therapy programs” developed that utilized the ropes course independent of, and in combination with, other forms of adventure activities such as rock climbing, canoeing, and backpacking expeditions. In more recent years the ropes course has become a major therapeutic tool in programs that provide services to drug and alcohol addicted people, prison populations, survivors of sexual and other forms of violence, and perpetrators of abuse.

In the early 1970s, a group of former Outward Bound instructors joined together and adapted Outward Bound activities to a high school setting with the ropes course being a major component of the program. “Project Adventure” eventually received federal funding for expansion of this program model to other schools around the country. According to Project Adventure, “a challenge ropes course is a series of individual and group physical challenges that require a combination of teamwork skills and individual commitment. Constructed of rope, cables, and wood, courses are built outdoors in trees (or using telephone poles) and indoors in gymnasiums” (Webster, 1989 preface). Some challenges built close to the ground are called “low ropes elements.” Those built in trees or telephone poles are referred to as “high ropes elements.” Some high ropes elements require the use of a safety system consisting of a belayer, belay rope, hard hat, harness, and an anchor. With a basic orientation toward safety, this system is characteristic in ropes course work.

Over the past three years, I have offered “Women on the Ropes” programs to women in a rural, up-state New York community. Program titles have included: “Women, Challenge and Self-Esteem,” “Unlearning Oppression-Ropes and Power,” “Women Therapists-Facing the Challenges Together,” and “Women on the Ropes-Stretching the Limits.” Programs offered in the spring/summer of 1993 included: “Mothers and Daughters-Building on the Connections,” “Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse-Challenges and Choices,” “Lesbians on the Ropes, in the Woods, Everywhere,” “Women Over 40-The Changer/The Challenger,” and “Bisexual Women-Claiming Space.” Participants attending past programs have been primarily white, working women and students, from their early teens through

their late 50s. In these programs I have combined a feminist perspective and a “challenge by choice” philosophy with non-competitive group games, problem solving, support, and trust-building activities, as well as the use of low and high ropes course elements. While the women who participated in these *Journey Weavers* programs were drawn from the general public rather than those who were intentionally seeking “therapy,” the process itself was found to be healing and therapeutic. In this paper I will discuss how the “all-women’s” group provides role models for women, supporting them to move past oppressive socialization and prescriptions of what is acceptable behavior for women. Additionally, I will discuss how these groups help women from the general population increase their ability to identify and/or move past fear, build trust and support, and gain a clearer understanding of their relationship to leadership.

Groups participating in a ropes course generally move through a progression of warm-up and “getting to know you” activities before beginning the low or high ropes elements. Time is included for individual and group goal-setting. A participant might decide that she wants to become a more active leader, or become more aware of her decisions to “choose” to participate, rather than participate because she’s expected to. A group goal might be to utilize as many resources found within the group as possible: for example, finding out if any women have experience building human pyramids before attempting to solve a problem that requires the group to go over an obstacle. These activities encourage the participants to begin to develop trust in themselves, find their voices, and express their ideas about how to solve a problem or accomplish a task. A base of trust and support begins to develop through these games and activities. Time is also built in for “debriefing” the activities, that is, discussing and sharing what actually happened for each participant during the activity. Discussions can cover topics of leadership, following, styles of communication, how the group handles suggestions from participants, feelings about the end result, as well as topics specific to the concerns of a particular group (the impact of age, body size, etc.). Reflection on the implications of the activity to “real life” is also an important part of the debriefing process.

Once the group proceeds to the low and high ropes course activi-

ties, metaphors are used to enhance the learning experience. Metaphors specifically designed to have meaning to the lives and struggles of the group members are powerful tools for change and growth. For example, a group of women exploring issues of oppression are presented with the metaphor of a maze representing what it is like for oppressed people unable to “see” their way out of oppression—people who are restricted by societal myths, stereotypes, and rules of what can and cannot be done by certain groups. The participants are first briefed about the activity in an area away from the maze and then those who choose to participate are asked to put on blindfolds. They are led into the maze—an area that is enclosed by ropes that prevent the participants from exiting unless the facilitator opens one of the “gates.” Each woman is taken into the maze individually and led to an area away from the others. The women are told that they cannot talk with each other and that each must find her own way out. The women attempt to move through the maze individually, but are not successful in finding their way out. One random participant (the token woman, person of color, or lesbian) is allowed to exit. This participant is then given the choice of returning to the maze to help others still caught in the maze of oppression or of staying out, removing her blindfold, and enjoying her new freedom. She is told that if she chooses to go back in she risks the possibility that the exit she previously used may not be available to her again. At some point participants realize that they can no longer “play by the rules” and begin to talk and have contact with each other. They realize they do not need to be “blinded” and they take off their blindfolds and help others find their way out of the maze.

In the debriefing that followed this experience, women recognized the connection between their own feelings of isolation and oppression, of not being able to find their way out alone, and the need for contact with others in order to understand their oppression and the oppression of other groups. They also recognized the randomness of the “token” woman allowed to exit, and how the system limits that woman’s ability to take leadership and guide others out. The risk of taking leadership is often counter-balanced by the threat of harassment, the possible loss of job and income, and/or the threat to physical safety. Being able to move past these

possible losses means facing tremendous fear and learning to make use of support systems, trusted friends, and family.

Another metaphor is used to assist women in dealing with issues of support and trust. After participating in a series of individual and group trust building activities, a group of women therapists was given the opportunity to take a step further toward a place of trust in and support of each other. The “trust fall” is introduced as a way of allowing themselves to physically let go and fall backwards, from a four-foot-high platform, into the arms of their group. Taking the risk that they will be supported by others they have just begun to trust had implications for relationships in society and the work world. After describing the activity to the group, a volunteer is asked to join the facilitator on the platform. The remainder of the group forms two lines facing each other on the ground, standing shoulder to shoulder with their arms bent at the elbows, hands flat, palms up. They create a flat bed of hands and arms that are braced by stable bodies, feet solidly placed one in front of the other on the ground. The volunteer has the opportunity to have eye contact with each participant and is encouraged to express any doubts or fears she might have. The group provides support and encouragement for her to take her next step and assure her that they hear her fears and are ready to support her. If she chooses to continue, she turns her back on the line of women and, following a series of communications between her and the group, falls flat backwards onto the arms of her supporters. She is gently rocked back and forth and then placed back on her feet. Others in the group then have the opportunity to move onto the platform and experience the trust fall. For some this is a very frightening yet empowering experience of “letting go” and trusting that others will “be there for them,” that they are not alone and can communicate when they are in need of support. For others the experience of falling is a feeling of relief in letting go to this degree. For yet others, making the decision not to do or complete the trust fall can also bring up strong feelings. As one woman explained:

I felt sadness, fear, disappointment . . . I was unable to complete [the trust fall] because of terror. It was a rich, powerful, welcome experience because it helped point out more of my

denial about myself. The feelings are hard but also welcome because usually it's too easy to function and stuff these feelings and go on at a limited level emotionally.

In my experience working with groups of women, these beginning activities enable the group to feel connected in a fairly short period of time. An atmosphere of acceptance, encouragement, and "an acknowledgement of each woman's presence" (Mitten, 1992, p. 57) adds to the ability of women to form connections with each other, to gain self-esteem, and trust in their abilities and those of the other women in their group.

Denise Mitten, Executive Director of Woodswomen, Inc., writes about her experiences and philosophy for working with women and girls in the out-of-doors. Mitten (1992, p. 56) states that "in order for women and girls to feel empowered [in the out-of-doors] several factors must exist. The program philosophy needs to be one that respects women, and adds to the building of self-esteem, with leaders who are skilled in implementing the philosophy, and participants who have choices about, and within the experience."

Mitten also states that "women perceive that they can meet certain emotional needs, such as unconditional support, attention, acceptance for who they are, and personal time more readily in an all-female environment" (Mitten, 1992, p. 57). I would add that women participate in all-women outdoor groups because of the need women have for powerful role models. Women gain strength, self-esteem, self-empowerment, and a sense of possibilities for moving beyond assumed limits, by seeing other women doing what society has taught them not to do. Participants have stated: "Having all-women felt safer; having women role models was important to me—it made it feel possible for me to do the activities." "I enjoyed it (the all-women's group). I like being in a physical environment without men there. I can relate to *my* strength when with *my* gender." "I felt safer being with women. I also felt empowered by watching all kinds of women with different physical abilities come together and do things that 'women aren't supposed to do.' " The all-women group also allowed women to be more honest with themselves and each other. One participant stated: "An all-women group

was necessary in order for me to be a more open and honest participant.”

Fear is a common concern for many women participating in the ropes course programs. Women are generally conditioned not to take risks, and not to see themselves as strong or able to deal with physical challenges. In addition, on a daily basis women are confronted with the threat of violence through films, reports of rapes, physical assaults, murders of women and children, and the continued presence of sexism in our culture.

Women attending the ropes course programs became more aware of their fear, and in some cases, found themselves relating to their fear in a different way. For example, the following responses came from a survey of participants in my *Journey Weavers* programs: “When I get afraid, I think of what I did and what the other women did. For weeks after I felt centered and less victimized by circumstances around me . . .” “Overcoming fear is the main impact of the ropes course that I use in addressing other fears both in myself and in clients.” “I felt in my body the terror of fear. I now am more humble about the fears of others. I relate more directly to the experience of fear.” “For a week following the ropes course I felt very emotionally strong. I think that I am more accepting of my fear—realizing that it doesn’t have to immobilize me.”

In an unfamiliar environment, most people get in touch with feelings of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and a need to develop trust and support within the group. Women with different abilities coming together to experience the ropes course are on some level equalized by the unfamiliarity of the situation. Through the trust building process, participants were able to gain new understandings of their fear, more acceptance as well as more ability to name fears they had otherwise avoided. One woman explained it this way:

I’ve been able to name my fears better and face them more. A lot of emotions came loose for me during the ropes course and now I’m exploring them further through therapy. My life has changed because I’m allowing myself to be more vulnerable and open myself up to emotions I didn’t want to feel before.

Another woman shared the impact of her experience on her general life: "I have thought long and hard about the nature of trust and support in every area of my life."

The leadership style of the facilitators on the ropes course has the potential of bringing out leadership in many of the women participants. One of the advantages of this work is the flexibility of the process, which allows for creative introduction of each new challenge and, in some cases, the creation of circumstances that change the leadership dynamics. In one instance, a group was presented with a challenge and three women who had naturally assumed the leadership role in previous challenges were made "mute"; they could participate in whatever way they felt comfortable but could not add anything verbally to the solution of the problem. One of the results was that other women came forward as leaders and took the opportunity to test their leadership skills with support and trust from the group. As one participant stated: "The ropes course experience deepened my understanding of some beliefs that I've had about myself, e.g., that I am a leader if I am in a supportive, safe place."

For women who were inclined to take leadership automatically, not having to do so resulted in a sense of relief and new awareness that they did not have to be under the pressure to lead, that others would take on that role and the job would get done. It opened up the possibility of being able to be a learner and to relax in that role. One woman shared her experience this way: "I learned more about my role as 'leader' as 'one who takes charge' in groups and how good it felt not to have to do that—I realized I want to learn how to participate without taking charge."

When women come together in an environment where an activity is perceived as dangerous and problems are in need of a solution, there is a shared sense of resolution through cooperation and support. Two women describe it this way: "I felt like one member of a collective group—at times a leader, other times a follower. There were a lot of strong leaders in the group, and I felt we worked well together, cooperatively." "I led and I followed. I challenged myself to trust and listen to the women I was with and to use my voice to express my fears and concerns." "I've talked with others about the teamwork that occurred when the team was working so well that no one knew whose idea was whose."



Women who have gone through the ropes course experience report other changes in their feelings and awarenesses of themselves: "I gained a bright burst of confidence from the whole experience. I call on certain moments when I doubt my abilities at any given time. I find myself noticing leaders and my own role within groups more." "I learned about the power of constant and non-invasive support. I was high up on a tree, and five women below were almost chanting confidence to me." "I noticed myself passively not participating in the group in the beginning and how that turned around when we processed an exercise. I learned to recognize how I did that and that I could move through that pattern of response."

Although the ropes course has been used for many "special populations" it can be used as a powerful tool for learning and increasing self-awareness and esteem for many women in our society. Sexism and oppression of women create internal and external fears and mistrust. Leadership development is stifled in some women, while others feel the pressure of having to lead. The all-women's ropes course experience presents opportunities for women to explore these fears, build trust in themselves and others, and try out their leadership skills within a safe and supportive environment. Women gain a new sense of possibility through the experience of seeing other women do what society says we should not be doing.

My experience offering *Journey Weavers* programs is a beginning point for exploring the use of the ropes course as a tool for enabling women to overcome the impacts of oppression and sexism. However, additional programs need to be developed addressing the needs of women from a broader range of backgrounds, races, ethnicities and physical abilities. In addition, it is expected that more in-depth research will be developed on the effectiveness of the ropes course as an agent of change.

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