



WOMEN, VOICE AND POWER

How transformative feminist leadership is challenging inequalities and the root causes of extreme vulnerability

Executive Summary

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OXFAM

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‘The claim is often made that there is insufficient proof of the effectiveness of grassroots women’s interventions in crisis settings. This claim is not just false, it also threatens to divert much needed resources away from them. It is time to bust this myth. The problem is not that the evidence does not exist, but that grassroots women’s organizing is not valued, so sufficient evidence has not been collected. When policy makers and researchers have documented such impacts during humanitarian crises, the data confirms that grassroots women’s work in war and disaster is very often life-saving.’
Y. Susskind. Myth-Busting in Defense of Grassroots Women Crisis Responders.
Cited in Oxfam Training Manual: Gender Leadership in Humanitarian Action¹

”

‘There are twenty-two in our council. We women are only eight... the men are noisy but not effective. If men are not accounting [for what they do with their power], we will. We’re showing a different way of doing things.’

Local councillor, Northern Uganda²

Men today are significantly over-represented in positions of power. They make up three-quarters of the world’s parliamentarians³ and control 86% of the world’s corporations.⁴ This male 75% dominate global and local decisions on who has access to quality school and health services; how we do or do not protect our planet; who pays and who avoids taxes; and when and where weapons are sold or fired.

As the world collectively commits to ‘just recoveries’ in the wake of the health, economic and social devastation still being caused by COVID-19 – who gets to decide what ‘just’ means?

A recent CARE survey of 30 national COVID-19 crisis committees found that men’s representation was, on average, also 76%. Just five of the countries surveyed had announced funding to support the specific ways that the pandemic has affected women economically, while 54% of countries surveyed had taken no demonstrable action on gender-based violence.

‘The world’s 10 richest men have seen their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the pandemic began – more than enough to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone and ensure no one is pushed into poverty.’

The Inequality Virus, Oxfam⁵

COVID-19 has exposed how, when the chips are down, women activists, leaders and their organizations and movements are still not considered legitimate or valued

partners in what truly remains the ‘big boy’ politics of decision making.

Feminist activists worldwide have long held that not only is men’s unquestionable power to shape our world not right, but that it results in poorer and badly informed decision making about issues impacting on everyone’s everyday lives.

In the UK for example, research by the Fawcett Society⁶ found that 96% of local councils in England are heavily male-dominated – and still predominantly white. Just 6% of councillors are women from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) groups, compared to the 14% of the population of England and Wales that identify as BAME. Only a third of UK councillors are women.

This has to change. This is women’s business too.

In simple terms, Oxfam understands ‘transformative feminist leadership’ as a **process of people working together to transform systemic and intersecting oppressions against women, including trans women and gender non-binary people – with the ultimate goal being the realization of gender and social justice and women’s rights.**

Oxfam’s **transformative feminist leadership** programming works alongside feminist activists, leaders, their organizations and movements to deepen the skills, confidence and resources they need to access and influence decision-making processes safely and effectively. We see transformative feminist leadership as critical to the success of both informal feminist movements for political, socio-economic change and for the deep shifts required to the formal structures and institutions of power that govern our lives.

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Both are needed

This is true because the world's power structures are largely still modelled around deeply racist, patriarchal and heteronormative ideals that exploit, exclude and silence People of Colour, women – Indigenous and migrant women, young and elderly women, women with disabilities and lesbian, bisexual and trans women in particular – in order to maintain and grow wealth and power.

The lack of data available globally to show how race, ethnicity, sex and gender intersect to exclude women, especially Women of Colour, from decision-making institutions represents a fundamental – and not accidental – barrier to transforming these structures and spaces.

To function effectively, these systems of power reward individuals and hierarchies over collective working and benefits. And yet, research from 70 countries over 20 years confirms that the single most effective way to promote legal protections against violence against women – arguably one of the most widespread and strongly resisted human rights abuses on the planet – is through the organizing of strong local feminist movements.⁷

A growing body of evidence from feminist organizing across the world shows that when decisions are made more equally and inclusively, and are rooted in locally-led, intersectional feminist movements and political agendas, they have immediate and long-term human development benefits for all.

For example:

- A review of progress in over 120 countries over the 40 years to 2015, which demonstrates that feminist movements contribute directly to women's economic empowerment, found that feminist mobilization is *'associated with more expansive economic rights, better support for both paid and unpaid domestic work, and better protection from sexual harassment'*.⁸
- The same review found that feminist mobilization is associated with smaller gender wage gaps and, indirectly, is positively associated with women's improved access to land rights and financial institutions, including access to their own bank accounts.⁹
- Women's leadership in community forest management bodies yields positive outcomes for both forest sustainability and gender equality.¹⁰ Additional evidence from Indonesia, Peru and Tanzania suggests that *'gender quotas make interventions more effective and lead to more equal sharing of intervention benefits'*.¹¹
- In India, women's equal representation in panchayat (village councils) has seen these structures respond more effectively to community demands for drinking water infrastructure, housing, schools and health services,¹² especially where the elected women are aware of and active in championing the specific issues facing women in their communities. Research has also found that households report paying fewer bribes to panchayat with a female leader.¹³
- Analysis of 181 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 found that *'processes that included women as witnesses, signatories, mediators, and/or negotiators demonstrated a 20% increase in the probability of an agreement lasting at least two years. This increases over time, with a 35% increase in the probability of a peace agreement lasting 15 years.'*¹⁴

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Supporting systemic transformations like these calls for a radically different approach to the way in which the development and humanitarian sectors understand, value and invest in feminist activism, organizing and movement building. It calls for an explicitly anti-racist analysis of, and transformations to, the way in which donors and allies in the global North collaborate with Southern feminist organizations and movements to support their expertise, politics and priorities. It also requires deep changes to male-dominated political institutions and exclusive cultures of formal decision-making processes. Above all, this requires promoting a different kind of leadership – one that is intersectional, explicitly feminist and operates as part of a collective, rather than solely individual, effort.

‘It has become clear and certain, after 10 years, that building bridges is key and central to any feminist movement that we are hoping to grow and nurture... we

need to work on widening the movement, and spreading it as an idea, a condition, or a basis of belonging, to those who aren’t working at its center. First, intergenerational work is key to this movement. Not only does it allow for knowledge and tools to be transferred, developed and adopted, but it also helps bring in new actors to the movement, from young women to individuals from different nationalities who are at the margins.’

Sara Abou Ghazal, feminist activist and former Co-Director, the Knowledge Workshop.¹⁵

Critically for our sector, this means long-term partnerships with women’s and trans rights organizations and Southern feminist technical experts so that their work is made even more visible, effective and sustainable. This also ensures that we do not miss critical perspectives and valuable collaborations for shaping effective and lasting solutions to the problems we face together.



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Making this shift also requires learning from the most mature of our intersectional gendered political analysis and thinking, and direct support for the groups of women most excluded from policy debates to hone the hard skills of negotiation, influencing, consensus building and conflict resolution, enabling them to work with confidence in key sectors and at all levels.

This is particularly urgent within the sectors that historically have been least open to working with intersectional feminist analysis and practice – including the male-dominated, wealth-creating sectors of public finance, criminal justice systems, national security and defence, climate policy and financing, and the infrastructure, agriculture and extractives industries.

‘We need political education. Otherwise, once we manage to have dialogue and they start talking to us about things like municipal budgets, it’s like jumping out of a plane with no parachute. If they are talking about infrastructure, I have to know about infrastructure. If they are talking about territorial rights, I have to know about territorial rights.’

Activist, Guatemala¹⁶

‘We worked a lot on the theory of change. We once sat for four hours, and what we had written on the white board stayed there for two months.’

Activist and RootsLab participant, Lebanon¹⁷

A growing body of examples and evidence from powerful feminist efforts to radically transform the way things are done offer us practical and compelling ways to do things differently – and better.

These include: FEMNET’s annual [African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy](#);¹⁸ the Women’s Environment and Development Organization’s [Climate Negotiators Delegates Fund](#);¹⁹ Huairou Commission’s resources documenting Grassroots Women’s Innovations in [Land Ownership and Property Control](#),²⁰ [Disaster Resilience](#)²¹ and [Local Governance for Poverty Eradication](#),²² an Oxfam and Women’s Budget Group [Short Guide to Taxing for Gender Equality](#),²³ [Feminist Foreign Policy guides](#)²⁴ as well as trainings, briefings and submissions by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development on [regional and international treaties and trade agreements](#) currently under negotiation.²⁵



Garment factory workers march in the streets of Phnom Penh. They demonstrate for better wages and working conditions and advocate for their rights as employees. Photo: Kimtong Meng/Oxfam Novib

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The impacts of transformative feminist leadership are clear

The evidence also shows us the clear – and necessary – interrelation between women’s influence, voice and power in formal and informal decision-making spaces.

In Egypt, for example, researchers found that *‘women’s movements, working in tandem with a woman politician, who functioned as a “gate opener”, helped bring about a feminist conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme with “women’s entitlements as citizens at its core” that the authors characterized as one of the most progressive CCT programmes internationally. The policy, designed with input from participatory research that factored in what women said would make a difference in their lives, granted women cash transfers to make up shortfalls in household income, and to access schools for their children, information about services and opportunities, shelter and decent work.’*²⁶

In Kenya, Oxfam’s WE-Care programme supported the mobilization of over 800 women in Nairobi’s informal settlements to advocate for essential care-supporting services, leading to increases in expenditure on accessible water points and Early Childhood Development Education Centres by 30% and 11%, respectively.²⁷

Radical shifts to the way we work – and the consistency with which we work – as donors, partners and allies alongside local feminist organizations and movements are urgently required in humanitarian responses²⁸ and in our sector’s work in fragile and conflict contexts, where the exclusion of women in peacebuilding work is well documented.²⁹ Where we fail to make these shifts, this has significant present and future losses for us all.

‘Women are also more likely to direct post-conflict resources to the reconstruction of public institutions and provision of services critical to long-term stability, including schools, health-care services, clean drinking water, and judicial systems.’

Council on Foreign Relations³⁰

Putting our money where our mouth is

In a world where women’s rights organizations globally have an average annual income of just \$20,000, with 48% having never received funding for core costs and 52% having never received multi-year funding,³¹ there is an urgent need for radically different partnerships, leadership, investment and accountability from donors, development actors and allies across sectors.

‘In 2017, global military spending was estimated to be almost \$1.7 trillion. Not only is this a terrifyingly high amount, but it is also scandalous when we know that women’s movements and empowerment remain woefully underfunded. The global feminist movement has the same budget as one F-35 fighter plane (about \$110 million). Read that twice...’

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)³²

While the institutional barriers and violent resistances to women’s activisms, leadership and collective organizing are deeply rooted, we know from feminist organizing in and across broad coalitions of social, racial and climate justice, popular and political movements worldwide, that the work of challenging and changing decision-making structures and institutions can – and is – being done. The examples shared throughout this paper demonstrate that slowly but surely, change is taking place.

Feminist funders and Women’s Funds have long recognized the power of feminist organizing to resist intersecting and oppressive forms of power. And a new generation of donors is emerging that sees transformative feminist leadership and collective action as critical to their understanding of how change happens.

This paper calls on the UK and global donorship to use its incredible ‘Power To...’ to do and demand so much more.

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Recommendations

Our recommendations draw from the wealth of learning and practical resources that feminist activists have designed specifically to guide donors and allies in their accompaniment to women’s rights organizations and movements. These include: FRIDA’s [No Straight Lines](#)³³ resource for supporting young feminist organizing; the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN) briefing for INGOs, [Solution or Part of the Problem?](#); AWID’s [Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem](#);³⁴ [Creating Equitable South-North Partnerships](#) from the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA);³⁵ Oxfam’s own Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights Programme Framework;³⁶ and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice’s [Feminist Funding Principles](#).³⁷

The recommendations build on clear and consistent appeals from women’s and trans rights and feminist organizations about the kinds of decolonized relationships, support, resourcing and solidarity they themselves want and need from donors, INGOs and allies in the project of feminist transformation. This requires shifting power, resources and capacity; uprooting and changing our sector’s colonial ways of working in partnerships; and fundamentally disrupting and rebalancing power in the international aid ecosystem.

To do this, donors, partners and allies must:

In partnerships

- Recentre the deep knowledge that comes from the lived experience of women, especially Women of Colour and value, seek and support equitable relationships over and above projects and delivery.
- Learn from the growing body of good practice to strengthen mutually beneficial partnerships with women’s rights and feminist organizations in all development design and implementation. Decolonize our partnership approaches and systems so that these are reshaped to centre women’s rights and Southern feminist organizations and movements’ own expertise, needs and ambitions.
- Do our research in non-extractive ways and collaborate with the feminist experts and specialists working in every region of the world and on the entire range of technical issues – often at the nexus of new social and political challenges and cross-sector working.
- Include time and resources for both process and content learning – and for cross-movement-building work in all proposals.
- Learn from feminist organizations who have taken their work to scale about the challenges of embedding feminist politics and practice in the work of ‘mainstream’ organizations, as more of us seek to test and replicate new ways of working.

- Hold ourselves accountable to the partners we work with to tell us whether we are engaging in partnerships in ways that are truly decolonial, anti-racist and intersectionally feminist.

In funding

- Enable those at the frontlines of struggles against inequalities and systemic oppression to gain access to the power, resources and spaces that organizations like Oxfam have long been occupying – so that they are able to engage in and lead this radical, transformative work.
- Include direct, core funding for at least one local women’s rights organizations or feminist technical partner – no matter how small to start – in all proposals.
- Shift power and resources by planning and using unrestricted funds more intentionally – enabling targeted support for pilots, innovation and more agile, partner-led collaborations and core organizational support costs.
- Pool donor funds to reduce duplication and increase the funds available for women’s rights organizations. Coordinate and simplify grant-making systems and tools to better respond to the operational realities of women’s rights and Southern feminist partner organizations.
- Create partnerships with – and provide money to – women’s funds around the world, as effective ways of getting money in agile and safe ways to the groups that need it most.
- Publish how much development spend goes to transformative women’s rights programming.
- Bring partners into our governance and decision-making spaces about how funds are spent.

Towards a better understanding of transformative feminist leadership commitments

From analysis carried out in 2019 by Oxfam in the UK,³⁸ ‘standalone’ gender justice programmes represented 11% of programme spend, with a long-standing target to increase this to 15% across the Oxfam Confederation. The experience of tracking programme expenditure with local women’s rights organization partners over several years also tells us that monitoring needs to happen across thematic areas in order to see greater consistency in our approach. For example, Oxfam GB’s 2018 spend on Ending Violence Against Women programming saw 70% of funds transferred directly to local women’s rights organizations, in comparison to just 30% in our Women’s Economic Empowerment programming.

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With a gender-transformative approach

- Insist on intersectional gender and power analysis in all development, humanitarian and research proposals as a critical first step to ensuring that we see the fullest of pictures.
- Integrate support for women's collective as well as individual activists, organizing and leadership within all programmes, and support collaborations between diverse feminist activists, organizations and movements working outside of formal decision-making institutions and those who are working within them.
- Demand at least one gender-transformative (not 'gender-aware' or 'gender-sensitive')³⁹ outcome in all proposals. This one shift moves development sector programming from tinkering at the edges to genuine wholesale engagement in – and critically, trialling, testing and learning from – the very process of doing things differently.

The power of targets

Where gender-transformative targets have been systematized in Oxfam's ways of working, these are helping to strengthen the ambition and quality of programmes and expenditure.

A 2014 review of progress against Oxfam's Middle East and North Africa Gender Justice Operational Plan, for example, saw 'an increase in the number of Programme Implementation Plans (PIPs) with at least one outcome and indicator for transformative change in women's lives from 33% in 2012 to 45% in 2014 and a fall in the number of proposals receiving the lowest score against newly introduced Gender Equality Markers from 57% in 2012 to 0% in 2014. The review also found a 142% increase in the funds transferred to women's rights organizations.'⁴⁰

- Include resourcing for the appropriate women's rights technical expertise to accompany and support *all* programmes and actions, and for the urgent immediate and longer-term anti-racism organizational accompaniment required to decolonize the way we work.
- Ensure that *all* programmes include funds and locally designed solutions for maximizing the safety of the gender and social justice 'disruptors' we work with.
- Walk the talk! Transforming the way that we shift power and resources to better support feminist and social justice movements cannot be done without parallel investments in our own organizational enabling environments. This requires long-term feminist

leadership and resourcing for the decolonizing of organizational policies, processes and practices; long-term investments in staff skills, confidence and accountabilities; and deep culture change.

Finally, we know from our experiences of trialling and testing new approaches that where there's a will, there's a way. All that's required is the first step – the interest, intention and desire to look at things differently, with an ambition to decolonize our partnerships and to seek feminist partners who want to partner with us because we add value to their work, with whom we can build equitable relationships of mutual respect and trust, and with whom we can step out of our comfort zones and act responsibly. Fundamentally, it all comes down to our intention – or not – to do things differently.

This also requires engaging honestly and intentionally with our own power – with the practices, behaviours, structures and systems that hold up the patriarchy and white supremacy that still shape so much of our sector's work. We need to invest urgently in the internal transformations necessary for dismantling these – guided always by what Southern feminist organizations and movements are telling us they want and need.

It is time for more equitable and better-quality decisions about the things that matter to us all. It is long overdue for Southern feminist activists, their organizations and movements – for Women of Colour, Indigenous and migrant women, both young and elderly women, women with disabilities and for lesbian, bisexual and trans women and gender non-binary people everywhere to become a central part of these dialogues and decisions. Through their experiences of intersecting forms of exclusion and silencing, they best understand the scope and nature of the violence, inequality and poverty they live with, and the local services, jobs and politics needed to transform these.

'There is no way that anything is going to be done for us, without us... because that's just doing it against us... We're not going to be beneficiaries. That's not happening anymore... it's 2019. So, give us power.'

Natasha Wang Mwansa,⁴¹ young activist at Women Deliver Global Conference

The benefits of transformative feminist leadership are hard to ignore

Increasingly, unapologetically, women in every country are coming together to organize and strategize in kind, creative, revolutionary ways to demand change. It is time now for donors and international development actors like Oxfam to recognize, celebrate, support and fund their work.

Read the full paper [here](#).

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Please note this paper has been edited in line with Oxfam's inclusive language approach.

For more information, or to comment on this paper, email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk

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