WOMEN, VOICE AND POWER

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

Full report

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1 Introduction

‘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.’


‘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, Kitgum, Northern Uganda

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a terrifying reality worldwide, feminist activists have organized together across community, environmental, anti-racist, labour, peace and political movements to provide both immediate local services and long-term support to those affected by poverty, intersecting inequalities, violence and oppression – as well as targeted work to uphold and promote women’s rights and gender justice.

In the urgent responses to COVID-19 around the world, these collaborations include formal strategy propositions like the Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women’s Feminist Economic Recovery Plan, emergency funding initiatives to support women migrant domestic workers ejected from their places of work, compilations of global feminist responses to COVID-19, and powerful visions of post-COVID feminist alternatives. These responses are not ‘just’ small-scale activisms and local organizing; they are building on and expanding system-wide transformations to the way entire economies work, healthcare is provided and social protections are designed and function.

Kudumbashree’s community kitchens and subsidized restaurants expanded rapidly across the state to respond to rising needs during the pandemic. Collaborating with local governments, Kudumbashree women transformed vacant public infrastructure into community kitchens and kick-started more than a thousand community kitchens across the state. Special community kitchens were opened for migrant workers or “guest workers” (as they are fondly known by the Government of Kerala).

Kudumbashree women also came to the state’s rescue when it experienced a shortage in hygiene and personal protection products. It immediately undertook a needs assessment exercise and assigned its textile and chemical microenterprises for exclusive production of sanitizers and masks. As of September 2020, Kudumbashree had become one of the main suppliers for masks and sanitizers to frontline institutions and local businesses in Kerala, selling more than 7 million cotton masks and 9300 litres of sanitizers.

Aysha Shamsuddin. How a Women’s Organization became ‘chief architects’ of the COVID-19 response in Southern India

In this paper, we describe why the transformative feminist leadership demonstrated in the many examples like this matter, and what this work means for and requires of donors and INGOs like Oxfam as we seek to strengthen our support and allyship to intersectional feminist activisms, leadership and organizing.

The evidence can no longer be ignored: when women and feminist activists are able to use their collective power to challenge inequalities, it can have a transformational impact. From women’s rights organizations and movements breaking down harmful social norms, to political leaders who advance progressive policies, there is a growing body of evidence from feminist organizing across the world that when decisions are made more equally and inclusively, and are rooted in locally owned, intersectional feminist movements and political agendas, they have immediate and long-term human development benefits for all.
When women’s rights activists, leaders and their organizations and movements working with and representing the diversity of their constituencies have the decision-making voice and power to influence what gets prioritized and where money is spent, we see enormous gains for the poorest and most excluded members of our societies.10

Conversely, when any one group with power and privilege in society dominates positions of leadership because of their race, ethnicity, class, age, sex, sexuality, caste, religious or tribal affiliation, it is incompatible with inclusive and equal outcomes.

Men today are significantly over-represented in positions of power. They make up three-quarters of the world’s parliamentarians11 and control 86% of the world’s corporations.12 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?

‘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, Oxfam13

We live, interconnected and interdependent, in a world where structures of power are largely still modelled around deeply racist, patriarchal and heteronormative ideals that exploit, exclude and silence women, People of Colour – and Indigenous, lesbian, bisexual, trans women and gender non-conforming people in particular – in order to maintain and grow wealth and power.

To function effectively, these systems of power reward individuals and hierarchies over collective working and benefits. Feminist activists, organizations and movements 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. This has to change.

This requires:

• **Redefining what we understand by leadership:** From a solely individual to a collective definition that recognizes the proven power of feminist organizing and movements. Recognizing that women’s leadership is born and matures in many different places: in faith and savings groups; as first responders in emergency situations; in local anti-racist, climate and social justice organizing; and in street protests for political change.

• **Taking an intersectional feminist approach** so that development analysis, decision making and resource allocation are grounded in the practical and strategic priorities of women in all their diversity – and centre the experiences of groups of women facing multiple exclusions for reasons of their race, ethnicity, class, age, physical or mental health and ability, sexuality, gender identity, caste, religion and marital status.

• **Supporting more women, including trans women with explicitly feminist agendas into positions of formal power** with control of policy decisions and resources across sectors. Providing the networks, support and protection mechanisms to ensure that this experience – a deeply disruptive one – is safe and dignified for all those involved.

• **Transforming the political structures, cultures and incentives** that keep the world-shaping 75%-male privilege and power so firmly in place.

This paper draws on learning from a wealth of feminist organizing and women’s political leadership globally – and from Oxfam’s own investments in support of ‘transformative feminist leadership’ over many years.14 It demonstrates the concrete development impacts that Oxfam’s feminist partners and so many others have seen as a result of this approach, and synthesizes insights about how change happens. It draws on both robust programme evaluations and reflections from the lived experiences of some of the activists and leaders with whom Oxfam has had the privilege of working. Its goal is to support more and better investment in our sector’s accompaniment to women activists, leaders and feminist organizations and movements worldwide.

This represents a critical part of the long-overdue work required to decolonize our sector’s politics, power and practice – and the more thoughtful, inclusive debates and decision making required across the development sector. 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.
BOX 1: WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?

Oxfam’s approach is grounded in the thinking and practices of Srilatha Batliwala and the feminist human rights organization CREA, who describe transformative feminist leadership as follows:

‘[A] composite definition... would be something like this: Women with a feminist perspective and vision of social justice, individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others – especially other women – around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realization of human rights for all.’ Srilatha Batliwala, CREA

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

Oxfam’s transformative feminist leadership programming works to support Southern feminist activists, leaders, their organizations and movements to have 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. Both are needed.

As such, Oxfam programming includes support to:

• strengthen intersectional feminist and young feminist organizations and movements – supporting their existing activisms, priorities and agendas;
• value, share and deepen the knowledge, influencing and technical skills of women and their organizations and movements, including longer-term accompaniment for community activists and leaders, organizations and networks;
• influence development and political institutions to promote and invest in feminist analysis, leadership and policy priorities;
• create spaces for connections and learning across communities, organizations and sectors – including safe spaces for developing and maturing more intersectional, transformative leadership practices.
Oxfam believes that sustainable development is only possible when gender-based inequalities are transformed and when women, men, trans and gender non-conforming people all fully enjoy their rights. In taking a feminist approach, Oxfam recognizes the need to focus on the rights of women and girls – but always to ground this in an understanding of the ways in which structural oppressions based on race, ethnicity, class, caste, ability, age, gender identity and sexual orientation interconnect with their sex to reinforce exclusion and violence. These experiences, positions and identities are different in each and every context that we – and those we collaborate with – work in.

A feminist approach also considers gender as a spectrum, going beyond oppressive binary categories of male and female. Oxfam therefore recognizes that work with transgender women and men, men, boys and the queer community represents a critical part of the long-term changes required to the deep social norms that underpin sex and gender-based discriminations and violence globally.

This paper’s focus on the power of women’s collective activisms and leadership should not be taken to suggest that gender equality is women’s business alone. We know that more and better investment in the work of Southern feminist activists and leaders, their organizations and movements cannot happen without the critical parallel work of changing the political structures, institutions and cultures that exclude them and so many others.

However, we focus here on the power and impacts of women’s – particularly Women of Colour and young feminists’ – collective activisms, organizing and movements because so much less has been documented about their harder-to-measure contributions to the development sector’s stated goals than has been documented about the more familiar – and more obviously political – areas of one-off candidate-training programmes, and the introduction of quotas and gender-responsive legal reforms.

Ultimately, both are required.
2. Background to this paper

This paper was written to help bring the powerful thinking and working of Southern feminist activists and their organizations and movements everywhere into mainstream, often gender-unaware development spaces and audiences. As feminists in Oxfam mandated to strengthen the gender and social justice programmes, campaigns and humanitarian practice of a UK-based INGO, the authors – and many others in spaces like ours – saw how rarely intersectional feminist critiques, initiatives, activisms or powerful new research findings were being seen, heard or integrated in ‘mainstream development’ working spaces and practice. We recognize that Oxfam’s work – and the work of the UK and international development and humanitarian sectors individually and collectively – is significantly less effective as a result.

Three recent reviews of the evidence on feminist activism by Mama Cash, on the impacts of women’s leadership by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, and by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) respectively, help to make the breadth and richness of women’s activisms and leadership globally more visible to new development and donor audiences. Each of the reviews found what the Mama Cash report articulated as ‘copious qualitative literature... on the impact of women’s and feminist movements in contexts around the world, often documenting in extensive detail the efforts of movements over a specific time period to create cultural, legal, policy-related, political and social change to advance women’s rights. In contrast...relatively few quantitative studies that take a cross-national or transnational/global look at the impact of women’s rights movements and feminist movements exist.’ This evidence gap poses a significant, self-perpetuating barrier for Southern feminist activists, organizations and their allies seeking to demonstrate the power and potential of what they do and how they do it to audiences for whom the ‘proof’ of numbers and data are still required to shift mindsets and conversations.

This paper therefore reflects an intention to use the best of Oxfam’s global presence, platforms, relationships, communication and influencing channels to share some of the growing body of evidence of the wealth, wonder and power of intersectional feminist thinking, working and organizing globally. We seek to play our part in helping these examples find their way into conversations – and, ultimately, resourcing decisions – about our sector’s legitimacy and impact in a time of live debate about what decolonizing and ‘depatriachalizing’ the politics and practice of development work and humanitarian action looks like and requires.

Sections one and two introduce transformative feminist leadership – what it is and why this discussion paper seeks to promote it.

Section three looks back at changing trends in global support for women’s activisms, leadership and organizing, and reflects on why transformative feminist leadership approaches are so needed today.

Section four shares a wealth of reasons for hope, from examples of the development impacts of feminist organizations and movements across the world.

Section five looks at the powerful evidence of the development impacts of feminist activists and leaders shaping formal decision and policy-making spaces and structures – often working closely with allies outside to shape new and more effective ways of working.

Section six reflects on learning and evidence about the power of political institutions – and our collective role in transforming male-shaped decision-making structures.

Section seven shares a myriad of practical examples of how donors and allies can – and already do – support more feminist transformations, including how we integrate this across our work, in the ‘big boy’ politics of the development and humanitarian sectors.

Section eight shares conclusions and recommendations for how all of this can be done, consistently, in future practice.
3 Why transformative feminist leadership is needed more than ever

In 1995, women’s movements came together with feminist political leaders to agree the Beijing Platform for Action. This landmark global agreement saw governments commit to women’s equal leadership, and it is an example of what can happen when women activists, leaders, their organizations and movements mobilize behind common political agendas across sectors.

Since then, both the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter for Human and Peoples’ Rights and the UN’s 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have reaffirmed and escalated this commitment. The latter includes SDG target 5.5: ‘full and effective participation – and equal opportunities for leadership – for women at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life’. Thus, for the first time, governments are required to be accountable for progress on the number of women in local as well as national decision-making positions.

The significance of this new commitment must not be underestimated. It gives feminist activists and their development partners and allies globally an unprecedented opportunity to influence the redistribution of power at community, local, district and sub-national levels – where the impacts of policy making, local service provision, and decisions on tax and spending are most strongly felt in women’s lives.

However, a recent review of progress against SDG 5 (gender equality) found that countries were making the least progress in meeting the targets related to women’s leadership and representation. Another review reflected on factors contributing to this, recognizing that ‘target 5.5 - on representation of women at national or local government level lacks an aspirational percentage and metrics to measure women’s levels of influence in power.’ Indeed, given that the metric for measuring progress against target 5.5 is ‘the share of national parliamentary seats, and ministerial positions held by women for each country’, this makes consistent tracking – and collective accountability for progress made at local level – almost impossible.

BOX 2: A SNAPSHOT – POLITICAL INEQUALITIES IN THE UK

The Fawcett Society’s research into local government in the UK found that 96% of councils in England today remain heavily male-dominated. Just 6% of councillors are women from Black, Asian or minority ethnic groups (BAME), compared to the 14% of the population of England and Wales that identify as BAME. Only a third of UK councillors are women.

Fifty-five percent of disabled women and half of BAME women in local government reported experiencing racism, ableism and sexism from colleagues and members of their own party. Only 7% of councils have maternity, paternity or parental leave policies for councillors.

The lack of progress against target 5.5 is no surprise. There is a deeply vested interest globally in maintaining heteronormative, male-shaped, race-based privileges and status quo – and the political structures that support and maintain them. 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 represent these women’s practical and political priorities in inclusive, effective ways.

More work is clearly required to level the global decision-making playing field to make these structures and spaces more inclusive of the sex, ethnic, race, geographic, age, caste and class groups of the populations they represent. However, local women’s rights and feminist movements, particularly in the global South, are chronically underfunded. Research by the Association of Women in Development (AWID) shows that women’s rights organizations globally have an average income of just $20,000 a year, with 48% having never received funding for core costs, and 52% having never received multi-year support from a donor. Just 0.02% of OECD countries’ total aid in 2016–17 went directly to Southern-based women’s organizations, despite the growing recognition of the vital work they do and their stated centrality in achieving SDG Goal 5 and indeed, the other 16 global goals.

A recent Oxfam review of seven donors found that only two of 72 ‘Gender Equality’ projects included all the minimum qualifying criteria advised by the OECD. Together, these 72 projects totalled $6bn of expenditure across development sectors.

‘99% of gender-related international aid fails to reach women’s rights and feminist organizations directly.’
K. Miller and R. Jones, Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem, AWID

We are at a crucial point in the history of democracy, the fight against the climate crisis and the struggles for greater equality – for racial justice and for women’s rights. That the crisis point for each of these comes at the same time is no coincidence. Right-wing populisms and religious fundamentalisms threaten freedom and democracy for all. A global economic model built on growth at all costs incentivizes non-stop consumption and a human relationship with the natural world that prioritizes the continued exploitation of the planet’s resources as the climate crisis unfolds before our eyes.

Feminist and LGBTQI+ Activists have often been the most vocal critics of the dominance of entrenched family,
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But something else is happening in response to all this. And this gives us reasons for hope.

Never in the recent past has there been much focus on women speaking out around the world as vocal and equal partners in the leadership of diverse and effective movements for change and in formal positions of influence in the political, social and economic institutions that shape lives and fates locally and globally.

This is why a transformative feminist leadership approach recognizes the importance of both — and why the examples from both women’s formal political leadership and the ongoing work of informal feminist organizing and movements — often working together — give us so much reason for hope.

As vocal, equal partners in the leadership of the Arab uprisings of 2011–12, and again in recent movements for political change in Lebanon and Iraq; from local campaigns for safe abortion, decent work, access to libraries and to quality housing worldwide; in the Black Lives Matter movement; the school strikes for climate, and the Green Belt Movement; to the 5 million women across India protesting against being barred from entering the Sabarimala temple; the Latin American Ni Una Menos and global Time’s Up movements; to indigenous and land rights activism; the examples woven through this paper highlight the power of women’s collective organizing for social, racial, gender and environmental justice.

This organizing, combined with complementary hard-won gains in many countries by feminist activists, leaders and alliances working with and within the political and socio-economic decision-making structures and institutions that matter are creating a powerful momentum for slow-but-radical changes in the way that the ‘business’ of governing is being done.

These inclusive and highly political approaches to social and political transformation offer inspiring and convincing alternatives to intersecting and oppressive forms of power and leadership. These are needed now more than ever.

‘Our political participation may look modest, but you have to understand the effort it takes to do what we do in a context where we are discriminated against, in economic crisis, with a lack of education and health services. We live in a state that is not our state. They ask us to create democracy and govern, but how are we supposed to do that when the very people who are asking us to do this built their wealth on the wealth of our people?’
Activist, Guatemala

‘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, young feminist activist at Women Deliver Global Conference

These alternative approaches are not only possible; they are already happening.

Now is the time to build on the powerful collective experience of the many women working outside and inside formal political spaces around the world; to nurture and grow more effective, intergenerational change that is rooted in the experiences and communities of those most affected by poverty, inequalities and conflict.

This means big shifts to the way we make decisions and do business, so that groups of people marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, citizenship status, class, age, sex, sexuality, gender identity, geography and health or marital status are not only represented, but are central to decision making.

All that is needed now is for donors, INGOs like Oxfam and development actors to recognize and provide safe, strong and long-term support for this growing voice and leadership. Donors, partners and allies must transform the ways in which we invest in the intersectional feminist activisms, approaches and practices that are enabling this radical revisioning of our shared future on a fragile planet.

In the sections that follow, we look at the development evidence and examples from both informal feminist activisms, organizing and movement building and from the clear impacts of feminists and their allies working intentionally in and alongside formal political structures and institutions to develop alternatives to the way decision making is done. As the evidence demonstrates, both are needed.
4. The power and impact of feminist organizations and movements

Women leaders working together are behind some of today’s most diverse and powerful movements to promote women’s rights, increase wellbeing and to improve our communities, economies, environmental and political landscapes – in homes, clinics, social movements, courtrooms and parliaments across the world.

‘The evidence is unequivocal that women organizing with other women is instrumental to their politicization, and solidarity, as well as their ability to exert the collective power and influence necessary to shift entrenched legal and social norms that marginalize women.’

Pilar Domingo and Tam O’Neil, Overseas Development Institute, Women’s Voice and Leadership in Decision-making: Assessing the Evidence

Oxfam’s most effective transformative feminist leadership partnerships and programmes have helped us to fundamentally rethink what we understand by leadership and power – recognizing that women’s activisms, leadership and experiences of organizing are born and mature in many different places: in church and savings groups; as first responders in emergency situations; in anti-racist, climate change, reproductive justice and land rights protests and movements; in young feminists organizing for radical change; in the work of community chiefs and parish elders; as well as in more visible, formal political processes.

Above all, this means that we explicitly focus on supporting collective, rather than individual, forms of activism, leadership and organizing across our work, in recognition of the clear added power of – and safety in – numbers.

Research covering 70 countries over 20 years confirms that the single most effective way to combat violence against women is to build strong feminist movements – a stronger contributing factor to progress in this area than either the economic health of a country or the political colour of its government. As we shall see in more detail later, feminist movements also work to support allies in formal positions of power to implement more inclusive agendas.

There are numerous examples of the impacts of women’s collective organizing at local and district levels. These remind us of the power and potential of political change happening outside of as well as within parliaments and councils – in spaces that are often undervalued and overlooked in the ‘big boys’ politics of mainstream governance programmes. These include:

- A cluster randomized control trial of the SASA! Raising Voices programme to assess the impact of a community mobilization intervention, with its firm focus on understanding power in order to prevent violence against women and reduce HIV risk, has seen physical partner violence rates that are 52% lower in participating communities than those in comparator groups. It also found that 27% of men in participating communities reported concurrent sexual partners compared to 45% of men in control communities.

‘SASA! has been an eye opener to us. It has really changed the way we do things... We are now organized on talking about power, the power imbalance, we are just not going, confusing the contributing factors and the causes of violence. Now we are concentrating on the real root causes of violence, which is power imbalance. So now our programming is very systematic... and well thought-out.’

Staff member, Women Against Rape, Botswana

- In Nepal, an evaluation of Oxfam and our local partner’s ‘Raising Her Voice’ gender and governance project found that 42% of nearly 2,000 women members of ‘community discussion centre’ classes reported feeling able to influence village and district development councils to allocate financial support for the promotion of women’s interests – compared to just 2% of respondents from comparator villages. As a result of their activism over three years, 87% of women surveyed also reported a change in the attitude and practice of local service providers – compared with just 3% from the comparator group (for more results, see Table 1). The results are even more powerful given the project’s explicit focus on support to the activism and leadership of women from ethnic Janajati (49%), Dalit (25%), Madhesi and Muslim minorities.
A 2020 review of progress in over 120 countries over the period 1975 to 2015 demonstrated that feminist movements contribute directly to women’s economic empowerment, finding 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, though action on sexual harassment takes time to manifest.’ The review also found that ‘feminist mobilization is associated with smaller gender wage gaps and, indirectly, is positively associated with improved access to land rights and women’s access to financial institutions, including access to their own bank accounts.’

An evaluation from the Global Fund for Women, one of the Dutch government’s early grantee partners in the €80m MDG3 ‘Funding Leadership and Opportunities Fund’ (FLOW) found that ‘transformational leadership and women’s empowerment programmes had led to securing women’s rights issues on the agenda in many governments at different levels.’
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In 2016, FRIDA | The Young Feminist Fund, Global Fund for Women, Oxfam and the Young Foundation piloted RootsLab – a programme built on feminist social innovation approaches to advance young women and trans youths’ rights, leadership and collective action.55

‘It made us feel capable, knowledgeable, revolutionary...’
Young feminist activist, RootsLab66

The pilot, run in Lebanon, supported a diverse group of over 40 young activists – and over 5,500 members of their respective communities – to dream, test and build bold new ideas for social change.57 Ten teams – most of whom had no previous access to formal funding – were ‘hosted’ by established women’s rights and feminist groups and were all part of a collective journey of technical support and connection through small grants, mentorship, group and tailored trainings. The ten feminist innovations supported include:

• EngnaLegna Besdet,58 which means ‘from us, to us [in a strange country]’ in Amharic, is a community group of young Ethiopian women supporting migrant women domestic workers in Lebanon from that same community, and has been pivotal in providing rapid response support to thousands of women domestic workers ejected from their places of work in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.59
• Research by Comics60 and Qomics61 use art to disseminate knowledge about feminism and queer representation, respectively.
• Nadeena62 created a gym for women piloted by young Syrian women. It served as a safe space for women, particularly Syrian refugee women, to come together and support each other’s wellbeing. Sport was used as an entry point for discussions on social issues and civic rights. As the RootsLab team wrote: ‘The energy created by both sports and discussions inspires the activists to sustain their work. They explain that this first experience of implementing their initiative has allowed them to gain insights and learnings, which they are eager to use in refining the design of their program, solidifying the relationships they have built, and growing the community that is starting to shape around Nadeena.’63

An external evaluation of the RootsLab project64 found:

• Its deliberate efforts to widen participation to include activists outside Beirut were critical to the project’s legitimacy and success – and to the participation of those feminist activists facing multiple forms of discrimination and silencing.
• A combination of diverse support and accompaniment approaches, drawing on over 60 partners, organizations and allies in the feminist movement, allowed teams’ ideas and projects to grow. Tailored support was provided through training and mentoring, as well as physical spaces, resources and networking. As one RootsLab activist said, ‘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.’65
• How we work matters – adopting strong feminist principles throughout allowed participants to lead and develop their ideas as equal agents of change. Although these approaches took more time and resources, they were essential to RootsLab’s success. They resulted in more solid initiatives that are already securing further support and funds with which to grow and deepen their impacts.
• Working collectively starts with individuals – the extent to which individuals were able to practice feminist principles and invest time in building relationships and self-care all contributed to the success of the programme.

‘RootsLab came at a time when there was a great desire and need to invest in collective work, and brought together many individuals, groups and organizations from the feminist scene. This is because 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. This is exactly what RootsLab has done...’
Sara Abou Ghazal, feminist activist and former Co-Director, the Knowledge Workshop66
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The humanitarian sector – with strong renewed focus and commitments to localization and partnerships under the Grand Bargain – is also increasingly able to demonstrate the clear impacts of more and better investment in local partnerships with women’s rights organizations and informal movements. These partnerships remind us again that supporting and including local women’s voices in the design of humanitarian and development responses results in more effective responses to the specific needs of women and girls in times of crisis.

In Pakistan, Women Leaders Group (WLG) members in flood affected areas emerged as a strong group of volunteers... putting forward immediate interventions to limit further loss of human life... and delivery of emergency food, medical supplies and other assistance to those in need. After the flood, these groups campaigned and advocated with the political leadership for an equitable reconstruction phase... identifying priorities and strategies. They also monitored relief efforts through frequent visits to the respective camps. Data about those affected was also used by government and INGOs to inform the formal humanitarian response. Raising Her Voice Project Completion Report, Oxfam

- Recent research from the Council on Foreign Relations concludes: ‘Women are more likely to raise social issues in peace negotiations that help societies reconcile and recover. Evidence suggests that women frequently raise issues in conflict resolution processes beyond military action, power-sharing arrangements, and territorial gains, instead introducing political and legal reforms, social and economic recovery priorities, and transitional justice concerns that can make agreements more durable.’

- For example, ‘women on Israeli and Palestinian technical committees in negotiations provide critical expertise on issues like water access and legal and human rights concerns... In Colombia, women negotiators successfully included provisions in the agreement on the rights of women, girls, and indigenous populations that sought to secure equal access to property for rural women, promote women’s political participation, create measures to prevent gender-based violence, and rebuke amnesty for crimes of sexual violence committed during the conflict.’

**BOX 4: CENTRING LOCAL INTELLIGENCE, PERSPECTIVES AND PRIORITIES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE EMERGENCY RESPONSES – GRASSROOTS WOMEN CRISIS RESPONDERS IN MOSUL**

‘Two years ago, when ISIS invaded the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, women mobilized immediately to set up emergency escape routes for human rights defenders and urgent humanitarian aid deliveries, even as large international aid agencies were pulling out of the danger zones. I was recently in Erbil, Iraq, to meet with some of these women.

I was struck by the gulf between their reality and the myths being perpetuated by some policy makers. With the north of their country still ruled by ISIS and the rest by a government that denies women basic rights, these activists planned strategies to keep their women’s shelters open and strong. They debated the best counselling methodologies for girls who were enslaved by ISIS and those who were abused in forced marriages condoned by the state. They honed communication tactics between nodes in the activist network they had built across Iraq, spreading a safety net to communities where no other aid reaches. They hammered out new security protocols because they know they are risking their lives every day to do this work.

Policy makers call these women service providers, but they are so much more. Woven into the strategizing in Erbil were debates over how to push for an end to violence against women – not just the violence of ISIS, but all of it. As an initial step, the women are campaigning locally and internationally to overturn the Iraqi government’s ban on the shelters they are currently forced to run illegally. And they’re winning; they’ve already generated unprecedented global pressure on the Iraqi government to change this law.’


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These examples – and the millions more from feminist activists, leaders and their organizations and movements across the globe – clearly demonstrate the power and value of women’s collective leadership. What’s more, this informal feminist organizing also plays a critical role in changing the terms of debate within formal male-shaped social and political systems and norms: for example, and perhaps most obviously, where women’s movements have also brought issues formerly seen as private (such as VAW and unpaid care work) into the public domain, and have changed attitudes, beliefs and social norms as a result.71 Deep structural and cultural change within the institutions that govern our lives cannot happen without this brave, often invisible, undervalued women’s work.

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

• In Egypt, 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 characterised 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.’72

• Research from Egypt, Jordan and South Africa respectively, indicates that ‘successful women’s coalitions are those that employ “soft advocacy” by harnessing existing networks, both informal relationships with male power-holders and established ties between elite women, and who strategically frame issues so as to circumvent conservative opposition.’73

• A 2018 study exploring data from 50 African countries found that ‘when domestic women’s organizations form a coalition for quotas within parliaments, governments are more likely to adopt them and do so more quickly. This correlation holds when controlling for international aid, involvement of international women’s movements, and whether countries recently emerged out of major armed conflict.’74 As the Mama Cash ‘Feminist Activism Works!’ review of global evidence clearly demonstrates, “these autonomous feminist movements “develop oppositional consciousness, imagine new forms of social organization, and mobilize broad societal action to generate understanding and support. They are essential to catalyzing the process of progressive social policy change and for its continuation.”75

In a development sector that often prioritizes a narrow, neoliberal focus on individual leadership and social entrepreneurship models,76 intentional support for collective activism (and the feminist movements that nurture and support them) needs to become a non-negotiable part of all future work seeking to promote gender equality. In a moment in history where development and global politics are dominated by the terrifying realities and demands of COVID-19, this is true now more than ever before.

‘... we will be astounded, even in this age of deep political and social divisions, by our capacity to reroute our lives, give and minister to disruption. The meaning of the term inter-independence is now on full display. Social cohesion, which we usually take for granted, is the platform that supports all of us.’ A Feminist’s Response to COVID-19, LiisBeth Editorial77

‘RootsLab never tried to teach us how to be the best at anything. On the contrary, they showed us how valuable it was to make space for the highest number of people possible. This was amazing. We were developing ourselves as individuals but we were benefiting everyone around us at the same time.’ RootsLab participant78

Fortunately, feminist activists and practitioners have created a wealth of learning and practical resources to guide donors and allies to make this shift. These include: FRIDA’s No Straight Lines resource for supporting young feminist organizing;79 the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN) briefing for INGOs, Solution or Part of the Problem?;80 AWID’s Toward a Feminist Funding Ecosystem;81 Creating Equitable South-North Partnerships from the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA);82 Oxfam’s own Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights Programme Framework;83 and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice’s Feminist Funding Principles.84

The inspiration, expertise and guidance for supporting and accompanying Southern feminist collective organizing contained in these practical tools provide us with a wealth of knowledge and power on which to build. These guides also remove any credible excuses for not trialling and embedding new and better, decolonized, feminist partnerships and ways of working throughout our future practice.
5. The power of feminist activists and leaders

This section focuses on the powerful impacts that women leaders and their allies have had when they have worked intentionally within and alongside formal political structures and institutions to shape and influence power and decision making. The examples below focus on the concrete gains made in mainstream development sectors – while recognizing the huge contributions that feminist leaders and allies have made in the better-documented priority areas of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and in sexual and reproductive and maternal health and services.

The evidence contributes to a strong case for more and better investment in the critical interconnections – often overlooked in development and governance thinking and working – between individual agency and leadership, the power of collective feminist and social justice organizing, and changes to the way structures and institutions shape what gets prioritized and where money is spent. Where this is done safely and effectively, we see enormous gains for the poorest and most excluded members of our societies.

More money, better spent and better local services

The evidence is clear that increasing women’s involvement, leadership and organizations in decision making results in better use of resources. For example:

- At local level, Indian 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, 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.

- Data from over 5,000 Brazilian local governments showed that increasing women’s participation in both electoral institutions and public administration (in particular as senior managers in city councils) increases the number of feminist policies, including services for victims of violence, participatory councils for women’s rights and daycare services.

- In Pakistan, 70% of the 1,500 women civil society, business, media and political activists supported through a district-level leadership project – part of Oxfam and local partner Aurat Foundation’s Raising Her Voice programme – reported securing direct investment for development schemes in their communities. These included skills training for divorced women with no income or family support; direct support for ID registration for unregistered women, who were otherwise unable to access services; and access to justice for survivors of violence.

- In La Esperanza, Honduras, long-term support and accompaniment by local women’s rights organizations saw women’s participation in community councils increase from 25% to 61%. ‘After a rocky start, the women’s audit committee on public budgetary transparency and expenditure gradually gained the trust of the men. They saw that the women, even though their level of literacy was limited, were actually asking good questions about the budget and following the money like bloodhounds. The women were gaining real power and influence.’

- Oxfam’s three-year AMAL programme found innovative ways to support 576 community organizations and accompany nearly 4,000 women activists in Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) to work with women in their communities to identify and act on local priorities. In Morocco, some 2,941 women from 500 newly formed community networks ‘converted’ their long engagement in informal community activisms into elected council seats in the September 2015 local elections. They took the community projects, campaigns and agendas they had supported with them into formal decision-making spaces and debates.

‘I stood as the first woman councillor in this area in order to defend women, but also because there were no women leaders. Rural women too have dreams and ambitions but they are not able to fulfil them. I also stood because I realised that I can achieve in politics what I can’t achieve in any other way – pushing for girls to go to school, for example, or sorting the many problems we have here with transport, where many women are crammed into small trucks for long periods of time just to get to work.’

Activist, Morocco

- New statistical evidence shows a correlation between greater representation of women in parliaments globally and increased health spending. This leads to improved health outcomes, including in areas prioritized by women such as maternal mortality.

- This is supported by recent research into government spending and population health in Canada’s ten provinces between 1976 and 2009, which further supports the hypothesis that women in government make real and substantive contributions to lower mortality rates. Four types of provincial government
spending correlating to lower mortality were identified in earlier research: medical care, preventive care, other social services and post-secondary education – all health-promoting expenditure areas that the researchers found to have been “triggered” by women in government.\textsuperscript{95}

- Women’s leadership in community forest management bodies also yields positive outcomes for both forest sustainability and gender equality.\textsuperscript{96} More recent additions to the evidence base comes from research in Indonesia, Peru and Tanzania, which suggests that “gender quotas make [collective forest management] interventions more effective and lead to more equal sharing of intervention benefits”.\textsuperscript{97} In a world where 2.5 billion people globally depend on indigenous and community lands but have legal title for just one-fifth of these, women’s participation in decisions about how these lands are used and cared for is critical for the rights, dignity, health, livelihoods and lands of present and future generations.\textsuperscript{98}

\textbf{WHY this matters: better-informed and more effective policies and decision making}

‘Through participatory processes, often involving the entire community, grassroots women assess their environment by analyzing their vulnerabilities and resources in relation to such issues as natural disasters, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and women’s access to land and housing. The information gleaned from mapping is used as a critical component in engendering sustainable, effective change.’

Huairou Commission\textsuperscript{99}

Evidence also shows that increasing women’s participation and influence in formal decision-making spheres results in better policy outcomes. This is because different groups of women bring different perspectives, lived experiences and expertise to decision-making processes and institutions that cannot be understood or represented in the same way by
male-only or male-dominated spaces. Similarly, the perspectives and expertise of groups and communities excluded by nature of their race, ethnicity, citizenship status, class, age, faith, sexuality and gender identity, disability and geography, health or marital status need to be brought as standard into the ways in which policies are assessed, designed and implemented.

The benefits of more inclusive, representative policy making are clear. These include:

• Analysis of 181 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 found that "peace 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." As community peacebuilders, but also as combatants and freedom fighters; as agents, negotiators and decision makers with unique and valuable perspectives on the meanings and realities of war and peace; and as holders of both visible and invisible power, the contributions of skilled women activists and leaders in shaping the terms and politics of complex peace processes are proving to be a necessary feature of their success and durability.

• In India, the National Planning Commission was expanded to include a Committee of Feminist Economists, which was officially mandated to engage in the preparation of the country’s Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–12). As a result, the Plan contained a much stronger analysis of the way in which mainstream economic policy could support more equal benefits for women and men – including in small-scale agriculture, which is a critical sector for India’s poorest families.

• An increase in women leaders in South Korea’s bureaucracy and government over 25 years led to greater media coverage of women’s issues, increased social welfare budgets and higher success rates of legislation being passed. An increase in women leaders in South Korea’s bureaucracy and government over 25 years led to greater media coverage of women’s issues, increased social welfare budgets and higher success rates of legislation being passed.

• The benefits of women’s leadership in the private sector are well documented. Although more needs to be done to convert a current focus on numbers into more diverse corporate working cultures and spaces for women to shape the terms of debate, methods are being tested and early gains made: ‘As well as having direct impacts on sustainable growth and profitability, more women on managerial teams has shown to boost the innovation capacity of their companies, especially when tackling complex issues. There is considerable evidence that women identify the critical new technologies, business models, new products, and services to meet consumer needs while also solving societal problems.’

• Research collated by the World Bank found that women’s representation in higher-income countries resulted in greater prominence of women’s rights issues – including violence against women, maternity leave and childcare – on government and media agendas.

‘For women to push for reforms and for their voices to be transformative, they need to be heard where decisions are made – in parlaments, legal institutions, formal professional associations, governments, legally recognized labor movements, land boards, zoning and planning committees and the like.’

World Bank, Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity
6. An end to male-shaped spaces: radically transforming decision-making structures

‘You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure. That means thinking about power differently. It means thinking collaboratively, about the power of followers as well as leaders.’

Mary Beard, Women and Power: A Manifesto

While the evidence shared in Section 4 reminds us that true transformation does not – and cannot – happen in parliaments alone, feminist activists throughout history have recognized that reforming societies and politics also requires more enabling political systems. Without these radical changes, the energies required to circumnavigate the male ‘shape’ of political systems and institutions designed to exclude women – and all groups of people structurally excluded from accessing power – will continue to cause exhaustion, burnout and fast exits.

‘At national level, including within political parties, discriminatory norms and practices persist in their exclusion of women from resources, spaces for training and education, and the discriminatory ways in which party policies are implemented. Many women have neither the power, money, connections nor networks to even enter the electoral race.’

Maritza Gallardo, Oxfam Honduras

There are clear limitations in an approach to women’s leadership in which ‘women’s political empowerment is equated with “sitting women at the table” […] Political participation is notorious for the obstacles presented to
challenging social norms and public perceptions of the value and legitimacy of women’s activisms, leadership and organizing. Campaigns like ‘Mas Mujeres al Poder’, a regional campaign led by Corporación Humanas or the Oxfam-supported Middle East and North Africa (MENA) ‘Time for Women to Lead’ campaign (see below) are an important part of shifting narratives and norms about the power and importance of women’s leadership and organizing.

Critically too, we need more male activists and leaders who are as good at listening to and representing the concerns of their communities and constituencies as the women leaders our programmes support. They need to be calling out sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia, discrimination and violence wherever they encounter it. Many already are – but we want and need many millions more standing in solidarity, so that hard-won gains are secured, protected and amplified.115

‘In terms of leadership, we’re leading well but with problems on land rights, women have no voice. [But] if we can use local cultural institutions, they can influence great changes… our clan developed a constitution with a lawyer advising us, and approving it. We set up good procedures for women who’ve been widowed… and for many other things.’

Male ally and clan elder, Uganda

The way that women are part of public dialogue and debate about the things that matter to them; the way that women see and use their votes; and the way that women are part of local politics and decision making also need to change. This is women’s business too.

More enabling environments for transformative feminist leadership

At present, women activists and leaders often have to adopt elements of male-shaped political culture, behaviours and ways of working in order to take their place at the table. While we cannot hold men and women...
leaders to different standards, we must recognize the distinctly masculine aspects of political culture in many parts of the world: the working hours; the nature of political debate; the huge cost of funding election campaigns independently of political parties; the lack of a positive vision among many political parties for the role of women members, activists and leaders; through to the design and accessibility of the buildings in which politics itself is carried out. These features are all still distinctly man-shaped. Thus, the culture, structure and the rules of the game also need radical reform.

The male shape of decision-making spaces and institutions globally are no accident. The following sections outline just some of the structural barriers preventing women activists, leaders, their organizations and movements from equal participation in the day-to-day decisions about what gets prioritized and where money is spent.

Repression and self-censorship

Women activists take tremendous risks when they exercise leadership, and when they oppose partners, relatives, communities and governments that fear the change they represent. Feminist fund Mama Cash interviewed 15 activist groups led by women and trans people working from a feminist perspective in 2017. ‘All groups reported that their organising has been restricted or repressed in ways that are related to the activists’ gender and/or because of the gendered-focused nature of their work. In addition, and significantly, the ways in which they are targeted are also gendered... and the use of sexualised violence to silence or intimidate them is a virtually universal experience.’

Religious, political, criminal, civil society and business groups have effectively used both overt and more subtle strategies to sideline and silence women. The threats and violence experienced by different groups of women activists and leaders take different forms, which reflect and reinforce intersecting structural discriminations on the basis of race, religion, class, age and sexuality, for example. In their homes, everyday campaigning and organizing, online and offline, and even on the steps of parliament, individually and collectively women activists and leaders around the world face an onslaught of abuse and violence designed explicitly to stop the status quo – the social and political norms relating to race, class or sex – from changing.

‘This patriarchal backlash is escalating globally. It aims to “other”, demonize and disempower those who seek to advance gender justice, and to re-value patriarchal traditional gender roles and stereotypes, founded on male supremacy and the subordination of women. It deploys a polarizing politics of mobilizing populist narratives which comingle misogyny, xenophobia and homophobia – and with scant regard for evidence or “truth”.’

Institute of Development Studies

Where the risk of violence against women speaking out is more obvious, some concerns from men come from genuine fears for the safety of their sisters, wives and daughters. However, restrictions imposed by family and communities on women’s mobility, to their ability to meet, vote, leave the house or speak out in public result in the same silencing of their experiences and voices. In fragile, conflict-affected and heavily censored political spaces, this situation risks becoming a vicious cycle of violence and silence, censorship and self-censorship.

‘I wanted to change the world but I couldn’t find a babysitter...’

Women spend between two and ten times more time than men on unpaid care and domestic work. This represents a significant barrier to their meaningful participation in life outside the home. In order for this to shift at all, the rules of the game need to change in ways that recognize, reduce and redistribute women’s unpaid care and domestic work. This needs to happen at all levels – in households, communities, council halls, social movements and in parliamentary assemblies.
'Intersecting forms of discrimination mean that women from disadvantaged groups are less likely to have the capabilities and resources necessary for political influence – such as the money or connections to fund and win election campaigns or to pay for domestic help or childcare so that they can take on responsibilities outside the home.'

Overseas Development Institute, Women’s Voice And Leadership In Decision-Making: Assessing the evidence.

Some evidence of this shift can already be seen in decisions being made about care infrastructure, policies and services around the world. For example, in the Philippines, Oxfam has worked with local organizations to support local government officials in promoting unpaid care in municipal budgeting and planning. Eight municipalities have since passed formal ordinances on unpaid care, including the ‘WE-Care ordinance’ in Salcedo and the GAD Code in Tacloban City. These include laws that make it mandatory to generate data and address unpaid care in all planning, budgeting and programming activities – including housing and land use, community-based conflict resolution, access to care-supporting infrastructure and services, and programmes to help women enter the labour market. In the UK, as more male MPs who have grown up sharing family care responsibility come into parliament, they are proving to be valuable allies to the women MPs who have long been calling for a more accessible, family-friendly parliamentary working culture.

COVID-19 has dramatically increased the hours women in many countries now spend on unpaid household and community care work. This further restricts the time and space available to women worldwide to participate in or shape the decisions that affect the lives of their families and communities in these times of health and socio-economic crisis. A recent survey of national COVID-19 emergency responses found that just 9 of 30 countries (30%) had increased support for childcare during the crisis. The report’s authors also reflected that ‘given the unprecedented increase in home care work due to school and childcare facility closures, it is surprising that this issue has not featured more prominently in many country’s responses.’

Shifting the rules of the game as dramatically as is necessary will clearly prove hard to do. For example, in September 2017, the UK government rejected all six proposals from a parliamentary review aimed at tackling the structural barriers to British women’s meaningful participation in national decision-making structures and processes. The recommendations included that the government set a firm target of 45% representation of women in parliament and local government by 2030, and that parties be required by law to publish their parliamentary candidate diversity data. While positive steps have since been made, most are still not legislated for and have therefore depended on significant amounts of creativity – the ‘political unpaid care work’, perhaps – by internal champions working within the system to reform it.

But across the world, feminist organizations have developed creative ways to challenge and change male-shaped leadership institutions, cultures and norms. On International Women’s Day 2018, for example, the Ugandan Women’s Network, Uganda Women Parliament Association, Oxfam, Action for Development and the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Uganda) brought together over 100 newly elected women MPs (including directly elected MPs and women MPs provided for under constitutional provisions to ensure greater gender equality) for a three-day National Women’s Conference. The conference, organized just months into parliament’s new term, set the tone for a new and powerful collective relationship focused explicitly on ‘sustaining women’s calls for parity on the policy agenda’. The sessions were aimed at giving women parliamentarians space to prepare a collective strategy through which to ‘take advantage of their position and numbers to influence the passing of gender-sensitive legislation and resource allocation’ as well as identifying ways in which they might work together to change the institutional culture. These included commitments to increase the number of women in leadership at all levels to at least 50%, increased funding for the Ugandan Human Rights Commission, and acknowledgement of the importance of platforms and spaces for orientation, knowledge, experience-sharing, capacity development and networking in advancing women’s leadership within parliamentary spaces.

Money talks

‘The neo-liberal rules for the new woman citizen... are quite clear: improve your household’s economic condition, participate in local community development (if you have the time), help build and run local (apolitical) institutions like the self-help group; by then, you should have no political or physical energy left to challenge this paradigm...’

Srilatha Battliwala and Deepa Dhanraj, Gender Myths that Instrumentalise Women: A View from the Indian Frontline
While ‘women’s economic participation is seen as an important entry point to foster women’s leadership and political participation... Interlocutors mentioned that in the current context of fragility and increased economic instability, the acceptance of women’s participation in the public sphere is primarily economically and instrumentally driven rather than values driven, not because the male “accepts and is avant-garde, but because he can’t afford to support a family on his own”.’

Oxfam, Moving from Individual to Collective Change for Women’s Participation in Lebanon, Jordan and Kurdistan Region of Iraq133

On both an individual and collective level, the realities of women’s care responsibilities and lack of financial autonomy impact heavily upon their ability to participate sustainably in locally led organizing or development project activities. This has a direct impact on their ability to take up positions of community or political leadership.

Research carried out into women’s collective action as part of an Oxfam Women’s Economic Empowerment project in Tanzania, Mali and Ethiopia found that ‘one common element among the three studied contexts is that higher household wealth (an aggregate indicator of durables and livestock, but excluding land) is positively associated with (community) group membership’.135

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The 2015 ODI assessment of the evidence found that ‘Women’s personal economic power also matters in relation to public influence. Women have less political power and credibility in patronage-based polities because they are less likely to have the resources required of powerful patrons. Women are concentrated in low-paid jobs and own less property, are less likely to occupy the senior positions that give them access to patronage resources (e.g. appointments, decisions that can be traded), and are more likely to be excluded from male-dominated networks through which to obtain access to finance.’136

The same is true for the significant impact of funding and financing on the effectiveness and sustainability of women’s rights and feminist organizations and movements. The costs involved, for community groups and national coalitions alike, to convene meetings, run activities and support women’s participation and attendance – particularly in a sector where stipends and childcare provision are so rarely costed into programme budgets – also impact heavily on the likelihood of these spaces and initiatives continuing to function once funding comes to an end.

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To be effective, programmes and humanitarian responses need to see political and economic gains for women as deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. To realize and sustain these gains, donor partners and allies of transformative feminist leadership approaches must therefore build in resources to remove both the immediate economic barriers to women’s participation and organizing – while investing in the structural changes required to the way in which women individually and collectively access and control land, credit and assets. While the financial and institutional barriers to women’s participation and leadership are deeply rooted – particularly those that exclude Women of Colour, migrant and refugee women, women from minority ethnic and religious groups, indigenous women, women with disabilities, young women, elderly women, trans and gender non-conforming women – we know it can be done.

The examples in this paper – which are just a small snapshot of the work of feminist organizations and movements worldwide – show that slowly but surely, alternatives are being trialed and tested. Change is taking place.
7. An end to male-shaped development – integrating the principles and practices of transformative feminist leadership across our sector

‘Good luck with that. Political economy analysis [PEA] is a boys’ toy. PEA-types will resist anything that sullies the elegance of their models. I remember speaking to a researcher who had studied the political economy of maternal mortality who concluded that gender wasn’t relevant to the analysis. Where do you start?’

Political economy analysis practitioner, blog comment, 2018

Transformative feminist leadership approaches are required across sectors so that the diversity of women’s expertise and experiences shapes policy priorities and the distribution of resources and power across development interventions – not just in civil society, education, health and social infrastructure and services, where much of global development spend on gender equality is currently focused.

The participation and leadership of women, their organizations and movements in the ‘big boy’ decisions about how services are provided, taxes are raised and spent, infrastructure investments are prioritized, defence and security decisions are shaped, and emergency responses are delivered are all central to the kinds of systemic change needed to address the intersecting root causes of global poverty and gender inequality.

However, across sectors, this consideration is still largely absent from the design and funding of large-scale development interventions.

For example, a 2016 analysis of 31 sub-Saharan African National Adaptation Programmes of Climate Action (NAPAs) found 10 of 31 to be completely gender-unaware – and none included an in-depth analysis of gender issues. When they did mention gender, there was a strong tendency to depict women purely as victims: ‘This ignorance of the interplay between gender and adaptation influences the kind of NAPA interventions designed, their effectiveness and their impact, both on adaptation as well as on gender equality outcomes.’

A recent CARE survey of 30 national COVID-19 crisis committees found that men’s representation was, on average, 76%. While all of the countries sampled had introduced at least one measure intended to support low-income and/or other vulnerable populations, just five had announced funding to support the specific ways that COVID-19 has affected women economically. In a 2020 Oxfam survey of 222 women’s rights and feminist organizations exploring the impact of COVID-19 on their work, 59% of respondents noted that COVID-19 travel restrictions made it more difficult to access key policy and decision-making spaces. In addition to the logistical challenges of accessing these spaces, 33% of respondents also noted that they are not invited to be part of these conversations because they are ‘not perceived as key stakeholders in response and recovery efforts.’

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?

Much has been learned about integrating more transformative approaches into mainstream development programming in ways that bring together the best of thematic, technical expertise and intersectional feminist analysis and approaches. Throughout this paper we share powerful examples from community level to national and regional organizing and influencing.

It is clear: the voices, expertise, priorities and experiences of women activists, leaders, their organizations and movements must now be a central part of determining the way in which policies are prioritized, resources distributed and power used. This means working with women and their organizations as active and equal agents, not passive, beneficiaries, in all development, business, security and humanitarian interventions and investments.

For donors, partners and allies, this means long-term partnerships with women’s rights organizations and Southern feminist technical expertise so that their work is made even more visible, effective and sustainable. And so that we too do not miss critical perspectives with which to shape effective and lasting solutions to the problems we face together.

There are countless examples to guide us of technical skill-building initiatives that centre feminist voices and expertise in global debates. These include: FEMNET’s annual African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy; the Women’s Environment and Development Organization’s Control, Disaster Resilience and Local Governance for Women’s Innovations in Land Ownership and Property Commission’s resources documenting Grassroots international treaties and trade agreements currently. We ignore women’s experiences and skills at our peril, missing opportunities for more practical, thoughtful, inclusive and ultimately more impactful development work. However, the long-term development of thematic, technical skills and capacities that women activists and leaders and their organizations and movements need in order to access, hold and employ power safely and effectively are not those usually prioritized in development or leadership programmes.

Addressing this requires dedicated funding:

- to nurture and mature technical expertise and political influencing skills in the many spaces and places where women are organizing together – not just in elected positions;
- to support the retention of elected women leaders, not just the pre-election campaign work to secure greater representation in numbers;
- for initiatives like the ‘Time for Women to Lead’ and ‘Mas Mujeres al Poder’ that challenge and change public perceptions that women cannot lead, demonstrating the intrinsic value and legitimacy of women’s brave and diverse activism and leadership; and
- core funds over sustained periods to the women’s rights organizations and movements whose survival will determine whether or not our sector is able to centre our work in the experiences of those most impacted by poverty and intersecting structural inequalities.

Once again, the resources to support exist in feminist spades! These include formal training and mentorship schemes – often prioritizing the leadership of those with limited formal literacy, those rooted in communities outside of city capitals – and, critically too, support to the creative and radical activisms and organizing of young feminists.

These resources range from long-established programmes by activist–educators like CREA’s Feminist Leadership, Movement Building, and Rights Institute; Akina Mama wa Afrika’s flagship African Women’s Leadership Institute; JASS’s Alquimia Feminist School; the Huairoom Commission’s Grassroots Academies and the Women’s Learning Partnership’s Grassroots Workshops; to local government strengthening tools like the UK government’s Twenty-First Century Councils: Enabling and Supporting Women, Parents and Carers to Stand and Serve in Local Government.

Programme-specific training approaches, like those built into Oxfam’s livelihoods and governance programmes in Burundi, Nepal and Yemen respectively, have also helped to support more feminist leadership approaches.
in mainstream development interventions.\textsuperscript{161} A wealth of toolkits in multiple languages also support the global transfer of feminist knowledge, skills and collective action among activists and their organizations – including powerful resources in Amharic, Arabic, Portuguese and Hindi.\textsuperscript{142}

**What’s required?**

There are no more excuses. We know what needs to change and how we start to make this shift together. The feminist evidence, knowledge and resources are all there. All that’s required is the first step – the interest, intention and desire to look at things differently – and the ambition to decolonize the way we as individuals, organizations and as a sector, do this in partnerships with others.

As donors, partners and allies, the speed of meaningful progress will only increase when we start to demand it of ourselves and our partners. This requires parallel and well-publicized divesting from global programmes, partnerships and political structures that fail to include women’s rights organizations and movements in their analysis and design – and that do not meaningfully rethink what their sectors look like for the diversity of the women whose lives they claim to benefit.

Shifts here are particularly urgent within the sectors that historically have been least open to working with intersectional feminist analysis and practice. These include the heavily male-dominated, wealth-creating sectors of public finance, security and defence, climate policy and financing, and the infrastructure, agriculture and extractives industries.

‘For things to change we need to ensure that women are elected and on local council committees. But we also need to elect them as Chairs of the most powerful committees such as finance, as well as the committees like social affairs that are more usually considered a female preserve.’

Male activist and ally, Morocco\textsuperscript{143}

‘Instead of monitoring expenditure of the 2% of municipal budget allocated to women, members of local women’s networks in Honduras are now re-focussing monitoring on the entirety of the municipal budget – looking more strategically, and more politically, at the way local resources are allocated and spent. This includes... taking their analysis of municipal budgets to the Supreme Court of Auditors to support... its [own] audit of national Mayors’ Offices.’

Raising Her Voice project completion report, Oxfam\textsuperscript{164}

This is particularly crucial in humanitarian responses\textsuperscript{165} and in our sector’s work in fragile and conflict contexts, where the exclusion of women in peacebuilding work is well documented.\textsuperscript{146} This requires a fundamental shift from thinking of a homogenous group of ‘women’ predominantly as ‘recipients’ or ‘victims’, on whose behalf development needs doing, to more mature conflict analyses and theories of change that understand the intersectional, gendered dimensions of conflict and the complex roles that women too play.\textsuperscript{147} This also requires more inclusive discussions and agreement on what ‘peace’ means in each context. This means, for example, greater attention to how we support the participation of women in all their diversity in the more contested political project of post-conflict nation-building – not just in the peacebuilding process that precedes it.

Recent research by the Council on Foreign Relations, for example, is clear on the positive impacts of women’s participation in shaping the prioritization of public funds to support post-conflict nation-building: ‘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, healthcare services, clean drinking water, and judicial systems.’\textsuperscript{168}

In Yemen... ‘women in villages were taking these literacy classes plus REFLECT [training] and the women I met were wanting to have more of this. They were saying incredible things, wanted their rights, were just tired of men undermining them. We had plans for these CB0s [community-based organizations] to start designing even their own initiatives that we could fund through AMAL. This is how women’s leadership should be encouraged, and how you can change culture/ society. It was really very promising, there was a potential to have real women’s leadership there. It was part of the re-arrangement of the program that we did together. And then the war happened, after we were happy with these first small steps.’

Cited in Michael Drinkwater et al., Final Evaluation of the AMAL Programme.\textsuperscript{169}

*How we work matters: the importance of walking the talk*

‘Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking so that humanity stops threatening its life support system. We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds. And in the process, heal our own... In the course of history there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness. To reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now.’

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 2004\textsuperscript{170}
The many examples referenced in this paper capture and celebrate just some of the powerful potential of feminist leadership and decision making. Not one of them happened by accident. Women’s rights activists and leaders know that working to tackle deep, systemic exclusion requires an explicit desire to do so.

“It is intriguing that a single word, “transformational” had such an indelible impact on AMAL [an Oxfam women’s political leadership programme in Yemen, OPT, Morocco and Tunisia]. It caused all partners, including the AMAL Innovation Fund grantees, to look at the familiar words, “women’s leadership” through new lenses, and thus to develop some less-familiar ways of encouraging and nurturing women to become leaders in ways that would truly challenge patriarchy and lead to some fresh opportunities for fulfilling women’s rights through advancing their political leadership.’

Michael Drinkwater et al., Final Evaluation of the AMAL Programme

As Srilatha Batliwala and feminist human rights organization CREA’s ground-breaking leadership work clearly shows, programmes and policies seeking to contribute to more transformative change need to be intentional not only about their end goal – their purpose – but also the politics and principles with which they work – and the practice of power with which they themselves act and lead.

It is not always the case that women’s rights organizations and networks that partner to promote gender justice or women’s leadership share the same end goals and politics. This can impact on the ability of joint programmes to work in more transformative feminist ways. Where this is true, being clear on the shared purpose and feminist principles is critical – as are donor support and resources for all those involved to purposefully build coherence and coordination.

This also requires funding for organizational and collective spaces for feminist activists, leaders and their organizations and movements to think and reflect together; to challenge each other safely; and to learn together across generational, geographic, gendered, race, class, caste and religious divides – recognizing that how we work is as important as what we do.

We are fortunate that feminist activists and organizations are also creating a growing body of practical guidance for this important *internal* work of transforming our collective approaches to feminist leadership and intersectional movement building.
How transformative feminist leadership is challenging inequalities and the root causes of extreme vulnerability.

For donors, partners and allies whose core work is not explicitly aligned behind a feminist agenda, establishing a shared purpose and agreeing areas where political coherence can – and can’t – be found is critical for the honesty, legitimacy and effectiveness of partnerships. Making the necessary time and space to agree theories of change, and establish shared feminist partnership principles and ways of working with all partners is also essential – so that future collaborations are not later undermined by operational contradictions and inequalities in the balance of power. Numerous resources exist to guide this accompaniment work by donors, partners and allies.

Being explicit about the safety of the ‘disruptors’ we work with

Finally, in this work of challenging and changing institutions, systems and cultures, a transformative feminist approach needs to ensure the safety and security of the diverse women activists, leaders, their organizations and movements that we work alongside, as far as is possible.

‘At local level violence is exercised... to either keep women confined in private spaces or, if they are able to take up public roles, define and constrain those roles (to those lacking power and influence). This impedes any substantial progress for women who, particularly for those who are poor, rural and Indigenous, have to struggle against multiple forms of discrimination and violence not only in the home but in the public arena. In a world where men command and women obey, many women rarely dare to participate in political issues.’

Maritza Gallardo, Oxfam Honduras

As Purna Sen reflected in the ‘Above the Parapet’ study into women’s leadership, in a world where for many women even the act of stepping into the public sphere is in itself an act of disruption, we need to be explicit about supporting the safety of those ‘disruptors’ with whom we work.

BOX 5: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO FEMINIST LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIA

PEKKA, an Indonesian organization, provides an inspiring vision of what work with an intentional feminist purpose looks and feels like. Established in late 2000, PEKKA began as a collection of financial savings groups for women heads of household, who face severe discrimination, marginalization and high levels of poverty. It used a holistic feminist model to reach beyond savings groups to build women’s collective power and transformative leadership. Its strategies include:

- providing safe spaces for its 30,000 members so that women can share their stories, talk about challenges they face and get support from their peers;
- developing women’s collective leadership skills and capacities, including alternative ways to communicate, confront and use power;
- creating safe forums for women to take part in dialogue with government officials at village, district and national levels; and
- encouraging the network to work collectively and bring together women from very different backgrounds across different movements and agendas.

‘Participatory democracy and leadership does, inevitably, create clashes and internal conflict – people always resist doing things differently. Some want to take control, which is why we have a leadership change every three years. That’s our role as organizers in PEKKA, supporting this growing grassroots movement of women – to develop and support new kinds of leadership and to build women’s capacity to manage conflict, basic business and planning skills, and then, gradually, how to use their collective power to influence local and even national politics.’

Nani Zulminary, founder of PEKKA

Women take part in a rally Biona Ranja village in India, demanding the right to be recognised for the work that they do. Photo: Rajendra Shaw/Oxfam
Feminist and trans rights organizations and networks are working to prevent this violence, standing alongside and supporting women activists and leaders so that they can keep speaking out in safety. Around the world, activists and organizations are finding innovative ways to respond head-on, through: financial planning; physical and digital security measures; self-care; filing lawsuits in response to office raids; public exposure of defamation campaigns; and advocating for laws that protect women candidates and voters from political violence.


Lyrics of the song Un Violador en tu Camino (A Rapist in Your Path) by Colectivo Las Tesis, a feminist artistic group performing in Chile.

The evidence shows that the experience of solidarity and group cohesion that comes through participating in activist spaces is doubly important in countries where states apply a “divide and rule” strategy as part of their efforts to close space for dissent… and fragment civil society. Thus, as Mama Cash reminds us: ‘The message from activists is clear: it is crucial that donors continue — and increase — funding for this work in difficult contexts.’

As donors, partners and allies, we have a collective responsibility to recognize, plan and properly resource the work required to respond to the reality that intersecting forms of violence against those that disrupt the status quo is a given — not an abstract ‘possible’ risk logged in a proposal annex or organizational risk register.

Violence and the threat of violence against women in public spaces is real, and becoming increasingly vicious. Indeed, as the economic, social and psychological impacts of COVID-19 add yet more pressure on women’s lives — and on the helplines, shelters and services already struggling to support them — soaring incidences of violence against women are being recorded right across the world.

And yet, a recent study by CARE of women’s participation in COVID-19 Emergency Response Committees in 30 countries found that ‘54% of countries surveyed have taken no action on (gender-based violence) that CARE could find’. In the UK, cuts in specialist BAME women’s VAWG services and wider austerity measures have undermined policy gains made elsewhere to protect women from violence.

We will surely cause harm if we fail to acknowledge this fact properly and change how we work as a result. All work to ensure that the full diversity of women’s voices inform and shape our everyday development work therefore needs to have parallel commitments and resourcing for their safety.

Again, there are numerous tried and tested, practical examples of how we might do this in practice. Oxfam’s Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights Global Programme Framework, for example, reminds Oxfam programme staff that: ‘This will require a small but specific budget in every project to ensure the safety of women activists, leaders and human rights defenders who may be threatened even more because they participate in our programmes. This budget should be used creatively and according to local contexts with, for example, personal and digital security training; support and services for women at risk; spaces for peer advice and strategizing; small contingency funds; and, strong policy positions that provide guidance in emergency cases.’

**BOX 6: AN EXTRACT FROM ‘NO STRAIGHT LINES, A FRIDA RESOURCE FOR INGOS AND DONORS SUPPORTING YOUNG FEMINIST ORGANISERS’**

- Prioritize the security of data: ask groups for their consent in publishing their photos or information. Furthermore, be conscious that information is power, and that activists need to be informed about what funders are doing with their data, as it is theirs – they own it!
- FRIDA tries to consider implications of providing information to many different audiences including the general public, auditors, and other funders. When we are unsure, we ask Young Feminist Organisers (YFOs) what they think.
- Speaking of security, support YFOS to access flexible or specific funding for holistic security, and to link with key funders who prioritise this work such as the Urgent Action Funds for Women Human Rights. This is important in times of emergency but also outside of it as all activists need resources to prepare, heal, recover, and build overall resilience.
- Try to really listen, operate from a place of humility and self awareness – and be more willing to take risks, as activists do every day.’

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the transformations described in this paper to take root in any significant way, we need a wholesale shift in donor and INGO accompaniment to and funding for intersectional, transformative feminist leadership work. This needs to prioritize solidarity, resources and support for the activists, organizations and movements leading these efforts.

The underfunding of women’s rights organizations and feminist movements is not an accident. It is a symptom both of a lack of political interest by the 75%-male decision makers that lead our global institutions – and much of the development sector’s colonial legacy of resistance to sharing resources with the Southern activists and movements calling for truly radical political, economic and social change.

And all this despite the overwhelming evidence of women’s positive impacts on outcomes related to short- and long-term recovery, peace and stability.

“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]189

Feminist funders and women’s funds have long recognized the power of feminist activations and movements to resist intersecting and oppressive forms of power. Organizations like FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund, Mama Cash, the Urgent Action Fund, Akina Mama wa Afrika and the African Women’s Development Fund, Kvinna till Kvinna, International Women’s Development Agency and Womankind Worldwide, MADRE and the Global Fund for Women, supported by collaborations like the Count Me In! initiative191 and progressive donors like the Open Society Foundations and Nova Foundation, have all used their money to open space for the protection of feminist politics and values, human rights and dignity across the world. Together, they are trialling radical ways of disrupting and transforming the system by researching, fundraising, communicating and funding in more effective, feminist ways.192 New funds have been established or adapted to respond to the particular challenges for feminist organizing posed by COVID-19.193

These sector-leading funders are being joined by a new group of donors that also see transformative feminist leadership and collective action as critical to their understanding of how change happens. These include Melinda Gates’ recent $1bn commitment to expand women’s power and influence in the US;193 the Canadian government’s Women’s Voice and Leadership Fund;196 the Swedish International Development Agency funded ‘Countering the Backlash’ research programme;195 the recent $20m joint investment by four US foundations in global women’s funds;198 the Feminist Open Government Initiative research fund;197 and Comic Relief’s ‘Power Up’ movement-building fund. The UK Department for International Development’s 2018 Strategic Vision for Gender Equality’s new fifth pillar on women’s political empowerment is an important global contribution too, centring as it does women’s voice and leadership as foundational to progress in other pillars.198

These new initiatives – and the learning that will come from them – represent valuable stepping-stones towards a more feminist financing future. However, this donorship can and must use its incredible ‘Power To…’ to do and demand so much more.

Recommendations

Building the alliances and our collective capacities to make the changes needed to the systems and institutions through which decisions are made at every level is not a quick fix. This is, after all, about fundamentally disrupting and rebalancing power in both our global governance systems and institutions – and in the international aid ecosystem that interweaves so closely with them.

There are numerous easy, more immediate opportunities for impactful anti-racist, feminist partnerships available for those with the intention and will to find them, but this requires a parallel process and politics of longer-term vision, planning, and commitments of support and investment. It also requires the openness and ability to do things differently, and a will to decolonize and radically transform our development and operational systems and staffing to support this.

The recommendations below build entirely on clear and consistent appeals from 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. These include powerful guides from FRIDA, AWID, GADN, Community for Understanding Scale Up (CUSP), WILPF and IWDA.199 We note them here again simply to re-emphasize what has become impossible to ignore if governments, donors and organizations like
Oxfam are to continue to claim to be genuine partners in global efforts for racial, gender, climate and social justice. Where possible, we share concrete examples of what our own behind-the-scenes efforts to respond to these calls more effectively have required from us – and how the results and learning from this experience are already making for better, richer feminist partnerships.

Donors, partners and allies must:
In partnerships:
• Recentre the deep knowledge that comes from the lived experience of women – especially Women of Colour. Recognize that our development solutions and humanitarian responses have to respect and centre the diversity and depth of women’s intelligence, agency and organizing in order to have any chance of being either effective or sustainable.
• 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’ 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. Bring the expertise of ‘unusual’ local feminist partners into consortia in ways that work for them.
• Include time and resources for both process and content learning – and for cross-movement-building work in all proposals. These precious and rarely funded spaces enable those at the frontlines of community organizing and influencing to step back, rest, reflect... and to keep developing ways of working and collaborations that are more likely to be safe, effective and sustainable.
• Where local organizations’ own priorities and capacities do not match what is required, collaborate with feminist technical specialists who are able to share their knowledge while growing and accompanying the evolution of local women’s rights organizations’ analysis and activisms on their own terms.
• Listen to and 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 test and replicate more feminist ways of working.200
• 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.

BOX 7: THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS
Donors and INGOs have immense power when they partner locally. We need to recognize that partnership selection is in itself a political act, and get better at centring feminist organizations and movements in the way we design, fund and deliver our work.

As AWID puts it: ‘INGOs should provide resources (including financial resources) for [women’s rights organizations and movements] to be able to conduct their core work, not just projects. Pay people for their labour; if your organisation is using the work, expertise or images of people in the local community ensure they are reimbursed. Include this in your fundraising.’201

This is particularly important with the growth of more apolitical women’s rights organizations. This includes both those that rely so heavily on donor funding that they cannot work outside of narrowly defined projects, using ‘NGO-ized’ approaches to gender equality,202 and women’s rights organizations set up by anti-rights, government, religious and private sector groups to deliberately close and confuse the space.203

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 organization 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 more agile, partner-led collaborations and core organizational support costs.
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- Confirm and publish how much development spend actually goes to transformative women’s rights programming.
- Bring partners into our governance and decision-making spaces about how funds are spent.

**BOX 8: TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINIST LEADERSHIP COMMITMENTS**

From analysis carried out in 2019 by Oxfam in the UK, ‘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.

With a gender-transformative approach:

- Insist on intersectional gender 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 increase support for collaborations between 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’) 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.
How transformative feminist leadership is challenging inequalities and the root causes of extreme vulnerability.

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.

**BOX 10: TRANSFORMATIVE FEMINIST LEADERSHIP ACCOMPANIMENT IN PROGRAMME PRACTICE**

“As much as the concrete tools, resources and support were valued, much of the positive feedback about the RootsLab model relates to the way in which these were provided – considered by local partners to be almost as important as the resource inputs themselves. The strong feminist principles and agile, responsive approach that the project team and local partners integrated into the way they worked with RootsLab teams has been greatly valued by all those involved. However, this has taken significant amounts of extra time, labour, creativity, and patience on the part of our Lebanon project team to deliver. Practicing our [RootsLab] feminist values has translated into inclusive and collective work, which the evaluator has described as “an accomplishment... in the Lebanese context of women’s rights and feminist organizing”. It also meant eliminating barriers to entry and participation, adopting easy and accessible processes of application and implementation, adapting the project to the needs and realities of all partners, being available for accompaniment and support, providing child care for mothers, and seeking to eliminate unpaid labour, and most importantly, bringing in participants as equal partners and agents of change rather than beneficiaries.

This has constituted a huge endeavour in terms of involving everybody in participatory decision-making processes, but is a necessary one for a project that upholds feminist principles.”

Throughout this paper we have seen how a diversity of women’s voice and power is already leading to systemic changes in both policy and practice. Support for Southern feminist activisms and leadership must be inclusive of women’s informal collective leadership and organizing as well as formal political leadership at all levels. It must be led by women themselves – by the feminist activists, organizations and networks with the knowledge, expertise, experience and commitment required for the long-term work of transformative change. This requires more and better partnership, leadership, investment and accountability from donors and development actors across sectors. It needs to be done safely, in recognition of the intersecting forms of violence that women, queer and trans ‘disruptors’ face when speaking out.

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, and 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. We need to see women worldwide supported to lead and to model new ways of leading. It is also time for men with power to work with women to open up our public and political spaces, to transform decision making into a more inclusive, just and effective endeavour.

It is time too, therefore, for more and better investment to strengthen our accompaniment to the diversity of women activists, leaders and feminist organizations and movements. This will ensure that the thoughtful, inclusive debates and decisions that we need for a fairer and more sustainable, shared future are equally informed by the intelligence, expertise and perspectives of women all over the world.

The benefits of transformative feminist leadership are hard to ignore. Increasingly, unapologetically, women in every country are coming together to organize, fundraise and strategize in kind, creative, revolutionary and fierce ways to demand change. It is time now for donors and all international development actors to recognize, celebrate, support, promote and fund their work.
Endnotes
(All links last accessed June 2021, unless otherwise specified)


2 Author’s notes – Women’s Leadership Programme project visit report, 2015.

3 The term ‘gender’ is used to refer to a hierarchical social structure, an internal sense of identity and as a synonym for sex. For the purposes of this paper, the term is defined as ‘the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female’ and the relationship between them, which determine ‘what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context’ and are socially constructed and learned through socialization. (From: Oxfam’s Gender Mainstreaming for Transformative Development guidance note. I Smyth for Oxfam with inputs from R. Soares Pinto, R. Garwood, and S. Barakati.)


9 Oxfam’s model of change aims for the transformation of power inequalities and abuses that cause poverty and inequality through a combination of active citizen and effective states. We strengthen the role of active citizens by helping to build the capacity of organizations we work with, with a particular focus on women’s leadership, and influencing attitudes concerning gender roles. See Oxfam Global Strategic Framework 2020–2030: Fight Inequality. Together, We Can End Poverty and Injustice. https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2020-11/GSF%202020-2030_ENG_FINAL_0.pdf


15 Defined within Oxfam as ‘Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights’ (TLWR), transformative feminist leadership is a key area of work for many feminist organizations and movements, women’s rights movements, INGOs and donors globally. Elements of transformative feminist leadership are also included in work on women’s political empowerment and women’s participation and leadership, but each has important differences and nuances in feminist, transformative scope and politics. Oxfam’s TLWR work is part of our wider ambition to promote leadership for women’s rights and gender equality by all: by men and women, mixed organizations and institutions, as well as by women’s rights movements and activists.


17 The limited research into the effectiveness of feminist leadership approaches and programming reflects general disinterest in – and resistance to – truly challenging gendered inequalities and imbalances of power. It also poses a significant barrier for feminist activists seeking to demonstrate the power and potential of what they do and how they do it. A 2015 assessment of the evidence on women’s voice and leadership in decision making by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) found that ‘the body of evidence is relatively small, particularly on support to girls’ leadership, and is largely grey literature written or commissioned by... NGOs as advocates or programme implementers... A minority of studies apply analytical rigour, exploring what leadership means and establishing (and testing) assumptions about how it might be developed and/or the relationship between women’s leadership and other things (e.g. women’s power, their influence, changes in policy, services or social norms, etc.). These more analytically sophisticated pieces are mostly academic, although there are some notable exceptions in the grey literature... Qualitative methods are most common in project evaluations, with quantitative
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methods relatively scarce and only one identified use of experimental design. In the assessment’s conclusions, the authors recommend: ‘More research is needed on the processes through which women are able to influence public decision-making. More cross-country evidence is needed about the factors that explain when and how women coalitions, women politicians and other types of women leaders [including women leaders in the private sector] successfully advance their interests and change the ideas and behaviour of others. This includes the need to look at how these effective leaders work strategically and politically to advance their and other women’s interests.’


25 Ibid.


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38 See the Green Belt Movement website: https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/
40 See the Ni Una Menos website: http://niunamenos.org.ar/
41 See the Time’s Up website: https://timesupnow.org/
43 See the Oxfam From Poverty to Power blog site: https://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/move-your-chair-into-the-circle-indigenous-womens-political-participation-in-guatemala/
44 See Natasha Wang Mwansa’s profile at: https://twitter.com/TashaWangMwansa?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eser-p%5Etwgr%5Eauthor
47 Ibid.
49 Nepal’s 2015 constitution has restructured the country into a federal system and state power has been divided into three levels of government, i.e. federal, provincial and local government. Local government now consists of municipalities, rural municipalities and wards – which now have unprecedented levels of authority and power to perform legislative, executive and some judiciary functions.
50 M.V. Aranas, S. Hall, A. Parkes for Oxfam. Making Care Count: An Overview of the Women’s Economic Empowerment and Care Initiative (2020) https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/resources/making-care-count-an-overview-of-the-womens-economic-empowerment-and-care-init-621100/ Although the research demonstrates that feminist movements have less of an influence on legal, policy reform and resource allocation relating to family leave than the impact of left-wing political parties (the primary factor associated with welfare state expansion in advanced democracies), as the WE-Care example shared here demonstrates, significant gains can be made where feminist organizations and their allies are able to influence government and corporate resource allocations – decision-making spaces often still closed to women’s rights activists and organizations. See also Mama Cash. (2020). Feminist Activism Works! Op. cit.
51 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
56 See the RootsLab website: http://rootslabglobal.org/
58 See the set of activists’ stories written at the pilot’s conclusion: http://rootslabglobal.org/lebanon/blogDetails/index.php?id=196/lang=en; and EngnaLegna website: https://engnalegna.org/
63 Ibid.
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65 Interviews, RootsLab, Mid-Term Review, 2018.
84 See Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice website: http://astraeafoundation.org/microsites/feminist-funding-principles/

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87 The same research found that having a female mayor or vice mayor also increases the presence of women in top-level administrative positions. K. Meier and K.D. Funk. (2017). Women and Public Administration in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Representation in Brazilian Local Governments. Administration & Society 49(1): 121–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582916628201


92 Oxfam internal AMAL project visit report.


99 See the Huairou Commission website: https://huairou.org/old-file/leadership/community-mapping/


102 For example, the Committee of Feminist Economists contributed to a ‘major shift’ in the way ‘the gendering of public policy (moved) away from women’s machinery… into macro-economic space’. For example, the chapter originally focusing on Women and Children was renamed ‘Women’s Agency and Child Rights’, as part of ‘a tactical move to recognize the potential of the women beyond reproductive roles of child-bearing and care’. Similarly, the Plan called for the agricultural sector to focus on the 85% of farmers who are small and marginal, increasingly female, and who find it difficult to access inputs, credit and extension or to market their output… and proposed that State support should be targeted through collective, rather than individual, credit provision in recognition of the fact that ‘women farmers are typically unable to access inputs, information, and market produce on an individual basis’. Summarized from S. Hameed and S. Park. (2013). Quota Shocks: Electoral Gender Quotas and Government Spending Priorities Worldwide. The Journal of Politics 80(3): 916–32. https://doi.org/10.1086/697251. Cited in S. Dodsworth and N. Cheeseman. (2019). Ibid.


105 Ibid.

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


111 For research on women’s participation in panchayat as role models of impact, see L. Beaman et al. (2012). Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: a policy experiment in India. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22267489/


114 See Corporación Humanas website; http://www.humanas.cl/


116 Author’s notes – Women’s Leadership Programme project visit report, 2015.


131 In line with the African Union (AU) Charter commitments on Democracy, Elections and Governance

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139 Ibid.


142 See the African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy website: https://fennet.org/africa/


148 See the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy online ‘crash course’ https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy


153 CREA’s Feminist Leadership, Movement Building, and Rights Institute: https://creaworld.org/institutes/feminist-leadership/


155 Just Associate’s (JASS’) Alquimia Feminist Popular Education School: https://www.justassociates.org/en/mesoamerica-alquimia-feminist-popular-education-school

156 The Huairou Commission’s Grassroots Academies: https://huairou.org/learning-tools/

157 Women’s Learning Partnership’s Grassroots Workshops: https://learningpartnership.org/index.php/how-we-do-it/training

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


181 Es Mi Fiesta TV. (2019). Intervención del colectivo Las Tesis en Santiago #25N [video file]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y36E9qg-na8 The lyrics in English are: ‘It’s the police. The Judges. The State. The President...The oppressive state...The oppressive state is a macho rapist. The rapist was you. The rapist is you.’


189 See WILPF website: https://www.wilpf.org/move-the-money/#;---:text=%E2%80%9CIt%20will%20be%20a%20great,peace%20that%20works%20for%20everyone

190 The Count Me In! (CMI!) initiative ‘recognises that challenging power imbalances in funding decisions and ensuring that donor resources works%20for%20everyone benefit girls, women and trans people in truly transformative ways, entails seizing opportunities to influence existing mechanisms... CMI! also perceives the need to go further. We believe that ensuring sustainable resourcing for feminist activism will require development of a stronger funding ecosystem, with funders acting in greater synergy to support the diverse needs and priorities of feminist movements.’ See Ensuring a seat at the table for feminist movements at: https://www.mamacash.org/en/spotlight-advocacy-ensuring-a-seat-at-the-table-for-feminist-movements; and the resource developed out of the 2018 Naivasha, Kenya global activist and funders meeting to generate insights, connections and ideas about the future of resourcing feminist movements and social change: https://www.mamacash.org/media/publications/money_and_movements_booklet_english-final.pdf

191 Alongside the countless feminist movement-building and influencing resources referenced throughout this paper, see also: https://www.mamacash.org/en/feminist-fundraising-why-is-it-different; the Feminist Open Government Partnership Initiative: https://fogo.opendata.net/; and more explicitly feminist approaches to Gender-Lens Investing: https://www.youngfoundation.org/publications/the-says-the-limit/


193 https://time.com/5690596/melinda-gates-empowering-women/


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WOMEN, VOICE AND POWER
How transformative feminist leadership is challenging inequalities and the root causes of extreme vulnerability.


197 See the Feminist Open Government Initiative website: https://fogo.od4d.net/


199 See useful donor, partner and ally resources listed in endnotes 79-84.


204 See https://raisinghervoice.ning.com/ for core programme documents, evaluations, case studies and process learning. The five-year Governance and Transparency Fund represented a symbolic and practical moment for the evolution of Oxfam’s investments in – and documentation of – learning from feminist partnerships and programmes seeking to test and grow locally owned, responsive gendered governance approaches and capacities.

205 See Gender Links website: https://genderlinks.org.za/

206 Internal analysis carried out at key intervals by Oxfam’s Gender Justice team between 2015 and 2019.


208 Internal Review of Oxfam’s MENA Regional Gender Justice Operational Plan, 2014

Naima Hammami, 60 years old, the first elected woman in the executive board of UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail – National Trade Union Centre of Tunisia). She celebrates with colleagues at UGTT HQ in Ben Arous. Photo: Ons Abid/Oxfam Novib
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