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Strategies that support women leaders in aid organisations

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Introduction

Knowledge about the factors leading to women's leadership in the aid sector is growing, emphasising the significance of gender equality and inclusivity in leadership positions across various fields. To have more women in leadership positions can enhance global efforts to safeguard and assist people affected by conflicts and disasters (Patel et al. 2020; Barclay et al., 2016). Greater gender balance among personnel is also critical for effective programme implementation (Red R et al., 2017) while women's leadership enables organisations to be more responsive to women's and gender-based needs in humanitarian emergencies (Oxfam, 2020). Other benefits of gender-equal and inclusive leadership in general, include more thorough and collaborative decision-making (The Women's Refugee Commission, 2021) and improved performance and decision-making of board members (Hamplova et al. 2022). At the global level, UNDP and UN Women's data show that higher representation of women in parliaments results in the adoption of more gender-sensitive policies (UN News, 2022).

While existing research clearly demonstrates the necessity for greater representation of women in leadership positions (IFRC, 2019) to support their rights but also for more effective decision-making and positive outcomes, many studies have delved into the barriers faced by women to attaint these roles. A comprehensive literature review conducted by the Humanitarian Advisory Group-HAG in 2017[1] stresses the following issues as the main obstacles for greater parity in the aid sector:

- Organisational culture and unconscious (or conscious) bias that disadvantage women;
- Pay and promotion gaps that slow down women's career progress;
- Self-confidence gap;
- Balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly in the aid sector;
- Lack of effective networks and mentors for women.

The combination of these factors contributes to the under-representation of women in the most senior leadership roles in the aid sector; a situation similar in many other sectors. In addition to this, other studies point out two recurring factors impeding women's leadership:

- Entrenched socio-cultural gender discrimination, including violence against women and girls which frame the contexts in which women live and work;
- In the aid sector, there is insufficient donor funding for women's empowerment while many donors' requirements are not geared to support change in organisational culture.

Objectives and scope

In collaboration with the French Red Cross Foundation, the GLOW Red network commissioned a desk review to strengthen the evidence base on the status of women leaders in the aid sector. Specifically, the network seeks to surpass the examination of factors contributing to the enduring prevalence of gender-based disparities which prevent women

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[1] The final report is available on : https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/HAG-Women-in-Leadership_Final_email-and-web_120217.pdf

from reaching the top positions of decision-making, to focus instead on strategies supporting women leaders to reach greater parity at every level of decision making.

Therefore, this review focuses on organizations themselves (not their projects) and compiles strategies to tackle gender-based inequalities by sourcing examples of successful pathways to strengthen women leadership. Examples of unsuccessful initiatives were also explored but organisations tend not to publish examples that failed to reach initial objectives. As a result, the review did not source much learning from strategies that did not work and the reasons why. While the Glow Red Network is interested in promising practice in the aid sector, this report also seeks to source evidence and learning from other sectors to identify relevant operational initiatives or strategies suitable for different geographical contexts.

Methodology

This report builds on the HAG report to bring new literature published since 2017 on women's leadership and gender-transformative approaches in organisations. The academic database Scopus was searched as well as google scholar and articles written in English and in French were selected. The overall list of reference consolidates the evidence base on gender and development, and feminist scholarship more broadly. However, a lot of references still date back to the late 1990s highlighting the relatively slow progress to learn from strategies promoting gender equality already documented two decades ago.

To organise the report, a set of recurring principles is used as building blocks for promoting women leadership. Each of these building blocks synthesizes research findings that support particular strategies and integrate examples of promising practices or particular tools that have been used and, when documented, the effects generated for women's leadership.

Building block to advance women' leadership

For the past 10 years, an increasing number of development and humanitarian organisations concerned with women's rights have developed programming that uses the language of gender-responsiveness and/or gender- transformation. This draws on a continuum of approaches to gender integration (see Figure 1) which helps to compare the level of ambition of programmes.

Gender discriminatory	Gender blind	Gender sensitive	Gender responsive	Gender transformative
Favours one gender in a manner that leads to a deepening of gender inequities.	Ignores gender in programme design; perpetuates status quo or potentially worsens inequalities.	Gender sensitive works around existing gender differences and inequalities to ensure equitable allocation/services/support aligned with the pre-existing gender differences, stuctures, systems and power divisions in society.	Gender responsive identifies and addresses the differentiated needs of all genders; promotes equal outcomes and responds to practical and strategic gender needs.	Gender transformative strives to transform unequal gender relations to promote shared power, control of resources, decision-making and support for the empowerment of all genders equally.

Figure 1. Different approaches to gender integration. Source: IFRC / UNICEF, 2021

A gender-transformative approach is concerned not only with addressing the needs of different gender groups, it also actively aims to transform the pervasive unequal distribution of power and resources. This approach is increasingly viewed as the gold standard to promote more social inclusion and gender equality in development programming, while gender-sensitive or responsive approaches are no longer "enough". While this continuum has predominantly been applied within the programming context, this review will adopt an organizational perspective instead. The principles and learning from implementing gender-transformative approaches provide avenues to create enabling environments for women to reach, and remain, in leadership positions. These avenues tend to address the obstacles documented in the literature and introduced at the beginning of this report. They pave the way for changes in attitudes and behaviours at organisational level primarily, even though the wider societal context can both hinder or favour gender equality. The seven following building blocks reflect on strategies to facilitate more parity and equality within organisations.

1. Building a foundation for gender equality: starting from within

'It is always much easier to raise questions of gender differences in an organisation's programmes 'out there' in the field, than it is to get your own house in order first.' (Plowman, 2000).

National and international organisations (I/NGOs) have a significant role in promoting women's empowerment and addressing gender inequality globally within the aid sector. However, they have often applied their gender mainstreaming/ transformative work in their programming interventions, without considering power and inequalities within their own organisational culture (Lokot, 2021). Although many I/NGOs have introduced gender equality policies, these tend to comply with donor requirements, while both implementation and

accountability lines remaining ambiguous (Meagher et al., 2022). Similarly, gender mainstreaming guidance and tools have flourished, presenting the problem of lack of parity and inequality as technical rather than political, avoiding critical issues related to power, organisational culture, and leadership (WRO, 2021; Daigle, 2022). The gender 'tick box exercise' however, fails to transform organisations' approach to gender programming (Gupta et al, 2023).

For over two decades, the academic and grey literatures have emphasised the significance of organisational efforts and internal accountability towards promoting equity and inclusion. Such efforts are pivotal to achieving a gender-equitable and inclusive impact through humanitarian operations (Sweetman, 1997; WRC, 2021; Daigle, 2022; Oxfam, 2020). Therefore, I/NGOs must examine their internal systemic structure, policies and culture closely if they are to deliver gender-transformative programmes effectively.

How Organisational Culture can promote gender equity

Organisations are not gender-neutral but instead reflect the gender differences that are present in society and in the place where they are based or where they operate. Societal norms and values that exist around gender roles and expectations shape individuals' behaviour and interactions within organisational settings, and this can perpetuate the institutionalisation of unequal gender relations and discrimination (Plowman, 2000).

'National cultural values are reflected in the ways organisations function, and these values stereotype appropriate roles and behaviours in ways that generally limit women's access to resources and decision-making' (Anderson, 1993 in Wallace, 1998).

Feminist scholars have long recognized that organizations are not gender-neutral and instead reflect the gendered differences that exist in the wider societal context. This understanding was emphasized as early as the 1970s within the field of organizational development theory (Plowman, 2000). Examining organisational culture is pivotal to understand what changes are necessary to support women's leadership as it shapes the values, norms and practices of an organisation and influences its functioning, communication, and operations. Organisational culture can have a more significant impact on women's leadership than any formal statement. Several scholars have characterised organisational culture as a 'deep structure', which encompasses a complex set of ingrained beliefs, values, and (often unconscious) habitual patterns of thinking, behaviour and working that constitute the fundamental basis of decision-making processes and actions. These deep structures include gendered biases for example the idea that work and family are distinct spheres, thereby implying that the 'ideal worker' is one who devotes themselves completely to the organisation, unfettered by familial obligations, and is male (Acker 1990, cited in Rao et al., 2005; Gupta et al, 2023).

The absence of a supportive organisational culture has been linked to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Patel et al., 2020). Organisational culture, as a reflection of structural barriers, also exerts an influence on the self-confidence

of women, the construction of their leadership identities, their decision to pursue leadership roles, and their leadership experience (Ibid.). Additionally, feminist scholars have highlighted the influence of organizational culture and values on reinforcing "masculine principles" and marginalizing women (Goetz', 1997 in Lokot, 2021)[2].

Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the organisational culture is a prerequisite to identifying and addressing any barriers that impede women's progress in leadership roles. The culture of humanitarian organisations has been described as hierarchical, exhibiting a tendency towards 'short-termism', and possessing a markedly masculine modus operandi, all of which impeding the progress of gender equality in the workplace (Lokot, 2021; Ruparel et al., 2017). Gupta et al. (2023) further expands reflecting on the patriarchal norms, saviour mentality, and macho culture that are pervasive in the aid sector and may account for the reported failure of gender mainstreaming efforts in programming (Ibid.). It is important to note that the aforementioned authors do not differentiate between countries, headquarters, and field levels in terms of the prevalence of traits associated with the humanitarian culture.

Wallace's review of several NGOs in 1998 revealed that even among NGOs actively working towards gender equality in their development programmes, there was little progress made in promoting women to leadership positions or breaking the male domination within their boards (Wallace, 1998). The lack of progress in their own structures suggests that there may be cultural and systemic barriers preventing women from accessing leadership positions. Indeed, organisational culture can lead to "gender pay-gaps, top-down decision-making processes, acceptability of harassment and resistance to providing parental leave beyond statutory requirements"[3] (Lokot, 2021). Organisational culture has the potential to influence seemingly simple matters such as how time is perceived and managed within an organisation, including the scheduling of meetings and the timing of decision-making processes. Yet, such practices can unintentionally disadvantage women who have caregiving responsibilities or who aspire to leadership roles (Plowman, 2000).

This raises the need to reconcile the tensions (and hypocrisy) between the expectations placed on I/NGOs' staff to engage in gender transformative programming with the communities they serve and the reality of discrimination that staff members themselves may face within their organizations (Ibid.). By addressing internal gender disparities and creating supportive, diverse and inclusive organizational cultures, I/NGOs can lead by example and promote gender equality and women's empowerment both within their organizations and in the communities they serve.

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[2] Organizational culture can perpetuate gender-based power imbalances by prioritizing traits and behaviors traditionally associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness and competitiveness. Women who do not conform to these masculine norms may be undervalued or excluded from leadership positions (Lokot, 2021).

[3] Some of these barriers are further expanded on in other sections of this paper.

Expanding the use of Gender Self-Assessment: addressing organisational culture beyond programming

InterAction[4] has developed a Gender Audit tool – described as 'A Tool for Organizational Self-Assessment and Transformation' - addressing staff perceptions regarding how gender issues are addressed both in programming and in internal organisational systems and activities. Gender Audits are used as "gender action planning, and to identify challenges and opportunities for increasing gender skills and organisation equality" (InterAction, website[5]). The handbook emphasizes the importance for humanitarian organizations engaged in gender programming to acknowledge the influence of organizational structure and culture in the development and execution of such programmes. The Gender Audit tool is grounded on a Gender Integration Framework that encompasses four essential organizational dimensions, namely **political will**, **technical capacity**, **accountability**, and **organizational culture**, which are critical for achieving gender integration and transformation (InterAction, 2010). The handbook explicitly asserts that the internal implementation of gender integration seeks to advance women's leadership and promote gender equality within policies and structures.

Organizational Dimensions	Types of Information Sought
Gender Policy	The nature, quality, extent and intensity of support for the organization's gender policy.
Staffing	The extent of gender balance in organizational staffing patterns.
Advocacy, Marketing and Communications	The quality and extent of gender sensitivity in the organization's communications and advocacy campaigns.
Organizational Culture	The extent and intensity of gender sensitivity in the organizational norms, structures, systems, processes and relations of power.
Human Resources	The level, extent and intensity of gender sensitive human resource policies, family friendly policies, and gender considerations in hiring and personnel reviews.
Financial Resources	The level and extent of organizational resources budgeted to support gender equity efforts.

Table 1. Organisational dimensions covered in the Gender self-assessment. Source: InterAction (2010)

World Vision (WV) has been using InterAction's gender audit tool at both headquarters and national offices level. This process has led to concrete actions to strengthen equity in both programmes and organisational processes. For example, following its self-assessment, WV national office in India made its Gender Advisor position a permanent

Director level position in the country office. Furthermore, following its gender audit, WV US implemented a series of measures, including the creation of new family-friendly policies (Ibid.)

Other organisations have since then developed their own self-assessment such as Save the Children -SCUS which developed a Gender Equality Self-Assessment (GESA) tool. This

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[4] Established in 1984, InterAction is the leading alliance of NGOs and partners in the United States
[5] https://www.interaction.org/blog/gender-audit-handbook/

has helped the organisation to drive significant internal gender equality and diversity and inclusion changes. In 2020, SCUS managed to close the gender pay gap and was recognized as the first non-profit certified as Gender Fair[6]. SCUS Gender Equality Strategy for 2019-2021 clearly outlines how organisational structures and staff can (in)directly impact programmes (SCUS, 2019).

Outside the aid sector, the Gender Equality Organizational Assessment Tool[7] developed by the World Customs Organization provides a useful guide of indicators.

Who you hire matters: the influence of recruitment on organizational values and identity

The effectiveness of gender-transformative programming is contingent upon the suitability and inclusivity of the staff and leadership team. Gender experts from a range of different organizations have identified humanitarian staff, particularly those in leadership positions, and organizational culture as critical factors for achieving transformative policies, programming, and impact (WRC, 2021; Gupta et al., 2023). I/NGOs must prioritize the recruitment of individuals who possess the necessary commitment and skills to create suitable and inclusive change and invest in their ongoing development and support (Ibid.). This involves hiring individuals who are knowledgeable about gender issues and possess the ability to identify and address gender-based challenges within the organization and programming. Of particular importance, the recruitment process of leaders should prioritize the selection of candidates who demonstrate a commitment to promoting inclusion, including gender equality (Daigle, 2022). Already in the late 1990s, a few international organisations included in many – if not all – staff job descriptions, a commitment to equality and diversity. However, in practice, this requirement was seldom monitored and prioritised (Wallace, 1998).

Moreover, and despite the increase in the number of gender expert positions over the past two decades, these experts are often limited to programming roles and may lack the necessary seniority to influence, or attain, leadership positions (Daigle, 2022). The limited influence of gender experts may be attributed to a lack of recognition of the importance of gender expertise in leadership positions, as well as to the ongoing challenges of addressing gender inequalities within organizations. Furthermore, research suggests that gender specialists may face limitations in their capacity to effect organisational change owing to a dearth of resources and support (WRC, 2021), as well as being viewed as "gender police" (Gupta et al., 2023). Given the difficulties encountered by gender specialists and recognising the significance of peer influence, Gupta and colleagues emphasise the necessity of identifying influential individuals with extensive networks at all organisational levels, to foster a conducive approach throughout the organisation. Women leaders tend to foster an

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[6] Gender Fair reviews and measures a company's gender metrics across four categories – leadership, employee policies, advertising and philanthropy/purpose - and then calculates a gender equity score (see: https://www.savethechildren.org/us/about-us/media-and-news/2020-press-releases/save-the-children-certified-gender-fair).

[7] https://www.wcoomd.org/-/media/wco/public/global/pdf/topics/capacity-building/activities-and-programmes/gender-equality/gender-equality-assessment-tool.pdf?la=en

organizational culture that supports gender equality and women's empowerment, inspire and mentor other women in leadership positions, and design and implement gender-transformative programmes that challenge patriarchal power structures (Ibid; Daigle, 2022). To maintain women leadership within INGOs is therefore imperative for ensuring the efficacy and longevity of gender-transformative programmes.

One means to achieve this objective is to implement quotas, particularly in contexts where systemic barriers to women's advancement exist (Gupta et al., 2023). Quotas can manifest in various forms, such as setting targets for female representation on governing boards or in leadership roles. Quotas can function as a catalyst for change, generating visible role models for women and girls, and facilitating a cultural shift that values women's leadership (Hamplova et al., 2022). By challenging gender stereotypes and combatting implicit biases that limit women's access to leadership positions, quotas can contribute to a more equitable distribution of opportunities. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that quotas are not a panacea for gender inequality in leadership. Resistance to quotas exist, or can emerge, and there is a risk of tokenism (Krook, 2015). Nonetheless, quotas can gradually build a "critical mass" of women in leadership positions, which is necessary to achieve lasting change - including around work and life balance, and mitigate the risk of backlash (Mastracci et al., 2016). Hence, the introduction of quotas must form part of a comprehensive strategy aimed at addressing gender inequality. This strategy may encompass measures such as ensuring impartial selection criteria, for example, by promoting blind reviews of applications and employing structured interview schedules that counteract unconscious bias (Gupta et al., 2023).

Breaking bias in recruitment and promotion processes to support women's leadership and diversity

"Bias can manifest when employees or job candidates are evaluated for hire, promotions or job assignments. [...] men and women who are equally qualified are often evaluated differently — especially when evaluation criteria are vague or when information about their performance is scarce. This is because, in situations of ambiguity, people unconsciously pull information from gender stereotypes to fill the gaps in their knowledge, which leads them to base decisions on assumptions instead of facts" (Correll, 2017, cited in Neimand et al., 2019).

Everyone navigates social situations using cultural stereotypes to categorize themselves and others often unconsciously. "Social-cognition studies show that in fact, we automatically and nearly instantly sex categorize any specific person to whom we attempt to relate [...] Studies show that Americans categorize others they encounter on black or white race almost instantly as well (Ito and Urland 2003). [...] This initial framing by sex never quite disappears from our understanding of them or ourselves in relation to them. Thus, we frame and are framed by gender literally before we know it." (Ridgeway, 2009 cited in Neimand et al., 2019)

This is why some organizations decide to remove names from job applications to prevent reviewers to see the race or name of the applicant and avoid implicit bias. Other recommendations based on Bohnet (2016) and CIPD, 2022) include the following:

1/ Role design and job advert:

- These should rely on inclusive, gender-neutral language. Research has shown that language that is perceived as stereotypically male or female can deter qualified applicants of the opposite gender from applying for the position (Gaucher et al. 2011). One way to use gender-neutral language is to check pronouns when describing the tasks of the ideal candidate: use "S/he" or "you." This is particularly important when working in Latin-origin languages such as French or Spanish where job titles tend to be gendered.
- Limit the number of mandatory qualifications to apply for the job.
- Offer flexible working by default.
- Make salaries non-negotiable and include them in job adverts.
- Advertise the specific benefits and policies available.

2/Attracting diverse candidates:

- Place job adverts where they are more likely to be seen by marginalised applicants.
- Use targeted 'word-of-mouth' referrals and focus outreach efforts on marginalised groups.
- Making the recruitment experience inclusive through proactively asking applicants if they need reasonable adjustments (e.g. timing, accessibility).

3/ Application process:

- Anonymise applications to remove any demographic information that could potentially lead to bias in the selection process.

4/Selection process:

- Interview panels should be diverse to ensure a variety of perspectives and reduce the likelihood of bias but CIPD (2022) flags that this could create a burden on existing marginalised staff with low representation.

- Unstructured interviews should be avoided as they can lead to subjective assessments of candidates' likability or similarity, which can perpetuate bias. Instead, structured interviews that focus on job qualifications should be used to allow for direct comparisons across candidates.

- To promote diversity in hiring, comparative evaluation and bundled decision-making should be utilized. Research has shown that when multiple candidates are evaluated simultaneously, decision-making is less biased and leads to more diversity. Similarly, assessing candidates in batches has also been shown to lead to greater diversity.

Overcoming gender bias in organizations: a role for third-party accountability mechanisms?

Several organisations have turned to third-party accountability mechanisms to evaluate the inclusivity of their organisational culture in relation to gender and diversity. For example, **Global Health 50/50**[8] is an external and independent accountability mechanism that assesses the progress of approximately 200 global health sector organisations on gender equality and produces an annual report. The assessment framework consists of ten core variables across four domains, including commitments to redistribute power, policies to address power and privilege imbalances, power and privilege distribution, and gender power dynamics that fuel health inequalities. Global Health 50/50 publishes the results, including an overall performance score, scorecard, and comparative analysis with peer organisations on its website. In 2022, World Vision and MSF received low-performance scores, while the IFRC and Oxfam were rated good performers, and UN Women, Save the Children, and CARE were rated very high performers (see website)[9].

Following the publication of the annual Global Health 50/50 report, a Senior staff member from the Swedish International Development Agency -SIDA decided to disseminate findings associated partner organisations across its organisation, along with some proposition of actions. As a result, SIDA took several measures, including supplementing their existing due diligence processes with questions based on the GH5050 index. SIDA also included a progress report as a condition within the funding agreement[10].

Another third-party certification body, **EDGE certification**[11], provides certification based on an organisation's objective and measurable evidence of gender and intersectional equity in the workplace. EDGE certification has four pillars: representation, pay equity, effectiveness of policies and practices to ensure equitable career flows, and inclusiveness of culture. Both the IFRC and ICRC have received EDGE certification.

2. Intersectionality: supporting women who face multiple systems of oppression

While a gender lens helps to uncover gender-based inequalities in decision-making, additional lenses are often needed to acknowledge and address the lack of diversity among leaders in many aid organisations. In the UK aid sector- i.e. in organisations receiving UK Official Development Assistance (ODA), 'the boards and senior leadership of I/NGOs and

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[8] https://globalhealth5050.org/mission-vision-values/

[9] Global Health 50/50 also proposes a self-assessment tool for organisations not included in their sample but interested in assessing their performance on gender equality and diversity. Available here: https://globalhealth5050.org/gh5050-how-to-series-2/

[10] Available here: https://globalhealth5050.org/updates/evidence-action-change/

[11] https://www.edge-cert.org/certifications/third-party-certification-system/

private sector contractors who hold decision-making power are still mostly White and based in high-income countries such as the UK. They are often not accountable to, or representative of, the people they serve. In contrast, many frontline service delivery jobs are undertaken by people from the local community and are more likely to be Black, Indigenous and People of Colour." (IDC, 2022)

Racism experienced by staff who are Black, Indigenous and People of Colour further impacts inequality and can intersect with sexism to raise barriers to women's leadership and/or to maintain a lack of diversity. The use of quotas for instance is a powerful tool to increase the number of qualified women to apply for a position but might not help with increasing the diversity among women applicants. This is the "diversity paradox" (Patel et al. 2020) which can result from implicit biases among decision-makers, lack of commitment on diversity initiatives, but also structural barriers such as institutional racism that prevents certain groups from ethnic or religious minorities from accessing leadership positions.

The notion of intersectionality refers to the experiences of people who face oppression as a result of several facets of their identity, particularly their gender, race and class (Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1991). Other social aspects of identity are also widely discriminated against, such as sexual orientations or diverse gender identities and expressions in systems dominated by norms around heterosexuality. Geographical location and income background are also powerful determinants of social position. For instance, qualitative research from Rwanda documented the differences between urban and rural women in elected local government positions and the benefits they derived from providing largely unpaid services. Urban and rural elite women who earned salaries, ran businesses, or supported their husbands' careers, used the government role to accrue social capital. In contrast, rural and low-income women saw their workload increase and their economic security undermined placing the government role as purely exploitative (Burnet, 2011 cited in Muraya, 2022). Overall, an intersectional lens incorporate multiple dimensions of identity and experience to effectively understand challenges encountered by women striving for leadership positions and develop suitable means of support (see Rhode, 2017).

Women of Colour (WOC)[12] in particular face systemic racism and sexism, which many have learned to navigate and overcome (Sims, 2022). Yet, they "are still more likely to be appointed to high-profile roles during times of crisis or placed in precarious leadership positions with a higher likelihood of failure" (Carter and Sisco, 2022). The compilation of strategies to support educational, career and leadership progression for women of colour is rendered difficult by the lack of research to document their experiences as they are typically grouped with all women (Ibid). The IDC's review commissioned by the UK government on racism in the aid sector stresses that the collection and publication of data on diversity in staffing is a key element of holding aid organisations to account (IDC, 2022).

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[12] Women of Color represent populations of women who have been historically marginalized by their social identity. In the United States, this designation includes larger populations of African American (Black), Hispanic, Latina women, and smaller populations of indigenous and immigrant women (SIMS, 2022)

Nurturing cultural perspectives for effective norm change:

In addition to the overarching culture prevalent in the aid sector, the culture of each organization is further moulded by its distinct cultural, social, and historical context, which in turn influences gender norms and roles. To promote a transformative shift in organizational culture and effectively advance gender equality, one must acknowledge the diverse cultural perspectives on gender. This awareness is commonly recognized by field teams engaged in gender-related projects with communities, as it plays a vital role in facilitating genuine progress towards gender equality.

"(…) gender mainstreaming processes to be effective they need to address the complex realities of people and be sensitive to the values of communities in their implementation. The more successful gender mainstreaming initiatives have worked with local people's beliefs and realities and allowed sufficient time for attitudinal change in both local people and NGO staff." (Wendoh & Wallace., 2005).

Hence, cultural values and beliefs held by staff members within a specific context must not only be considered but they must also inform strategies. Wendoh and Wallace's research on gender mainstreaming in African NGOs and communities revealed that gender is frequently perceived as an external concept imposed by powerful actors, such as international NGO partners, donors, or government entities. Such a perspective diminishes the sense of ownership and understanding among both local communities and NGOs. Without proper consideration for local perspectives, analysis, skills, and the knowledge of NGO staff and leaders, there is a risk of merely superficially embracing gender sensitivity without truly comprehending underlying issues of inequality. This disconnection can breed mistrust and skepticism, impeding genuine progress towards gender equality. Moreover, Wendoh and colleagues stress that the hasty adoption of the English term "gender mainstreaming" without an equivalent local terminology further exacerbated the challenge. At the grassroots level, discussions about gender equality often incorporated foreign terms that may not resonate with the local culture. Instead, by engaging local languages and expressions, the concept could become more relatable, empowering individuals to participate in open discussions and contribute their perspectives to the process of organizational culture change. Additionally, tailoring training and discussions to local realities can help to prevent resistance and apprehension among staff who may be uncomfortable with the implications of gender equality work (Ibid.). This however, raises questions around who is responsible for leading and designing such trainings to ensure local ownership of the 'gender agenda'. Achieving attitudinal change, which involves shifting individuals' beliefs and values, is a slow process, but it is essential for creating sustainable and meaningful change (Ibid.).

A global backlash on gender discourse and the risk to dilute the promotion of women's rights into a 'diversity mainstreaming package'

In 2015, a group of NGO practitioners, donor representatives and researchers, gathered together in a workshop to examine different approaches to integrate gender equality and social inclusion in their programming (a synthesis of the discussion is available on the ODI's website[13]). One major point of debate was whether or not organisations should explicitly use 'gender' as a concept and the promotion of gender equality as an explicit objective of their projects. Approaches differed between practitioners who used a more gender-neutral language (e.g. 'supporting women, girls, men and boys' or 'building the resilience of all') and those who clearly targeted specific groups (e.g. supporting women and girls) by adopting an explicit feminist approach and not shying away from its political dimension. The former did not want to assume which groups were discriminated against the most, but they also wanted to avoid a backlash in communities where they knew that the language and/or the goal of gender equality would not resonate well. In contrast, the latter organisations did not want to dilute the issue of women's rights arguing that projects should allocate funding (often limited for supporting women's empowerment) to target those they already know are excluded (Le Masson, 2016). While this example relates to the programme level, it illustrates that the means to promote equality and diversity are likely to change from one organisation to the next, depending on their mandate, the context and the backlash that they are likely to face.

The backlash against progress in women's right can be indeed significant (see Woolf and Dwyer, 2020 for a review of the experience of women's rights activists and activists asserting the rights of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, facing backlash). Researching the effects of gender-focused international aid on women and men in Afghanistan, gender expert Lina Abirafeh warned in 2005 against a dramatic increase in violence against women castigated for being 'Western-influenced', and urged for increased sensitivity in NGO's programmes to protect women. Several studies have further shown how anti-gender equality discourse including the rejection of gender theory, feminism, and non-heterosexual sexuality, is linked to resistance against what is perceived as western influence (Auque-Pallez, 2022; Awondo et al., 2022). In Ghana, anti-gender activists frame sexuality and gender identities as harmful or dangerous to societal norms and values by appealing to notions of preserving local traditions and cultural heritage, to amplify concerns, generate fear and rally support (Adomako, 2022).

Yet, neither is the fight towards achieving gender equality exclusive to western countries, nor is the backlash only confined to African nations. The work of women's grassroot associations globally and international organisations is constantly threatened by counter-mobilizations of conservative movements including religious groups, right-wing populist and nationalist organisations from a wide range of countries. They share a critique of the concept of gender and will oppose language on women's rights and reproductive rights in policy and legislation they see as a threat to traditional values (Roggeband and Krizsan, 2019; Awondo et al., 2022). Campaigns, commonly referred to as 'anti-gender' movements, can pose significant challenges to the advancement of women's leadership, including the erosion of legal protection resulting from the influence of these movements on policy-making processes,

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the hindered acceptance and recognition of women's leadership capacities within society at large, and the discouragement of women's active pursuit of leadership roles.

Pathways to scaling up women's political leadership and influence in Uganda : Learning from Akina Mama wa Afrika

Drawing on action research to inform efforts to advance gender equality, women's rights, and inclusive governance in Uganda, pan-African feminist leadership development organization Akina Mama wa Afrika published a policy brief with a set of recommendations (Musiime et al. 2022). Some of these are equally useful for aid organisations to inform initiatives to support women's leadership:

- **Scale-up efforts toward gender parity**: to ensure 50:50 representation in all elected positions and decision-making processes, there should be an equal number of women and men as candidates at minima, while affirmative action policy should be backed with commitment to gender equality.

- **Engaging men's responsibility to end all forms of violence against women in politics** : from state-instigated violence, to sexual harassment in the workplace and cyber-bullying, women will only be able to fully and equally participate in leadership if the political climate is free of violence, threats, and negative attitudes.

- **Address socio-cultural barriers**: in Uganda, social norms often create preferences for women candidates with household profiles (e.g., married and with children), yet one of the primary reasons that women cannot enter politics is the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work they are usually tasked to perform with little or no help from their spouses. Political and citizens must use public platforms to demand equitable distribution of domestic responsibilities while organizations can set up technical support for accommodating candidates with caregiving work.

- **Foster intersectional feminist approaches and young women's political leadership**: in Uganda, pervasive gender stereotypes tend to portray unmarried women as incomplete and unfit; implying that a woman must have a man to demonstrate capability. Organisations must create an enabling environment for young women's participation in decision-making processes while current women leaders must, in solidarity, advocate for financing, capacity building, and professional development opportunities for women.

https://www.akinamamawaafrika.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Pathways-to-scaling-up-womens-political-leadership-and-influence-in-Uganda-Adopting-Feminist-Approaches..pdf

3. Gender data and effective awareness for action

Sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data: a starting point:

The first step often taken by advocates of women leadership is to share evidence of the persistent lack of parity between men and women and the pervasive lack of representation of women at all levels of decision-making worldwide, from executive positions to national parliaments (UN WOMEN, 2023).

A synthesis of in-depth interviews with senior leaders working on gender equality in 10 large, influential development organisations stresses that the collection and analysis of sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data considerably strengthens organisational buy-in and performance (Henry et al., 2015). The study also found four distinct categories of data related to gender. The first category is data that highlight the conditions that women and girls encounter in their lives, making their experiences more visible, particularly when disaggregated by location, age, race, or ethnicity. Secondly, data that are disaggregated by sex also help document gender gaps, i.e. differentials between men and women. The third category is evidence of successful initiatives to increase women's empowerment and reduce gender inequalities, for instance from evaluation reports. Fourthly, data on the impact of changes in the lives of women themselves, and in their organisations or even on wider development outcomes. It is in the last two categories that data are still largely inadequate (Ibid).

Data on gender gaps often serve as a 'wake-up call'. In the case of women's leadership in climate change policymaking for instance, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) has tracked the participation of women delegates in national delegations to the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change-UNFCCC—since 2009, as a part of ongoing efforts to enhance women's voice and leadership in this arena. This collection of data has enabled the Women and Gender Constituency to communicate the gaps (e.g. only 10% of Heads of Delegations were women in 2009), to keep track of progress (the percentage of women as heads of delegations only rose to 13% in 2021) (WEDO, 2022) and to keep the pressure on UNFCCC parties.

Overall, organisations within and outside the aid sector, can also rely on an increasing wealth of literature that documents both the gender gaps in leadership and the reasons behind this gap in a wide range of settings. The previous section did highlight that more research is still needed to understand the unique challenges faced by women of colour and a whole field of enquiry has only just begun to examine the experiences of people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions in the workplace and in different contexts. However, increased evidence of gender gaps in leadership is not an end in itself but rather a means to (i) increase awareness on inequalities and (ii) foster action to remedy the lack of parity and representation of women.

The limits of raising awareness only

To raise awareness among staff about the barriers faced by women to progress in their career seems like a logical step in organisations characterized by entrenched gendered hierarchies. If managers are not aware that their female colleagues find the organizational culture challenging, they are less likely to do anything to change it. Likewise, if women are not informed that there is a persistent pay gap between their wage and that of their male colleagues, they have less reason to raise an enquiry at their human resource department to discuss their salary. When people "don't know what they don't know," education can be helpful in making people aware (Rhode, 2017) and this can create a momentum to raise concerns and make change possible. This is the assumption for instance behind the creation of the Gender Equality Index at the European level, to give more visibility to areas that need improvement[14].

However, raising awareness can also lead to no, or very, limited action. In France, since 2020, all companies, associations and unions with more than 50 employees, must calculate and publish their Gender Equality Index. By law, these organisations must assess the level of equality between women and men out of 100 points, based on the following criteria:

- gender pay gap
- gap in individual raise rates
- number of female employees receiving raises following maternity leave
- parity among the 10 highest earner
- promotion rate gap (only for organisations with more than 250 employees).

The law further requires that the resulting score be published on the organisation's website alongside improvement targets and corrective measures for each indicator. In this instance, the Gender Equality Index was conceived as an awareness tool to tackle gender inequalities at work (République Française, 2021). However, in 2022, only 61% of organisations had published their score despite the risk of receiving a fine (Ministère du Travail, du Plein Emploi et de l'Insertion, 2022.

The lack of action following awareness raising might be due to a lack of visibility of the message- not many people see it because it is not shared effectively. The information may be also communicated in a format or a language that most people do not understand. Failure to act could also result from people not taking the message seriously, either because they do not consider the issue a priority and/or it does not affect them, or because those who could enact change have an interest in maintaining the status quo. In fact, research in behavioural sciences suggest that people who are simply given more information are unlikely to change their beliefs or behaviour (Christiano and Neimand, 2017). In worse cases, awareness raising can lead to backlash particularly when issues have the potential to generate controversy (for instance when a campaign on women's reproductive rights ignite partisan politics debate over abortion) (Ibid).To trigger change, a few key components are required to make awareness raising a powerful tool for change (see Box) as long as it is part of a larger effort to change social norms.

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[14] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/about

Effectiveness of awareness raising

The University of Florida College of Journalism is developing science-based, planned strategic communication campaigns to achieve positive behavioral change (Christiano and Neimand, 2017). They identify four essential elements to creating a successful public interest communications campaign:

1. **Identify the target audience**—the individuals or groups whose action or behavior change will be most important to achieve the objective. For this, one must develop a good understanding of the audience to reach and what will resonate with them. Sometimes, it could be that the target audience is only one person like the head of an organization.

2. **Create compelling messages with clear calls to action**. "It is particularly important to craft campaign messages, stories, and calls to action that do not threaten how an audience sees itself or its values." (Ibid) Creating positive messaging and incentives seem also more effective than generating fear or shame.

3. **Develop a road map which includes objectives, tactics, and evaluation.** This involves knowing the issue well enough to know where change will have its greatest effect and this might require research and data.

4. **Use the right messenger.** "In order to inspire and persuade people to adopt a new behavior or a new way of thinking, having the message come from people who have authority and credibility in your audience's world matters." (Ibid) This involves identifying who is influential and whom people trust for information which is tied to how people see themselves, their values, and their identities.

Research can inform strategies, particularly if it has been commissioned by organisations themselves committed to implement changes and when research findings are communicated in an effective way (as opposed to producing scientific papers only accessible via payments or through academic institutions). For instance, researchers Hobgood and Draucker investigated the challenges experienced by one cohort of women department chairs in emergency medicine (EM) in 36 academic institutions in the US. Challenges that were highlighted by participants included feeling unprepared for the role of department chair, being one of few women in leadership, inheriting unhealthy department cultures, and facing negative faculty reactions. The study also asked participants to identify solutions to address these challenges. Findings revealed that the top five solutions were a mix of measures to be implemented by individuals themselves such as gaining and maintaining confidence or facilitating teamwork, and responsibilities of the institution including supporting women's leadership and creating safe leadership cultures.

Independent research also helps to overcome assumptions of what works. For instance, it is often assumed that better awareness to both gender and racial differences within organisations can reduce prejudice because it brings to the fore issues such as inequality that many staff never considered. However, strategies that can be successful in reducing bias against some groups such as emphasizing differences between racial groups, will not necessarily work equally well for other objectives such as elevating women in leadership positions. In a systematic review of the literature, Gündemir and colleagues (2019) found that a diversity aware ideology (i.e., multiculturalism) as opposed to ignoring or downplaying racial or religious differences support better performance outcomes for racial-ethnic minorities as well as inclusion, workplace satisfaction, more positive leadership self-perceptions, and reduced perceptions of bias and turnover intentions. In contrast, gender-awareness strategies tend to highlight stereotypes, increase bias, and reinforces men's influence. To partly explain this difference, researcher Martin advances that "For whites, racial differences are often perceived as external, so race-awareness strategies tend to increase support for policies that promote equality; for men, gender differences are often perceived as internal" (Martin, 2022). Hence, gender-awareness strategies that emphasize male-female differences tend to reinforce support for the status quo, since such differences are often assumed to be biological, whereas gender-blindness is associated with more positive outcomes such as enhanced self-confidence, pro-active behaviours and leadership emergence (Ibid).

Using theatre play and choosing the rights messengers to raise awareness on women's rights (Le Masson et al., 2018)

Research conducted in Chad on violence against women and girls documented strategies used by NGOs and the government to tackle this issue (Le Masson et al., 2018). In 2015, 29% of women aged 15 to 49 in Chad reported having experienced physical violence at least once since they were 15 years old. The national policy framework encompasses many laws that guarantee women's equal rights but development practitioners stressed that the majority of the population is not aware of these protective policies. To help women and girls understand their rights better, practitioners of UNFPA pointed to the need to invest in raising the awareness of the local authorities, especially traditional leaders first. With traditional and religious leaders as the target audience, UNFPA's programme relied on different messengers: doctors and psychologists would explain to traditional leaders the physical and psychological impacts of violence not only on women but how it can affect the wellbeing of the household; magistrates would translate what the law says, and theological specialists would clarify what is stated in holy books in terms of rights. The goal was to rely on local leaders to facilitate the dissemination of laws and to involve them in changing behavior, given their influence in communities. Starting with raising the awareness of men who lead, is a way of respecting the social hierarchy and thus avoiding a hostile reaction at the beginning of initiatives. It is also a way to maximise the effectiveness of outreach activities at the community level by obtaining support from those who control power.

One INGO, Concern, used a similar strategy in the province of Dar Sila. They organized a theatre play on the occasion of the International Day of Women's Rights in one particular town. The play depicted the difficulties facing the wife and daughter of a man who migrated to find work in a goldmine. He had forbidden them from continuing trading and going to school

respectively, in accordance to their gender and assigned roles whereby women are not supposed to earn money and girls are supposed to stay at home. In the absence of her husband and since she had no income, the woman decided to ignore the ban and sell vegetables in the market, which also allowed her to pay for the schooling of her daughter. The husband returned years later, without any income, and looked like an old man whose appearance and deflated look made children in the audience laugh loudly. Immediately after the play, the NGO had organized for the regional representative of the government's social affairs department to facilitate a debriefing discussion. The man was known for being well educated, knowledgeable of policies, critical vis à vis discriminatory attitudes and he was also an Imam: the perfect messenger. He built on the message conveyed by the theatre play and the reactions to it, to explain what the Chadian law says on what women and men can do or cannot do, but also what the Q'ran said about men and women's position in the household. Hence, information that could potentially lead to controversy was conveyed by a respected man, in the local language of the targeted audience and based on stories and religious texts that people could relate and refer to.

https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/12011.pdf

4. The responsibility of current leaders of aid organisations

"Leaders who aim to bring about social transformation in line with feminist goals must provide the vision to challenge these institutional principles [formal rules and informal norms], and their manifestations in organisations." (Rao and Kelleher, 2000: 75)

Current leaders hold power to challenge institutional principles that sustain gender inequalities and can play a pivotal role in transforming organizational culture as they have the ability to influence and mold the beliefs and actions of others. They can offer guidance and direction to adopt new concepts and behaviours (Rao et al., 2005). This can be particularly crucial in settings where cultural norms and traditions may hinder progress.

Men allies and overcoming the 'Queen Bee' syndrome

The literature underscores the difficulty that women encounter in progressing their careers and securing leadership positions, given that organizations have historically been structured by, and for, men. As a result, female professionals require the support of male allies to achieve their goals and succeed in male-dominated environments (Burke in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). When examining the contribution of senior women leaders in promoting their female colleagues, the literature highlights instances where women who were elevated to senior managerial positions have exhibited negative attitudes towards their junior female staff, similar to their male counterparts (Hamplova et al., 2022). This phenomenon was first coined as the "Queen Bee" syndrome in the 1970s (Staines et al., 1974, cited in Hamplova et al., 2022). In an interview, Julie Lyn Hall, former Chief of Staff for the IFRC calls on women to

challenge this negative culture: *"We do have to look honestly at ourselves ... How many of us are truly ensuring that our ceiling really is the floor for those who are younger than ourselves? Or how many of us are actually acting as ladder-kickers — who enjoy that privileged position of having been the first; have thought that we've fought a greater fight than anyone else could fight; and not necessarily helping younger women come up?"* (Watters, 2018). In light of the existing literature, it is apparent that women in leadership positions are often confronted with the need to distance themselves from other women in their organizations to be taken seriously and gain respect (Marvin et al., 2014 in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). This pressure can lead to a situation where women leaders may not prioritize supporting other women in their organizations and may even act in ways that undermine their female colleagues' success. This can include withholding mentorship, promotions, or advocacy for other women, or actively discriminating against them. Such findings suggest that while this may not be a universal phenomenon, there are societal and structural barriers that make it challenging for women in leadership positions to fully support their female colleagues (Ibid.). Therefore, it becomes evident that by promoting a culture of inclusivity, collaborative work environment and shared purpose, organizations can reduce the pressure on women in leadership positions to distance themselves from other women in their organization. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that although women leaders have the capacity and do contribute to supporting other women on their leadership paths, the burden of this responsibility should not be solely placed on their shoulders. Ultimately, fostering an environment conducive to women's advancement in leadership is an organizational obligation.

As highlighted previously, gender expertise is often a prerequisite to advance on gender equality, however, in most organisations, it is neither sufficiently supported nor influential enough to facilitate significant cultural changes. Typically, gender experts are not included in decision-making processes or senior leadership positions (Rao et al., 2005). Without a robust representation of gender equality advocates in decision-making positions, gender issues are unlikely to be fully considered both within the organisation and within its programming.

The importance of female role models in leadership

"Talking about gender in theoretical terms will only achieve so much: more can be done by creating role models which give women a positive image, in the eyes of both men and women" (Chitsike,1995).

Women leaders who have broken barriers and achieved success can serve as powerful examples for other women, demonstrating that leadership positions are attainable and can be successful. This can help to challenge the stereotype that leadership is a male-dominated field (and the reality of the lack of parity) and encourage more women to pursue leadership positions by providing inspiration, guidance, and representation.

For instance, group dynamics can significantly influence women's confidence to express their opinions and deviate from gender norms. When facing individual pressure to conform to subservient gender roles, women may exhibit behaviors and attitudes that align with conventional gender roles. This conforming pressure impedes women from serving as positive role models for other women seeking to challenge gender norms. Consequently,

there is a dearth of affirmative female role models who defy conventional gender roles, which can hinder women from envisaging themselves as leaders or aspiring to positions of power (Ibid.). In contrast, group support can empower women to challenge traditional gender roles while role models help other women to overcome negative self-perceptions. Drawing on her personal experience[15] as a role model, Chitsike (1995) stresses that such models can facilitate more comprehensive societal changes where an increased number of children can learn from the example set by their mothers and sons can recognize that their sisters possess equal potential." (Ibid.)[16].

Indeed, studies have demonstrated that increased representation of women in leadership roles can positively influence the educational and career aspirations of girls (UN news, 2022). The emergence of female role models in leadership positions (for example as NGO Country Directors, board members) can instigate significant social transformations. By witnessing a growing number of women in such influential roles, individuals may gradually shift their values and beliefs towards accepting women as competent leaders, despite any initial resistance or biased perceptions. Exposure to these seemingly unconventional positions can engender changes in social norms and attitudes in a relatively short period (Keohane, 2020; Lu, 2020).

The importance of numerical representation cannot be overstated, as research has shown that increasing the number of women in leadership positions can have a significant impact on reducing feelings of isolation and enabling female leaders to exert their influence more effectively (Hobgood, 2022)[17]. The experiences of female leaders who found themselves in the minority within predominantly male leadership teams underscore the importance of this finding. These leaders reported feeling increasingly isolated as they progressed to higher tiers of leadership, with their gender often making them feel "solitary outsiders" and inhibiting their ability to speak out. However, as their institutions began to expand the cohort of women leaders, some participants reported a greater sense of acceptance and empowerment (Ibid.).

Breaking the Glass Ceiling[18] with the support of mentorship

To support women's leadership, mentorship plays a critical role across the different fields of work and yet research shows that women have fewer opportunities than men to be mentored (Keohane, 2020). Mentorship provides a valuable opportunity for women to learn from the experiences of successful female and male leaders and to develop the skills and knowledge needed to advance in their careers. Women from different sectors have highlighted the importance of mentoring and being encouraged to put themselves forward for a leadership position (Ibid.). The same is true for many women leaders in the aid sector, where

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[15] The author is a Southern person who at the time worked for a Northern Funding Agency. She recalls for example an episode where a father of nine girls asked her to drive all the way to his doorsteps so his girls and wife could see what women are capable and can do many jobs – as men do.

[16] However, the author also warned that these 'strong women' risk suffering emotional trauma as they challenge traditional gender norms.

[17] The research of Hobgood focuses on Emergency Medicine Women Chairs.

[18] The term "glass ceiling" is often attributed to the author and consultant Marilyn Loden (Loden, 1987) and refers to the invisible barriers and obstacles that prevent women and other marginalized groups from advancing to higher positions in the workplace or in society. It describes the systemic and structural biases and discrimination that limit women's access to leadership roles and opportunities for advancement.

self-confidence is often an issue (Root et al., 2019). Women leaders reported navigating challenges through the use of coaches who provided reassurance and strategies for successful change management (Hobgood, 2022). A recent investigation into gender and leadership in conflict-afflicted settings has highlighted humanitarian women's concerns that mentoring is frequently disregarded and not accorded the appropriate value. They have recommended a more structured approach, including incorporating mentorship as a component of job descriptions or performance management assessments. This would require systematic investments from organizations and an acknowledgement that mentorship is critical to nurturing women's leadership capabilities (Meagher et al., 2022).

Women leaders within the aid sector have urged organizations to adopt a proactive approach towards mentoring and cultivating the potential of women (Root et al., 2019). They have also emphasized the importance of sharing their own experiences of how mentoring has facilitated their progression into leadership roles and helped them navigate challenges in their positions (Watters, 2018). Mentors can offer advice on navigating obstacles and overcoming the unique challenges they face as women in leadership positions in the workplace. Dr Joanne Liu, former International President at Médecins Sans Frontières, has been an advocate for mentorship throughout her career, both seeking out her own mentors and now serving as a mentor to other women. In an interview, Dr Liu recommended that women seek out a variety of mentors from diverse backgrounds to broaden their perspectives. Sometimes young women may prefer mentors who share similar backgrounds and experiences, as they may provide more relatable and personal guidance, in contrast to senior mentors who may offer a more distant perspective (Watters, 2018). Furthermore, while mentoring can be an effective tool for facilitating career development and growth, it may not be sufficient in itself to provide the necessary support for women leaders, who often require more extensive assistance to navigate the complex dynamics of their workplaces. In this regard, having sponsors who can provide access to networking opportunities and open doors for female professionals can be particularly beneficial (Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

Mentorship programmes to promote the advancement of women leaders in the aid sector

In India, one of the main objectives of renowned federation of women-led institutions **SEWA Bharat**, is to support informal women workers' rights. They do so through identifying women with leadership qualities unique to their economic situations in the communities they work in, and actively invest in training and helping these women to build bridges and networks within their local contexts, and lead their communities. Selected women undergo entrepreneurial training, governance training and/or facilitation training[19].

The **African Women's Leadership Institute** (AWLI)[20] has been strengthening young African women's leadership capacities since 1997. Hosted by Ugandan organization Akina Mama wa Afrika, the network includes thousands of alumnae and partners spread across Africa and the diaspora who have been instrumental in forming social movements campaigning against gender inequality, women's exploitation, and discrimination. The

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AWLI provides leadership training for young African women who are in leadership positions in women's NGOs, mixed NGOs, government institutions or corporate bodies and other related sectors that promote women's economic empowerment. It teaches self-development and life skills, initiate l for young women to meet and build alliances for individual and professional support, develop a mentoring and role modelling system in order to benefit from the knowledge, skills and expertise of older women and strengthen existing national and regional networks to build and sustain links with the international women's movement.

Women in Leadership Across Organisational Mentoring Programme (WIL AOMP)[21] is an initiative jointly developed by Save the Children UK, the Humanitarian Leadership Academy and Coach Mentoring Ltd. Through connecting people across humanitarian and development member organisations, WIL AOMP aims at providing professional development opportunities for current and developing women leaders. Mentoring usually last between 9 to 12 months. WIL AOMP uses a framework emphasizing the benefits of coaching and mentoring[22] for both the individuals and the organization.

Recently, Save the Children International launched a **Centre Mentoring Programme[23]** in collaboration with the Women's Council. Women are provided with coaching opportunities and other development related programmes such as Leading for High Performance, the Harvard Manage Mentor Programme, etc. (SCI, 2021). Finally, **SCI** is also launching in partnership with MentorcliQ a **mentorship platform for Yemeni women** working in the aid sector. The initiative is around women to women mentorship, supporting mentees to connect with successful women leaders closer to their own lived les and reality as women[24].

Oxfam Trainee entry-level Scheme[25] is dedicated to talents from diverse and under-represented backgrounds (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion and socio-economic backgrounds) to support career development and progression. Oxfam is also providing coaching opportunities specifically to staff who are Black, Indigenous and People of colour.

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[21] https://www.humanitarianleadershipacademy.org/insights/women-in-leadership-addressing-gender-equality-through-mentoring/

[22] Coaching aims to support performance and improvement at work, focusing on specific skills and goals whereas mentoring in the workplace describes a relationship in which a more experienced colleague shares their greater knowledge to support the development of another colleague, generally over a long-term period.

[23] https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/www.savethechildren.net/files/Gender%20Pay%20Gap%202020 22-%20Final_0.pdf

[24] https://www.linkedin.com/posts/rama-hansraj-she-her-11850a2b_duplicate-mentor-application-form-activity-7054781347059351552-0FVz/

[25] https://www.oxfam.org.uk/documents/661/Oxfam_Gender_Pay_Gap_2023_-_Final.pdf

5. Stop penalizing motherhood and support parenthood

"The first and most fundamental obstacle to achieving top leadership in any field is that women in almost all societies still have primary (if not sole) responsibility for childcare and homemaking." (Keohane, 2020).

Today, regardless of location or culture, women consistently perform more unpaid care work[26] than men at every stage of life and no country in the world achieved an equal share of unpaid care work (Dugarova, 2020). Some 10 years ago, women's unpaid care work was already referred as a 'major human rights issue' by the United Nations (UN News, 2013[27]). Inequality in the division of unpaid care work between genders stems from persisting social norms and long-standing disparities influenced by various factors including income, education, age, race, ethnicity, and place of residence. Women who have lower levels of education and income tend to assume a greater burden of unpaid care work when compared to men, particularly women and girls who live in low-income countries, rural areas (The International Labour Organisation-ILO, 2018).

Globally, women perform on average 76% of the total amount of unpaid care work, more than three times as much as men, and the amount women devote to unpaid care work systematically increases when children are present in the household (ILO, 2018). The (ILO) report delves deeper into this issue and refers to the phenomenon as the 'motherhood leadership penalty' meaning the potentially discriminating impacts that having children can have on a mother's career and earning potential. Mothers of young children exhibit the lowest levels of participation in managerial and leadership roles (ILO, 2018). Women with children are often paid less than their childless female counterparts, even when they have the same level of education and experience (Dugarova, 2020). They may also experience promotion denial or limited opportunities for career progression due to the perception that they are less dedicated or competent. In contrast, a more equitable distribution of unpaid caregiving responsibilities among women and men in a household results in an increase in the number of women who occupy managerial positions (Patel et al., 2020; World Bank, 2022).

The task of juggling familial and professional responsibilities carries several repercussions for women, such as withdrawing from the labour market due to inadequate support from their partners in childcare and a scarcity of flexibility within the workplace (Ibid.). The evidence therefore suggests that parenthood is a crucial factor influencing gender equality in career prospects for both women and men, and in all sectors (Patel et al., 2020; Hamplova and al., 2022). In the aid sector, the need to balance professional and familial responsibilities can also impede women's progress in attaining leadership positions in humanitarian work (Oxfam, 2020). This is especially true in a field where working long hours and being on call at any time is often regarded as a measure of commitment and seriousness (Keohane, 2020). This also serves as one of the primary explanations for the underrepresentation of women in surge positions (Ruparel et al., 2017). Additionally, women in surge roles highlighted the absence of support from their partners as a significant barrier to their entry into or continuation in such

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[26] "Unpaid care and domestic work refer to all non-market, unpaid activities carried out in households – including both direct care of persons, such as children or elderly, and indirect care, such as cooking, cleaning or fetching water." (OECD, 2019: https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work/

[27] https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/10/453702

positions (Ibid.). They also reported being frequently asked about childcare arrangements while deployed, whereas such inquiries were never directed at men (Ibid.).

Research also stresses that women encounter difficulties in resuming a role at a level that corresponds to their abilities and prior experience following a period of parental leave (Ibid.). This has led to the development of 'returnship' programmes and even companies to support women (and men) to rejoin the workforce. Workplace policies which promote flexibility, family-friendliness, and sufficient support from leadership and supervisors can be effective tools for improving staff inclusion and retention, particularly those who value work-life balance (OECD, 2016).

Organisational policies and practices to counter parenthood penalty

Best practices from programming can be learned. For example, in Kenya, a project called Weather Wise implemented by the **Network of Climate Journalists in the Greater Horn of Africa** (NECJOGHA) and **BBC Media Action** organized several trainings for journalists. To ensure that women journalists who had young children could attend the trainings, the project budgeted for the women to bring a family member to training opportunities. This provided a solution for childcare and enabled them to fully participate, and therefore not miss out on important training (Vincent, 2021).

In its Gender Pay Gap report (2020), **Oxfam**'s commitments towards a clear, transparent, and inclusive career framework include the provision of support for colleagues on Furlough to ensure that their leave does not impact their career and development opportunities. Oxfam also commits to a flexible by default approach reflected into internal policies and practices to ensure that "having caring responsibilities is never a barrier to someone reaching their full potential at Oxfam, while also valuing care and the important role it plays in our societies." (Oxfam, 2020). The flexible by default approach encompasses supporting job sharing, flexible working options but also supportive policies and training for pregnant women, parents who experienced child loss, etc.

Other international organizations, such as **SCI** also embraced flexible working as part of their organizational culture while focusing less on the number of hours worked per employee and more on agreed deliverables. SCI has also enhanced its shared and parental leave package (SCI, 2021)[28], a path also followed by the British Red Cross (BRC, 2021)[29].

Following an investigation into the underrepresentation of women in surge operations, **ActionAid** undertook specific measures to address the gender imbalance within its surge team. These initiatives commenced with the revision of its surge policy. Of particular note, ActionAid ensured that personnel required to make additional paid care arrangements during deployment would be eligible to receive financial support for such arrangements. Moreover, shorter or non-rapid deployments (lasting less than 4 weeks) are given priority consideration for staff members with caregiving responsibilities, regardless of gender. For

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[28] https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/www.savethechildren.net/files/Gender%20Pay%20Gap%202020 22-%20Final_0.pdf

[29] https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/how-we-are-run/our-finances/gender-pay-gap

deployments lasting over a month, staff caregivers are granted the right to take leave if they so desired to return home (Ruparel et al., 2017).

   Similarly, **Islamic Relief** established a 'Gender Inclusion' Working Group with a central emphasis on devising strategies to facilitate the aspirations of female employees to participate in field deployments. This dedicated working group convenes at regular intervals, actively recognizing and addressing the challenges and obstacles encountered by women engaged in emergency response efforts. The primary objective is to proactively implement measures that support the career progression and deployment opportunities of female staff members within the organization. (Ruparel et al., 2017).

6. Making zero tolerance policies on sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment count

"(...) disproportionate number of men as compared to women on the staff and in leadership positions of humanitarian organizations, which is one reason identified by the key informants for a culture that tolerates abuse. Other factors cited by key informants were the lack of strong mechanisms of accountability, particularly in field operations in remote settings." (Gupta et al., 2023).

Up to 75% of women occupying positions in professional or top management roles have encountered incidents of sexual harassment throughout their lifetime (FRA, 2014 in UN Women, 2019). In a variety of sectors, instances of sexual harassment and gender-based violence can significantly hinder women's prospects for leadership by restricting their opportunities, eroding their confidence and psychological well-being, productivity at work, and establishing a hostile working environment that is incompatible with cooperation or professional advancement (see also UN Women, 2019). Recent studies highlight a "paradox of power" for women ascending the hierarchical ladder: rather than reducing the likelihood of sexual harassment, power in the workplace appears to increase women's vulnerability (McLaughlin et al. in Folke et al., 2020). Sexual harassment is a workplace hazard that amplifies the challenges and costs for women seeking leadership aspirations and, consequently, perpetuates gender disparities in income, status, and agency (Folke et al., 2020). One possible explanation relates to unconscious gender biases of what is considered appropriate behaviors and social roles, and where leadership is frequently regarded as a predominantly masculine pursuit. Thus, sexual harassment can become a means of retaliation aimed at women leaders who transgress roles by occupying positions that have conventionally been associated with men, and challenge established gender-based hierarchies within the workplace (FRA, 2014 cited in UN Women, 2019). While the prevalence of sexual harassment seems to rise as women attain more power in the workplace, incidence of sexual harassment is relatively lower among women occupying uppermost leadership positions, as opposed to those in lower levels of management. In fact, the harassment of

these women was more frequently perpetrated by individuals occupying a position higher than that of their immediate supervisor (Folke et al., 2020).

The global #MeToo movement and its resonance in the aid sector via the #AidToo hashtag have brought attention to the widespread occurrence of harassment, indicative of a deeply entrenched systemic issue relating to power disparities at all levels, including those between genders[30]. The necessity of reforming the culture of aid organisations has been further underscored by debates on the Decolonisation of Aid. Although #AidToo has facilitated the exposure and validation of numerous women's accounts, a prevalent view is that more significant efforts are required to adequately tackle the issue. This requires initiating changes that recognize the dominance of men occupying leadership positions in aid operations and organisations, and which contributes to a 'macho environment' that fosters the propagation of sexual discrimination and harassment (Pater et al., 2020; Spencer, 2018; Gupta et al., 2023). In a study examining the under representation of women in surge within the aid sector, female participants reported encountering obstacles related to safety and security, and voiced concerns regarding potential assaults, as well as instances of sexual harassment or inappropriate behaviors that they personally experienced (Ruparel et al., 2017).

"The same woman shared a story of being patted on the head by a man in a meeting, and when sharing that story with others more than once received the response 'I bet you were upset that he didn't pat you on the bum'" (Ruparel et al., 2017).

Spencer's work in 2018 shed light on the inadequate resourcing and subversion of efforts by aid organisations to address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) through policies. Organisations typically *only engage in efforts to 'mask over' the problem and take action on SEAH only when the media shines a spotlight on them'* (Spencer et al., 2018). Spencer also highlighted a pattern of "compartmentalisation" within organisations, wherein they establish new roles or departments dedicated solely to SEAH policies and their implementation, effectively relieving senior leadership, who possess power and resources, of the responsibility to protect staff. Spencer's research has also brought to light the continued prevalence of unjust practices within aid organisations, such as the protection and advancement of male known perpetrators, even to the extent of being relocated to other locations, whilst female victims of sexual violence, who reported the incidents involving a colleague, ended up being dismissed from their positions. Additionally, Spencer contended that SEAH policies and their implementation were perceived to be more forgiving towards men from the Global North compared to those hailing from the Global South, who were more readily labelled as perpetrators (Ibid.).

Some scholars advocate for organizations to engage in *"sustained and disciplined culture work"* (Vijfeijken, 2019), expressing doubt about the effectiveness of formal policies and regulations in addressing the SEAH related issues. They argue that organizational culture in the aid sector is shaped by informal and covert belief systems where the prevalence of sexual harassment and other manifestations of sexual violence cannot be underestimated (Spencer, 2018; Vijfeijken, 2019).

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[30] But also between international and national staff and/or actors, people belonging to a minority group and people who belong to a majority and of course between aid workers and affected population.

As part of their #ThisIsNotWorking initiative that campaigns for the implementation of a new global law aimed at eradicating workplace harassment and abuse, CARE conducted a global poll across eight countries in 2018. The results of the survey indicate that 23% of men deem "sometimes or always acceptable for an employer to ask or expect employee to have intimate interactions such as sex with them, a family member or a friend" (CARE, website, 2018). Notably, significant differences emerged between countries: in Egypt, this percentage reached as high as 62% for men, while for women in the same country, it was 38%. In India, over half of men (52%) believed that 'it's sometimes (34%) or always (18%) acceptable to rank colleagues based on their appearance" (Ibid.). In the United States, 44% of men aged between 18-34 years stated that 'it's sometimes or always acceptable to tell a sexual joke to a colleague at work" (Ibid.). This underscores the crucial significance of acknowledging the intersectionality of discrimination, which can shape the nature and extent of violence and harassment that women encounter, and the manner in which they are subjected to it. Moreover, it reiterates the fact that deeply ingrained biases and societal gender stereotypes can significantly impact the perceptions and conduct of employees, ultimately placing limitations on women's professional opportunities. Overall, to confront the power imbalance and political nature of sexual harassment and gender-based violence requires acknowledging and addressing the patriarchal norms, culture, and practices prevalent in aid organisations (Spencer, 2018; Gupta, 2023; Naik, 2022; etc.).

Enhancing accountability mechanisms emerges as a crucial factor in combating workplace sexual harassment since it fosters a conducive environment where victims feel heard, believed, and supported, thereby increasing the likelihood of reporting such incidents. For example, Bangladesh's garment workers frequently encounter threats whenever they attempt to raise their voices against instances of abuse (International Labor Rights Forum, 2015 cited in UN Women, 2019). Moreover, accountability mechanisms can promote transformative changes in organisational culture.

Finally, recent studies have highlighted the importance of increasing the representation of women and diversity in the workplace as a protective measure to enhance accountability and, more crucially, challenge impunity (Feather et al., 2021). Promoting diversity, particularly in leadership roles, has been identified as an effective approach to addressing SEAH. Organizations with a more equitable balance of genders and races tend to experience lower levels of sexual harassment in the workplace (Fraser and Muller, 2018, cited in Feather et al., 2021; PEW Research Center, 2018 cited in UN Women, 2019). Outside the aid sector, a recent study found that effective programmes to tackle sexual harassment were those that focused on cultivating a culture of respect and inclusivity in the workplace. Authors suggest that such programmes should be proactive, interactive, and engaging, and should integrate diverse tactics, such as bystander intervention and leadership training (Dobbin et al., 2019).

Learning from a Feminist Accountability Framework (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin, 2021)[31].

The Center for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) have jointly proposed an alternative toolkit to address SEAH, titled "Organisational Safeguarding Best Practices and Procedures: A Toolkit." The aim of this toolkit is to establish transnational, intersectional, feminist accountability frameworks that can respond to exploitative, abusive, harassing, and bullying practices.

The toolkit offers numerous resources for safeguarding the welfare of staff and communities against SEAH and other abusive practices. It adopts a feminist perspective that recognizes the intersectionality of different experiences, providing tools that enable organizations and their staff to gain a deeper understanding of various abusive practices and the types of power that need to be addressed.

Examples of leadership skills based on feminist accountability as an alternative to poor management include:

- Openness to learning and to see problems as learning opportunities.
- Accountability to the different forms of power that one possesses, which may be emotional, relational, or based on positionality, job, or title.
- A spirit of cooperation and solidarity both within an organisation's personnel and with other organisations and actors concerned with social justice.
- Clarity in one's vision and mission linked to economic, social, and political analysis.
- Ability to listen carefully; show concern, acceptance, empathy, steadiness, and reliability; and to encourage self-evaluation.
- Readiness to address topics that are sensitive and challenging to talk about.
- Commitment to decentralise authority and instead foster rotating leadership for instance.
- Respect for all opinions and generosity in the sharing of knowledge and information.

7. Training approaches to support women leadership

"Women need to see themselves as leaders, to internalize a leadership identity; failure to do so may impede their leadership development." (Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

In any initiative designed to nurture women leaders, training and development programmes – whether formal or informal – are crucial components. Such programmes not only equip women with the skills and knowledge required to excel in leadership positions, but

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[31] https://ctdc.org/content/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Toolkit-English-final-WEB.pdf

also instil in them the confidence and support essential to surmount the obstacles they may confront. The development of leadership skills among women, or those aspiring to leadership roles, is often impeded by a range of challenges, including the historical male-centric design of leadership programmes, the masculinist ethos of many organizations, and the gendered perception of leadership as a primarily male domain (Ngunjiri et al., 2017; Lu, 2020). Notably, the majority of leadership research has been carried out by male researchers on male subjects, highlighting the significance of female leadership scholars studying female leaders to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics (Lu, 2020).

Key components for relevant trainings on women leadership development

The work of Ngunjiri and Gardiner (2017) on strategies aimed at developing women leaders yields valuable insights into the factors that need to be taken into account. The following components are based on their typology.

1/ Navigating identity in women's leadership development: the development of women leaders requires an identity-building process that contests assumptions on the attributes of a female leader. Women who occupy leadership roles frequently encounter distinct challenges that are associated with their gender, such as prejudice, stereotyping, and bias, which can render it arduous to negotiate diverse settings and uphold a positive self-assurance (Hernandez et al., 2015 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Leadership development initiatives must encourage women to identify and embrace their strengths, values, and unique perspectives and experiences, particularly in regard to leadership styles (Murphy et al. (2017) Ospina and Foldy, 2009 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Studies have shown that women who adopt behaviours considered to be more masculine may be met with negative attitudes and backlash from colleagues who perceive them as overly aggressive or unlikeable (Keohane, 2020; Gupta et al., 2023). Therefore, it may be counterproductive to teach women to conform to these behaviours, as it may not align with their authentic leadership style and may hinder their career advancement (Ely et al., 2011, Mavin et al., 2014, cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Rather, leadership development programmes should focus on empowering women to lead in a way that is true to their own values and beliefs. By doing so, women can build confidence and become more effective leaders, while also challenging traditional gender norms in the workplace. Notwithstanding, certain academics posit that leadership development programmes carry the potential to compound gender prejudices by assuming that men and women exhibit disparate leadership styles or capabilities (Loumpourdi, 2023).

2/ Intersectionality in leadership development - diverse approaches to leading: in the realm of leadership development programmes, the diversity of women's lived experiences and the challenges they face in the workplace are often overlooked. A more holistic approach to leadership development that recognizes the intersectional identities that women occupy can provide a better understanding of the effects of workplace diversity (or lack of) and the development of appropriate measures to uproot oppressive policies, structures, and cultural norms (Debebe et al., 2014, cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Identities may change in different

cultural milieus, and what works well in one context may not be appropriate in another (Blackmore, 2009, Corlett et al., 2014, Hernandez et al. 2015, all cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

"For example, an individualistic approach to leading that is common in the West may be inappropriate in cultures that have a more collective understanding of leadership. Taking a leadership development program aimed at women in North America and applying it to women in Africa or Asia may not only be ineffective but may also perpetuate the Western cultural hegemony that postcolonial feminist scholars have long argued against." (Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

This requires a new way of thinking, not only about how programmes are delivered but also about how trainers (and which trainers) and participants need to be mindful of differences (Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

3/ Creating safe spaces: programmes offering training for women only (including for women of colour only) supports the creation of a safe and supporting space for identity work. Women need to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences and engaging with their gender and leadership identities, exploring and unpacking issues related to institutional bias for example, which can often be overlooked in mixed-gender or non-specific programmes (Kassotakis & Rizk, 2015 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Within sectors and organizations that are male-dominated, women may perceive that they must confront workplace difficulties by themselves or without the support of colleagues who can empathize with their experiences. As a result, by offering a women-only environment, leadership programmes can establish a feeling of camaraderie and belonging among attendees, which can lead to higher self-assurance and the ability to take initiative and control over workplace challenges (Ely et al., 2011 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017).

4/Networking is key: Establishing strong networks and partnerships between women and minorities can be a powerful tool for promoting gender equality (Rhode, 2017). In a podcast on advancing women leadership in the aid sector, Nasra Ismail, former deputy director of the Somalia NGO Consortium suggested forming a coalition of women from high-income and emerging country contexts to tackle enduring barriers and learn from each other specific experiences (Root et al., 2019). Networks can indeed provide a safe space for women to learn from one another, foster collaboration and solidarity between women from diverse backgrounds, leverage collective knowledge and advocate together for change (Patel et al., 2020; Lee, 2019).

Leadership development programmes can enhance women's networks by building more profound and wider connections. While men are willing to use their networks for multiple purposes and seek career advice from others, women often refrain from doing so as it may not seem genuine (Ely et al., 2011 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). The challenge of building social capital to tap into networks successfully remains a gender gap issue, and women require strategies to find sponsors or allies (Trefalt et al., 2011 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Additionally, networking becomes even more complicated for women when intersecting factors such as race, ethnicity, and national origins come into play, affecting their access to and success in networks (Hernandez et al., 2015 cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Therefore, leadership development programmes must equip women with skills and tools to build and

leverage networks and align them with their leadership style and values, while also addressing the unique challenges they may face (see also Lee, 2019). Furthermore, establishing a women's network is not an end: organisations need to monitor its effectiveness in bringing positive impact on individuals' career development and devise strategies for improvement (Rhode, 2017).

5/ Building a strong leader pipeline through multilevel and longitudinal approach to leadership development: being a continuous process that requires ongoing learning and growth, leadership development involves different levels within an organization over a prolonged duration (Day et al., 2014, cited in Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Training must be customized to suit the various levels of an organization and offer continuous support to help individuals develop as successful leaders over an extended period (Hobgood & Draucker, 2022). This multilevel and longitudinal approach to leadership development enables organizations to establish a strong pipeline of leaders who are capable of driving success and growth overtime (Day et al., 2014).

It is important to recognize though that formal training may not be necessary for all women, as some may already possess the requisite skills and experience, while others may derive greater benefit from obtaining a training certificate to bolster their self-assurance rather than acquiring new skills. The investigation into the underrepresentation of women in surge operations revealed that women may not consistently assert themselves confidently for assignments, particularly when it comes to assuming team leader roles, and that they might require constructive feedback and performance management to affirm their capabilities (Ruparel et al., 2017).

Gender diversity training cannot be isolated and must also target those in power

Women leadership training still need to be implemented alongside broader structural and cultural changes in organizations (Loumpourdi, 2023; Ngunjiri et al., 2017). Due to the persistent and multifaceted obstacles that women encounter in obtaining and retaining leadership positions, it is widely acknowledged that isolated or sporadic gender diversity and inclusivity (GDI) training sessions are inadequate in effecting lasting change. (Global Health 50/50, 2022). As summarised by Day and colleagues (2014: 80), "it is highly unlikely that anyone would be able to develop fully as a leader merely through participation in a series of programmes, workshops, or seminars. [...] ongoing practice through day-to-day leadership activities is where the crux of development really resides". According to a recent survey of global health organizations, regular and in-depth training or discussions on gender diversity and inclusivity (GDI) are considered crucial in promoting a sustained shift in attitudes and behaviours and in developing GDI-related sensitivity and empathy at all levels (staff, leadership, board members, etc). The survey found that training programmes focusing on developing self-reflection and self-awareness of implicit biases were particularly highlighted as effective tools for facilitating individual and organizational change (Global Health 50/50, 2022). The significance of providing such training targeted at senior leadership and board members (the majority of whom are men) cannot be overstated, as these individuals hold a critical role in setting the vision and promoting accountability within an organization (Rao et

al., 2005). Ultimately, women's leadership must be seen not "as women's issues but as organizational priorities in which women have a particular stake. Men must be part of that struggle." (Rhode, 2017: 322).

Promoting GDI through internal networks and affinity groups: strategies for organizational progress.

Organisations in the Global Health sector have identified several effective strategies to promote gender diversity and inclusivity (GDI) in the workplace in addition to training programmes. These include the establishment of internal networks and affinity groups that aim to enhance cross-representation and inclusivity within the organization (Global Health 50/50, 2022). The following are some examples:

- **Network of gender focal points (GFP):** for example, one organisation reported having *"500 GFPs, with an information hub and peer exchange dashboard for these focal points, direct email to communicate with leadership; an annual GFP meeting and three-day retreat, and light temperature checks to assess progress and challenges for improving actions related to GDI-policy commitments"* (Ibid.)

- **Workplace well-being committees**

- **Staff diversity and inclusion groups:** for example, one organisation reported having a *"DEI Council from various offices/countries for discussions and actions tailored to each context/ priority around DEI related issues and led by a new DEI staff lead"* (Ibid).

Fostering gender equity and leadership in programmes and the workplace: a training and awareness approach

Oxfam has developed a training for staff on "Gender Leadership in Humanitarian Action: Institutionalizing Gender in Emergencies: Bridging Policy and Practice in the Humanitarian System"[32]. One of the outcomes of the training is for participants to "recognize the impact of internal organizational practices on programme outcomes on gender equality and to consider how to make their own organization's internal practices more gender responsive."

The training manual provides trainers with guidance on supporting an organisation's staff in understanding the need for internal practices to align with the organization's commitment to gender equality in their programming. Achieving this alignment would require substantial political, institutional, and cultural changes.

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[32] https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/training-manual-gender-leadership-in-humanitarian-action-620215/

Recommendations

This review has provided a set of building blocks for strengthening women leadership, primarily at organization level and in the aid sector. At the onset, initiatives to support gender equality must confront and overcome resistance and apprehension associated to/with this goal. Staff members' beliefs and attitudes are deeply influenced by their cultural backgrounds and the prevalent gender relations within the society they live in.

Deeply ingrained biases and societal gender stereotypes can significantly impact self-perception and the attitudes of employees towards others, ultimately shaping aspirations and professional opportunities. But people may not be aware nor of their own prejudice, neither of the discriminations that others may be subjected to, the extent of it and the consequences on wellbeing, professional development and equality in governance.

By acknowledging this reality, organizational leadership can gain valuable insights to inform a tailored and phased approach to addressing barriers hindering women's advancement to leadership positions. Creating a nurturing environment that fosters inclusivity and safety is instrumental in encouraging staff to voice their concerns, fears, and reservations regarding gender equality initiatives.

Through the compilation of strategies implemented by I/NGOs, and other organizations outside the aid sector, this report concludes with a series of recommendations to partially contribute to address some of the questions raised in the HAG's review, namely: How can organisations be more disruptive and challenge the status quo around women's leadership? How can different approaches be developed to reflect the diversity of women and cultures and their experiences? While the following selection of recommendations is necessarily restricted, one way for organisations willing to move forward to support more women leaders is to identify 'low-hanging fruits' in their context as well as prioritize what can be implemented in a succession of phases.

Building a Foundation for Gender Equality: Starting from within

1. **Conduct a Gender Equality self-assessment:** this internal exercise is crucial to identify existing gender disparities, and power inequalities within the organization's leadership ranks and across different levels (field/main office). The assessment will bring a gender and diversity lens to analyse organisational culture, policies, staffing structure, recruitment practices, promotion patterns, salary scales, representation in decision-making roles and programming. This foundational understanding of how gender gaps persist will serve as the bedrock for establishing a more egalitarian and inclusive environment for all personnel.

2. **Appraise recruitment strategies to ensure their efficacy in facilitating the selection and progression of women into leadership roles.** In particular:

- Offer comprehensive bias-mitigation training to individuals entrusted with the responsibility of conducting recruitment and promotion interviews.
- Establish a prescribed threshold (e.g., 40%) for the representation of under-represented social categories at each stage of the recruitment process.
- Ensure impartial evaluation criteria for selection, for instance, by endorsing the adoption of blind application reviews and structured interview schedules to mitigate unconscious bias.
- Embed the promotion of gender equality within the terms of reference/job description for senior personnel and diligently monitor their performance vis-à-vis these objectives.
- During the selection process for senior staff, incorporate considerations of their understanding, capacities, and commitment to promote gender equality as key criteria.

Intersectionality: supporting women who face multiple systems of oppression

1. **Acknowledge the diverse cultural perspectives on gender equality** to build a strategy tailored to address the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of both women-aspiring leaders and those already in power. Barriers to attain leadership for women and/or Black, Indigenous and People of Colour will not be broken by an all-encompassing intersectionality lens applied everywhere and in the same way.
2. **Prepare for potential backlash:** Although women's rights have progressed, they remained constantly challenged by anti-gender movements in a wide range of settings. Being aware of this and finding allies, building partnerships, and adopting context-specific strategies can support women's and marginalized groups' active pursuit of leadership roles.

Gender data and effective awareness for action

1. **Collect and analyse sex-disaggregated and gender-sensitive data** to document gender gaps within the organisation and set a baseline to monitor progress. Hold leaders accountable for achieving gender equality targets and promote transparency in decision-making processes.
2. **Raise awareness to support women leadership as part of a wider effort to change norms,** by targeting the audience, focusing on actionable messages, knowing the barriers well and selecting the right messenger(s).
3. **Assess and share the impacts of initiatives to reduce gender inequalities**, including what works, what does not work and why, and what effect does supporting women leadership bring to the organisation.

The responsibility of current leaders in aid organisations

1. **Retain women in leadership positions**. Monitor progress in reducing the gender gaps, and turnover rates and identify barriers for women to remain in leading positions, bearing in mind the disproportionate unpaid care work women are tasked with outside of their organization. Invest in incentives tailored to the needs of women leaders.
2. **Foster a culture of inclusivity by making role models visible and accessible within the organization:** find the right channel/platform to enable role models to tell their stories, to challenge stereotypes, and to inspire others. By sharing their coping strategies and lessons learned, role models can make the aspiration of work-life integration tangible and attainable for others. Ensure that a diverse range of role models is represented as this will help resonate with a broader audience.
3. **Invest in mentoring** over an extended period to provide longitudinal support for leadership development in the day-to-day work. Ensure diversity[33] in mentorship opportunities, with particular emphasis on women at early and mid-career stages as mentees.

Stop penalizing motherhood

1. **Foster a culture that recognizes and values caregiving and parenthood:**
   - Strive to provide flexible work arrangements for all employees, and comprehensive support for working parents, including affordable childcare, and paid shared parental leave. When possible, go beyond the minimum required by law.
   - Challenge gender stereotypes that limit women's career opportunities by promoting the view of motherhood/parenthood as a valuable asset rather than a liability, and encouraging equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities between men and women. Use inclusive language such as "parental" or "family leave" instead of "maternity leave" to define caregiving more broadly.
   - Adopt equitable paid parental leave policies, giving equal weight to both maternity and paternity leave, thus promoting gender-transformative ideals of familial responsibility and addressing the gender pay gap.
   - Encourage openness from both male and female leaders who are parents, fostering a culture where employees feel empowered to take on their caregiving responsibilities.

2. **Support parents upon their return to work** by implementing practical measures that facilitate a smooth transition and have a positive impact on women's leadership:
   - Provide a supportive breastfeeding environment within the workplace and facilitate childcare options suitable to the context.

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[33] Women to women mentoring; men to women mentoring; Global North -Global south mentoring, etc.

- Offer personalized support to help parents, particularly mothers, navigate the challenges of returning to work, and address their needs (e.g., flexible working arrangements).

Making zero tolerance policies count: a call to action for operationalizing policies on SEAH to Promote Women's Leadership

1. **Establish transparent, safe, reactive, and easily accessible complaints procedures within the organisation. In doing so consider:**
   - Ensuring the preservation of confidentiality in handling reports of sexual harassment while maintaining transparency regarding the process and disclosure of information.
   - Obtaining the victim's informed consent before initiating any formal reporting process
   - Clearly outlining both informal and formal procedures.
2. **Conduct regular climate surveys[34] to demonstrate an organisational commitment to addressing sexual harassment and promoting a safe and inclusive workplace.** Climate surveys can serve as a foundation for evidence-based decision-making and the implementation of effective interventions that support women's leadership; for example, they can support in:
   - Assessing the prevalence of sexual harassment including the frequency and types of sexual harassment incidents experienced by employees.
   - Evaluating employee confidence in filing complaints[35]: creating an environment where women feel comfortable reporting harassment is crucial for fostering women's leadership.
   - Identifying underlying causes and contributing factors that may perpetuate sexual harassment and identify specific areas for improvement, such as policies, procedures, or training programs.

3. **Disaggregate data on violence and harassment in the workplace based on various dimensions** such as gender, age, ethnicity, and position. This detailed analysis of data allows for a deeper understanding of the specific experiences and vulnerabilities faced by different groups, including women. Disaggregating data can help uncover intersectional dynamics and identify disproportionate impacts on specific groups of women to inform tailored prevention strategies.

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[34] https://hr-survey.com/ClimateSurvey.htm
[35] This data is essential for understanding barriers that may deter victims from coming forward, such as fear of retaliation or disbelief.

Training approaches to support women leadership across the organisation

1. **Learn from programming:** "organisations should draw on their experiences in bringing about behavior and norm change within communities – this time applying the lessons internally" (Lokot, 2021).
2. **Invest in trainings with both the content and format carefully tailored to the targeted group:**
   - For women-aspiring leaders, training must be continuous and tied to day-to-day work and responsibilities; they must help with identity building, create safe spaces to voice concerns, and support networking.
   - For others and particularly for those holding power, regular and in-depth training or discussions on gender diversity and inclusivity, focusing on developing self-reflection and self-awareness of implicit biases, help in promoting a sustained shift in attitudes and behaviours.
3. **Networks, both internal and external are key to maintain pressure:** alongside trainings, networks of gender champions, or women's constituencies, can continuously emphasize the importance of gender equality and hold into account leaders of organizations to fulfill their responsibilities.

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