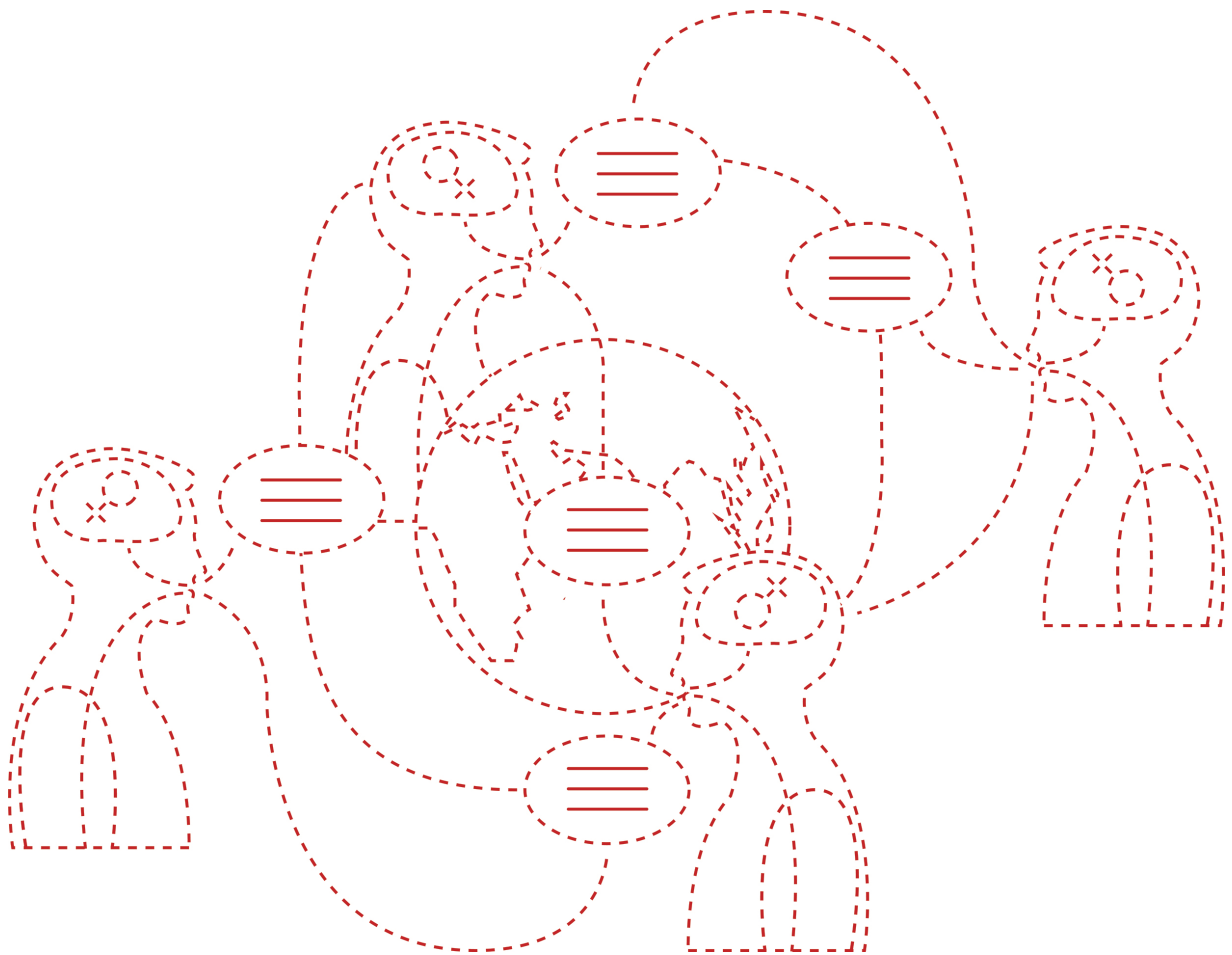


Women's Leadership in International Development NGOs



A collaborative action research project

Contents

Women's leadership in international development NGOs	p. 3
In our view - a note from the facilitators	p. 3
The research approach	p. 4
Summary of findings	p. 6
Understanding the data	p. 7
Benchmarking awareness	p. 10
The changing nature of NGO leadership	p. 13
Bringing about change	p. 19
In Summary	p. 23
References	p. 24

Women's leadership in international development NGOs

The movement for women's empowerment and gender equality is a critical strategic priority for many development organisations in the not-for-profit sector. However, there remains a lack of awareness and knowledge as to the level of gender equality¹ in leadership across the NGO² sector. This collaborative research project was driven by a desire to build awareness and knowledge to fill this gap.

Women make up 66% of the voluntary sector workforce but make up less than 26% of the most senior executives in the top 100 UK headquartered charities.³ There is also a significant differential in the number and seniority of women in leadership in the international development sector. International NGOs (INGOs) are leading the way in the movement for gender equality and women's empowerment in their work in the 'external' world, yet we have mostly neglected to check that internal ways of working reflect these same gender equal values. In addition to this, recent research suggests that there is a positive relationship between gender diversity and corporate performance with studies showing improved financial results, performance stability during the economic downturn, and better overall management and decision-making.⁴ This suggests that gender equality in our leadership teams is more than a 'nice-to-have': it can be key to an organisation's success.

In our view - a note from the facilitators

As OD⁵ consultants we have worked with many INGO's across the sector on leadership development and culture change. We have both had the benefit of working with many highly skilled, ambitious and effective female leaders making powerful contributions to the work of their organisations. However, we notice that despite their success, women at every managerial level are experiencing some of the same challenges progressing into leadership as those in other sectors, as highlighted by the Women Count Report in 2012.⁶ Even in those organisations where there is a female CEO or balanced gender representation at Executive Team and Board level, there are unconscious⁷ biases and assumptions that constrain the opportunity for female leaders to maximize their potential and contribution to the sector.

¹ In reference to gender equality, the focus of this research only looked at equality between women and men. References to gender equality therefore do not extend to other aspects of gender such as LGBTQI. The particular focus remained on women's empowerment.

² NGO - A non-governmental organisation.

³ Jarboe, N. (2012). Women Count Report 2012. P.19.

⁴ Desvauz, G., Devillard-Hoellinger, S., & Baumgarten, P. (2007). Women matter: Gender Diversity, a corporate performance driver. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from: <http://www.europeanpwn.net>

⁵ OD – Organisation Development.

⁶ Jarboe, N. (2012). Women Count Report 2012.

⁷ Unconscious bias – This is what Hogrefe calls our unintentional preferences, formed by our socialisation and experiences. We are constantly processing information, often without conscious awareness. Unconscious biases act as short cuts to make sense and draw conclusions, influencing everything from strategic decisions to interactions with colleagues. There is growing focus on drawing awareness to these biases which may be affecting the way we unconsciously make sense of gender differences in the workplace.

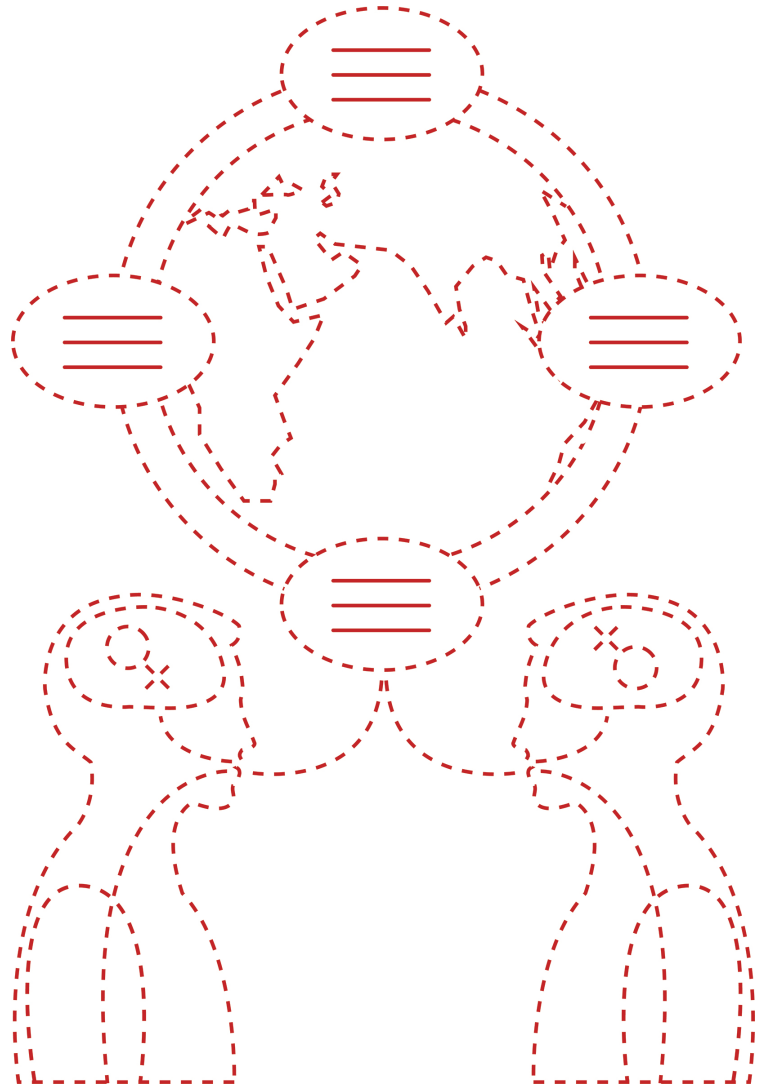
As we know, these challenges are not exclusive to the NGO sector. Yet the issue comes into greater focus because gender equality and women's empowerment are core to the strategic priorities of so many INGOs working on poverty and rights based issues. Despite some efforts by some organisations to support women to develop as leaders, in 2012 men still held the most senior executive position in over 70% of the largest UK headquartered charities.⁸ We focused on the opportunity and desire for the leaders of our INGOs to hold a mirror up to themselves, to raise awareness of the incongruence between externally expressed values and internal cultures and to become exemplary in gender equal leadership practice.

The research approach

The research project was guided by the principles of participative action research. The focus of action research is on learning through doing; participants take action in their organisations, and then reflect on these actions within a small community of expert peers. Action research provides a way of working with people who have similar interests and concerns as co-researchers, drawing on their expertise and experience to develop new insights and shared knowledge.

Five female leaders, all from different INGOs, formed the 2014 - 2015 research group:

- Concern Worldwide
- International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)
- Oxfam GB
- Plan International
- World Vision UK



⁸ Jarboe, N. (2012). Women Count Report 2012. P.19

Facilitated by Katy Murray⁹ and Sarah Fraser¹⁰, both experienced OD consultants in the NGO sector, the group met six times over a seven-month period. During each session the group worked to clarify the issues of leadership, women's empowerment and gender equality / diversity, define the critical questions and identify actions to find the answers in their organisations. The meetings provided a space for wise collective reflection, appreciative inquiry (clarifying what is working), and identification of the changes emerging. Changes came from the researchers taking practical actions and asking questions in their own organisations, as well as from individual explorations into their own leadership journeys through peer-to-peer coaching. The women were simultaneously designers and stakeholders, improving the knowledge, strategies, and practices of the environments within which they operate.

The value of an action research approach is in acting on insights, changing and improving things in the process, rather than waiting for conclusions, proof or judgement, by which time the environment and needs may well have moved on. Action is taken at the moment that the need for change is recognised, enabling and encouraging active agents of change. As a result the findings outlined below are based on experience and provide practical solutions to, rather than a theoretical perspective on, what it takes to enable gender equality in INGO leadership.

Being part of the Women in NGO Leadership research process has been an exceptional, yet also mysterious and empowering learning experience, both personally and professionally.

The Action Learning process enabled me to learn from the experience of others whilst at the same time being able to input my own personal and professional experience. We developed a safe space to explore our thinking, build on our experience and even challenge our own assumptions and stereotypes. Action learning at this level is creative and dynamic – creating an environment which generates new and innovative approaches. What I noticed was the process was a vehicle for work and thinking I wanted to do and gave me a framework to approach my research in a way that felt authentic and accessible.

The research took various forms. Interventions included interviews, women's leadership events, data gathering and analysis, mentoring, as well as desk research. The following data is practical, experiential and expert, and forms the basis of the collective insights and recommendations from the research group.

Please note - the perspectives and data presented represent that of the research group and the individuals involved, not necessarily that of their organisations as a whole.

⁹ Director, Katycatalyst: www.katycatalyst.co.uk

¹⁰ Director, Mayvin Ltd: www.mayvin.co.uk

Summary of findings

The issues are not new, unknown or insurmountable, but they are part of the complex fabric of organisational cultures that are not simple to overcome. The group found that through small, but intentional actions they were enabling a bigger conversation about gender and leadership in their organisations. Armed with growing knowledge and data, as well as insight into their own biases and self-made barriers, they could support themselves and others to explore the potential for a gender equal leadership culture.

We need a change in our culture to align internal workings with what we're putting out externally.

We want to create a culture of recognising gender equality to be in the DNA of our organisation.

As the research programme progressed several key findings emerged, the first and most important being that there is a disparity between men and women in leadership positions in many INGOs. The group recognised a need to raise organisational awareness around the lack of data and/or action on pay parity and role parity¹¹ in the first instance, as well as benchmarking general awareness around gender equality and leadership. The gathering and analysis of data was not seen as a solution in itself, but a step to understanding the issues in each organisation and knowing what was needed to create change.

In addition to this the group concluded that change would not come from a new policy, a women's leadership workshop, or a few more female directors. This is a 'wicked problem'¹²; a problem that needs a solution to which the right questions have yet to be identified and a solution by no means obvious. In fact the group found the need to change the research question we started with in the process. Instead of focusing on the barrier for women progressing into leadership roles in their organisations, what emerged was a need to better understand what we value in our leaders. From this the group saw greater opportunity for women to recognise how their existing strengths were valued, rather than working on the assumption that it is the women who need to change.

This is a great example of how 'wicked problems' can best be progressed through collaborative, creative and relational responses. The group identified that what is needed is change leaders to take small but vital steps to shift understanding and start a new conversation about the nature of INGO leadership as a vehicle to bring to light and dispel the unconscious biases and unseen barriers that go unspoken. It was also recognised that some were already further down this path than others.

Finally, the actual process and dominant approach to creating change by the research group highlighted the value that women in their organisations placed on opportunities to share their experiences in developing as leaders, to

¹¹ Role parity refers here to an analysis of the ratio of men to women at the same grade at every level in the organisation.

¹² Pedler. (March 2012). Action Learning Research & Practice, Vol 9 No.1

learn from each other and gain support to do things differently. It was not about learning new skills or developing weaknesses, but rather about making sense of what value women already bring as leaders.

Through data and benchmarking, and cross-organisational conversations for change, the group saw indications that INGOs can help themselves to shift the nature of leadership from the inside out.

Through the process, four key themes emerged:

1. **Understanding the data** - The need to collect data and then use it to raise awareness of pay and role parity between men and women within the organisation
2. **Benchmarking awareness** – The value of benchmarking gender awareness to build a case and focus for change
3. **The changing nature of INGO leadership** - Recognition of the changing nature of INGO leadership, understanding women's leadership journeys within this and benchmarking levels of awareness on gender equality
4. **Bringing about change** - The tools and approaches to bring about the leadership culture change

1. Understanding the data

Defining the issue:

- Not all organisations were able to provide data, with some noting they were not currently tracking pay parity between men and women, but this clearly remains an issue. The group found some evidence of small but existing pay gaps between men and women, with external data¹³ showing a more challenging picture of the issue.
- All organisations represented showed gender imbalances across different grades and departments, with more men in senior leadership positions, and more women in more junior roles.

Researching the issue:

Each member of the group approached their organisation to gather data on both pay and role parity. Both their experience of asking the questions, the responses received and the data available were revealing. For most, these issues of parity did not receive much attention within their organisation and it was clear that there was more the researchers could do to use data and benchmarking to encourage change.

¹³ Lewis, Rowena. (2010). Close to Parity -Clore Leadership Report

There was a range of responses, from 'resistance' to 'action'...

The organisation did not particularly warm to being asked for this information. Reasons included the difficulty in pulling the information together and the fact that it could reveal personal data. In terms of role parity, the head office data revealed a classic triangle with one anomaly, with more women at the bottom of the formal organisational hierarchy and fewer at the top. Of the staff working part-time, the majority are women. The anomaly was found at the team manager level where there is an equal number of men and women.

Figures are not available and this does seem to cause some frustration amongst some female staff – the reality of not having the figures available fuels the perception that the organisation has something to hide and is not transparent. Female staff have cited staff retention amongst key women leader positions and lack of flexible working as reasons for the loss of good female staff.

The organisation had not previously monitored data on pay and role parity but felt comfortable being asked for the information. They were interested to see the results and going forward are open to incorporating this into regular reporting.

The organisation recognises the importance of monitoring and measuring both. Role parity data is monitored, reported and shared quarterly, primarily with leaders. When asked it was freely shared within the group. The gender imbalance, particularly at senior levels, is recognised and positive actions are in place to help address this. Pay parity is monitored but not generally reported or widely shared. However, the organisation would welcome the opportunity to benchmark this data with other INGOs. This organisation also conducts a quarterly engagement survey and monitors gender specific responses to a number of questions, including leadership. Results are shared internally with all staff

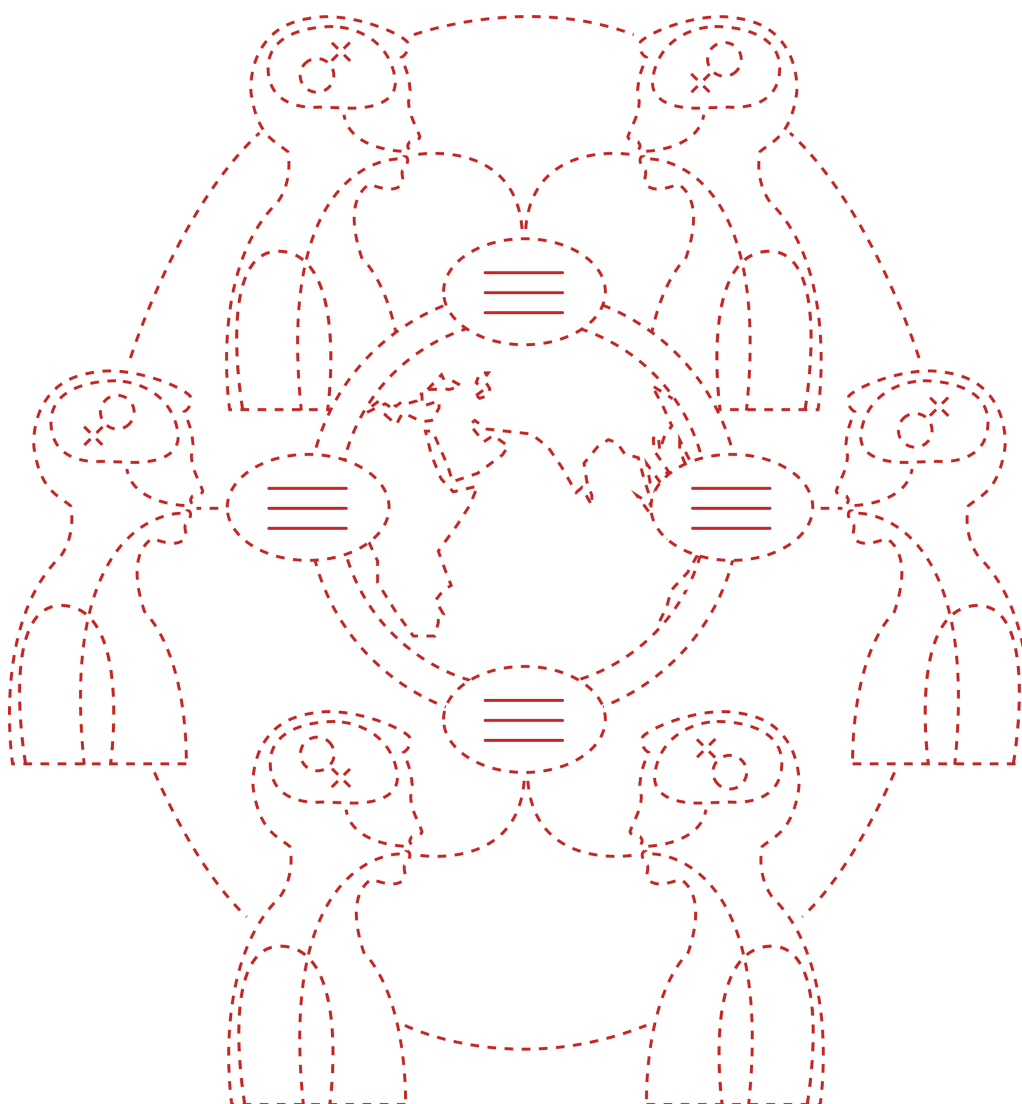
The organisation recognises that both of these (pay and role parity) need to be measured and reported on a regular basis to drive organisational change. Data regarding both pay and role parity was freely shared ... at the international head office, and was included in the assessment report which was made available to all staff. The data revealed a slight gender imbalance in the average salary by grade and gender, and indicates furthermore that while female staff constitutes the majority of the international head office, there are gender imbalances across different grades and departments, with more men in senior leadership positions. Furthermore, Directors fees were published in the annual report, by name, which revealed pay by gender within the groups of directors.

What we know now:

There appears to be limited organisational and individual awareness around the current lack of parity between men and women when it comes to seniority and pay. All five organisations involved found there was a majority of women at the more junior levels, and a significantly smaller ratio of women to men in senior leadership roles. This was found to be compounded by a lack of clarity around pay parity. Not all organisations track and report on pay and role parity, yet this is recognised as essential to drive change. The 2011/2012 annual pay survey of the UK Association of Chief Executive Officers of Voluntary Organisations reports a pay gap of 16% between male and female chief executives in voluntary bodies with the pay gap rising to almost 30% for some roles. The Clore

Report¹⁴ also raised the issue in 2010 that women do not tend to negotiate salary.

The issue of pay and role parity is not high on the agenda for many INGOs. The concern is that for many INGOs there is little discussion around differences and biases go unspoken. As noted: *'The voluntary sector pay gap is all the more insidious for the fact that women working in the sector simply don't know that the gap exists'*.¹⁵ The critical issue is to raise awareness and ensure individuals take responsibility, whether in the role of organisational policy makers, recruiters or individuals managing, leading and developing themselves and others in these organisations to work towards equality. Organisations fighting for gender equality in the world need to do more to ensure internal congruence with their outwardly expressed values and priorities.



¹⁴ Lewis, Rowena. (2010). Close to Parity -Clare Leadership Report

¹⁵ Lewis, Rowena. (2010). Close to Parity -Clare Leadership Report

Recommendations for action:

Regular review and open reporting on pay and role parity between women and men across all grades within your organisation to track progress and increase transparency on this data for all.

Develop organisation wide policies and practices that enable men and women to thrive as leaders, e.g. flexible working policies.

Use data to inform HR and Talent/OD strategies to support women in their journey to leadership. This should include working with all managers (male and female) and teams on 'unconscious bias'¹ in order to achieve a more balanced ratio across all departments and grades.

2. Benchmarking awareness

Defining the issue:

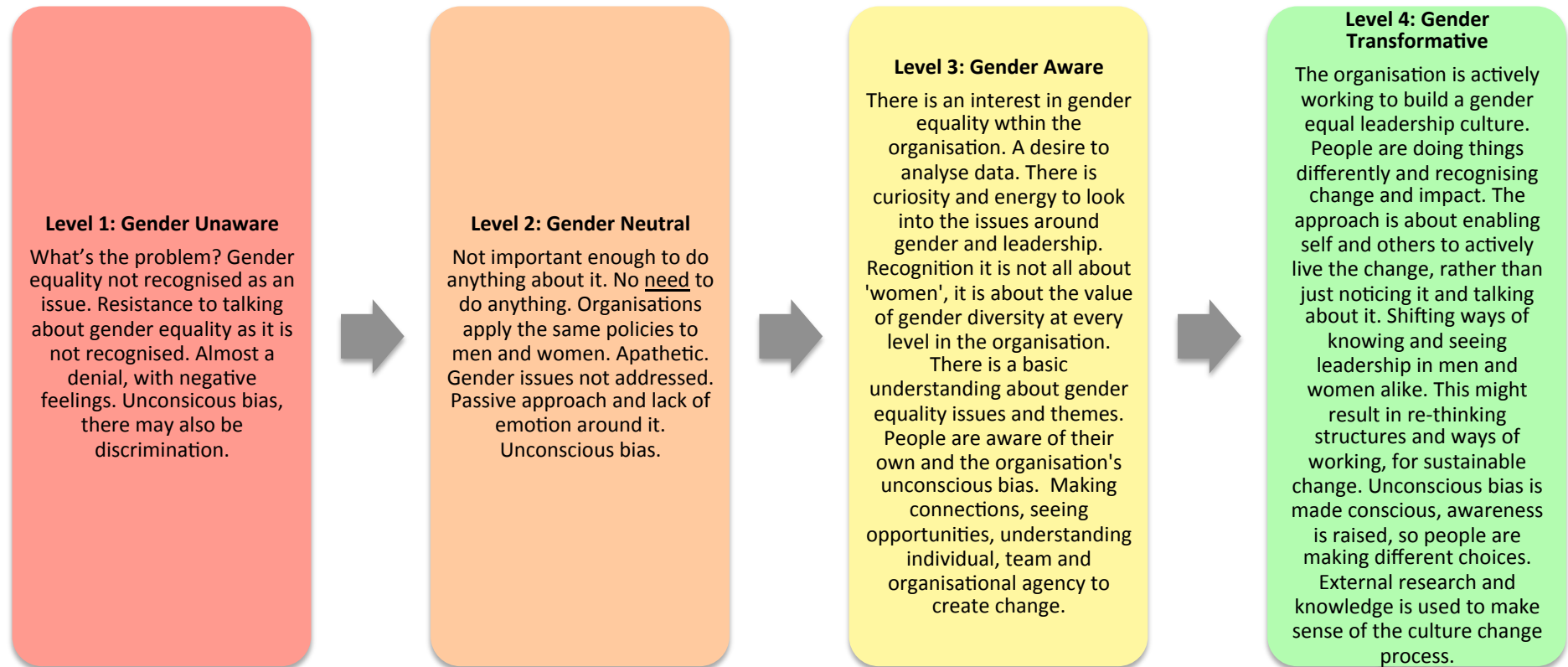
- There are varied levels of gender equality awareness at an organisational level, with no comparable data on what good looks like.
- It is unclear on where to start if organisations want to make a shift towards greater gender equality in their leadership culture.

Researching the issue:

Through the research, the group built on an approach developed at Plan International and used in its Gender Equality Self-Assessment (GESA) process, conducted across the organisation in 2014.¹⁶ The assessment looked at four different levels of gender awareness. The research group developed the definitions of these four levels for sector-wide benchmarking and self-assessed themselves and their own organisations as part of the process.

¹⁶ The GESA is a participatory reflection process that encourages staff to assess an office's promotion of gender equality and develop recommendations for improvement.

Gender Equality Awareness Scale



What we know now:

Using the **Gender Equality Awareness Scale** we found each level was recognisable across the individuals and organisations represented in the research group. This assessment process proved an invaluable tool to recognise not only the status quo, but also more importantly the potential and focus for change to move to the next level.

Highlights of sample assessment discussions:

Self-assessment:

- **Pre-programme 'Level 2'** – *'previously gender issues wouldn't have registered'*
- **Post-programme 'Level 3'** – *'I now pick up on things in conversations, in workshops I notice gender dynamics. I also see it in my own team, such as giving a woman positive feedback and they always deflect it.'*
- **Ambition 'Level 4'** – *'I am definitely wanting to shift to living and working in a way that is gender transformative.'*

I noticed the difference in me as I progressed through the programme, growing in confidence and enthusiasm. Partly this was due to not feeling on top of the topic at the start, I know I'm someone who needs the information and research. As I acquired this, my attitude changed and I now recognise my potential to make a difference, no matter how small. If I could get other women ... feeling the same way, how great would that be?!

Organisational assessment:

- **Currently 'Level 2'** – *'We've got lots of women around and great women managers and it's part of our strategy. But there is limited awareness of how this is lived internally. Some people would take awareness-raising as criticism.'*
- **Next steps for 'Level 3'** – *'Potential to move from Level 2 to greater awareness at Level 3. This research report and recommendations could highlight inconsistencies, what we are doing and not doing.'*
- **Moving towards 'Level 4'** – *The organisation is aware, but shifting.... We have a report coming out [on gender equality] and [we are] developing an action plan, pushing strategies forward. There is a shared belief that we must be able to do this... so pushing for Level 4.*

Recommendations for action:

Use the Gender Equality Awareness Scale as a tool to benchmark gender equality awareness at individual, team and organisational levels. Diagnose where the organisation is now, as well as the next level to work to, identifying focus and strategies for change.

Create a context to explore perceptions of gender equality in the leadership culture of your organisation. From this, identify the perceived barriers for women to build the case and focus for change in the context of the Gender Equality Awareness Scale benchmark.

There is the opportunity to use the INGO network to share learning and build a body of knowledge and tools that accelerate change at each level of the Gender Equality Awareness Scale.

3. The changing nature of INGO leadership

Defining the issue:

The key emerging question is around what is the best leadership for our organisations in the world in which we live and work today. What is important in leadership seems to have changed – the group agreed that they were looking for something different in themselves and in others.

- INGOs lack internal congruence with their outwardly expressed values and priorities on gender equality. This is not just in terms of values, but behaviour, unconscious bias and assumptions.
- There is a huge range of knowledge and analysis on leadership in the NGO sector. This analysis is not, in itself, creating change and there is a mismatch between the leadership culture desired, and that which we find. 'Masculine' behaviours continue to dominate the common leadership styles.¹⁷
- There is limited understanding of the specific nature of leadership demanded within the INGO sector due to the risk, pressure and global reach of the work.

¹⁷ Gerzema, J. & D'antonio, M. (2013). The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future.

Researching the issue:

Research was conducted in all five agencies, exploring the question 'what does it mean for us to be women leaders' through a variety of focus groups and interview formats as well as through reflection on the researchers' own experiences as female leaders within the sector.¹⁸ Here are some examples of how the researchers found themselves working with changing definitions of what great leadership looks like.

As the pre-cursor to a Leadership Development Programme (LDP) that was to be rolled out across World Vision UK in 2015, and involve our top 63 leaders, the first task was to define what 'good' leadership looked like for us at this time and going forward. We were intentional although not explicit regarding gender bias awareness and, as far as possible, about creating a model that articulated what a good leader looked like irrespective of gender. The emergent behavioural framework is encapsulated in the acronym SERVES and stands for the following core behaviours:

Seek to influence - listen to understand

Empower and energise others

Release potential - in yourself and others

Vulnerability in our strength

Expect the best - hold yourself and others accountable

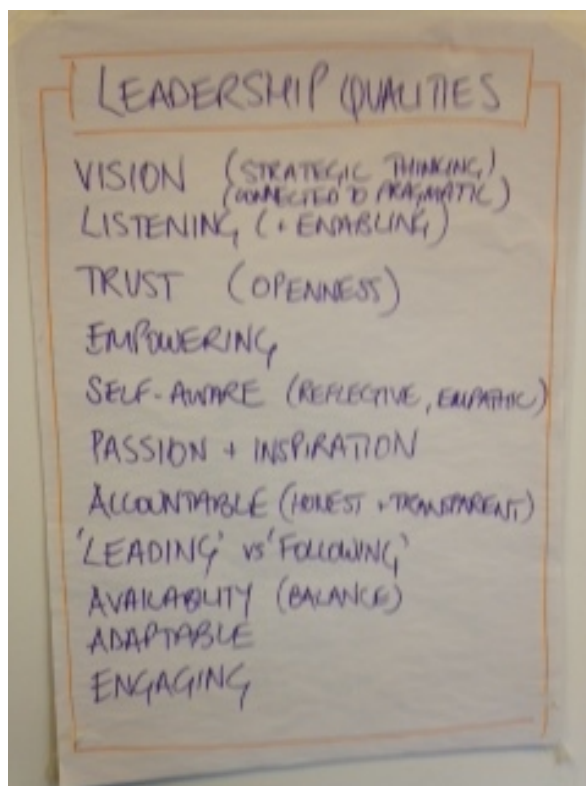
Show the way - collaborate to achieve

I was mindful of gender diversity when facilitating the discussions and focus groups that grappled with what the role of a leader should look like for our organisation moving forward and when listening and noticing the responses. This enabled me to ask some pertinent questions to ascertain the data required to develop the framework. The result, I feel, is a richer, more rounded framework with a diversity of behaviours that might not have been present had I not intentionally applied this lens. Working with this collaborative research programme gave me an opportunity to discuss my approach and be more intentional about it.

We need to hold our own definition of leadership tightly – to hold ourselves accountable and also role model.

¹⁸ See Appendix for some detailed case studies.

A collaborative action research project



Results of all this are clear – in 2008 when the Country Director joined there was one female manager on management, when she left in 2012 there was a 50/50 balance at least in Nairobi.

I am the Chair of a small domestic rights charity. I have realised that I feel and act differently in that role compared to the way I behave in my paid INGO role. The title of 'Chair' and the formal recognition of the position as a leadership role help, but the main difference comes, I think, from the way others relate to me, what they expect from me, as well as from what I expect from myself. I still work in a facilitative and consensus building style but the imperative for me to make decisions, set direction and clarify priorities feels stronger. The facilitators and group process helped me to see that I was not 'stepping up' and using the leadership skills I was demonstrating as Chair as much as I could be in my INGO role. They challenged me on this. What stood out for me as I thought about this more were two questions: first what was I taking and not taking responsibility for and second how was I seeing myself in my INGO role including in relation to colleagues? I also realised that I was not recognising when I had shown leadership: not giving myself credit for what I was already doing and achieving. I see that these aspects, the inner and the external, are inter-related.

After reading a number of inspiring books (such as Sheryl Sandberg's book 'Lean in') sharing articles, stories and experiences with my colleagues throughout the research process, and deciding to wear my 'gender lenses' a little more often, I soon noticed that I had in fact adopted the role of 'victim in a patriarchal world', which was not very different to what I had seen amongst some women I had worked with in South Africa. I recognised that rather than seeking to actively change some of the critical factors, influences and attitudes in my life, I was simply analysing my context within a tight framework of oppression and largely complaining about it, rather than managing it. I saw that I had in fact rendered myself powerless, almost as a way of justifying my lack of courage in making a change. No doubt the barriers were there, but I felt it was time that I learned how to identify them more clearly, and then tackle them the best I could with the resources and imagination I had.

What we know now:

Having explored various approaches to leadership, the research group recognised the need to address the question - **what do we value in our leaders?** As questioned in the Athena Doctrine, '*What kind of leadership do we want – what is a good leader for our organisation?*'¹⁹ This challenged the initial premise of the research, to identify the barriers to female leadership and how to overcome these. The group concluded that their organisations were in need of, or already moving towards, a different type of leadership that more explicitly values mutually empowering behaviours and skills, commonly associated with feminine leadership traits.²⁰

¹⁹ Gerzema, J. & D'antonio, M. (2013). The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future.

²⁰ Fletcher, J.K. (1998). Relational practice: A feminist reconstruction of work. Journal of management inquiry, 7(2), 163-186.

The group drew on The Athena Doctrine²¹ research. This extensive research study interviewed 64,000 people around the world about what it means to be 'feminine' and 'masculine', correlating this with leadership, morality and happiness. Most significantly the traits identified as more 'feminine' than 'masculine' correlated more strongly with a successful approach to leadership, in order to work with the complexity of contemporary global issues.²² All these qualities are of course available to men and women, so this highlighted the need to better understand the leadership qualities valued in INGOs, challenging assumptions on where changes in behaviour were needed.

The interviews, discussions and self-reflections shared by the group highlight a persistent mismatch between the current leadership culture in the researchers' organisations and what is wanted. Although there is much overlap between dominant masculine and feminine leadership qualities, many of the behaviours and skills of mutually empowering feminine leadership get 'disappeared' by both men and women alike.²³

I've been reflecting that as women, do we have to add 'extra'? Do we have to add 'difference'? No, we don't, and that's ok and that's fine.... We can still demand that there is equality.

Our identity as women leaders²⁴ is socially constructed – as we act in the world, we receive feedback that then shapes our next response and our sense of our identity. We therefore need to be more explicit and speak out about the leadership behaviours we are valuing and want more of. There is a need to recognise different qualities, behaviours and ways of working which are more strongly associated with what it means to be feminine (See footnote 22 for examples)²⁵. Through this, organisations can create a shared sense of what a good leader is and start to shift behaviours and uncover self-limiting barriers. Some of the research group experienced this for themselves.

What does it mean for us to step into our power? How can I be myself, and be authentic as a woman in the position I'm in?

I can make a choice to be who I want to be in this space, and not be defined by my perceptions of what others think of me and be defined by that.

²¹ Gerzema, J. & D'antonio, M. (2013). The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future.

²² Qualities cited included: connectedness, humility, candor, patience, empathy, trustworthiness, openness, flexibility, vulnerability, balance – well-balanced sense of purpose. From John Gerzema and Michale D'antonio. (2013). The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future.

²³ Fletcher, J.K. (1998). Relational practice: A feminist reconstruction of work. Journal of management inquiry, 7(2), 163-186.

²⁴ Ibarra, H. Ely, R. and Kolb, D (Sept 2013) 'Women rising the unseen barriers' HBR reprint. <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers>

²⁵ Gerzema, J. & D'antonio, M. (2013). The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future.

We can see from the research reported above and further evidence in the case studies (see Appendix), that the research group want to see a move towards valuing a leadership approach that is more relational, collaborative and mutually empowering.²⁶ It takes self-awareness and reflection with others in order to work in this way, in what remains a hierarchical and, to a great extent, masculine environment. The research group recognised that you cannot 'tell' others how to do this; it is not a training download of information. It is more exploratory, experiential and personal, so what is needed are new ways to support individuals and organisations to engage in the process of changing behaviour.

You can't simply train managers in how to address these issues. The awareness needs to be there before people are open to it. Finding ways to create awareness is the key. This is difficult as it's a sensitive area. People get uncomfortable and even defensive about it.

What this means in practice is working across the organisation to identify the behaviours we value in our leaders, assessing where these are in need of development and then supporting people to develop new skills and levels of awareness to bring these to life.

Being mindful of gender diversity when facilitating the focus/discussion groups that grappled with what the role of a leader should look like for our organisation moving forward ... has resulted in a richer, more rounded framework with a diversity of behaviours that might not have been present had I not intentionally applied this lens.

²⁶ Mutually empowering - relational activities associated with another i.e. empowering others to achieve. From Fletcher, J.K. (1998). Relational practice: A feminist reconstruction of work. Journal of management inquiry, 7(2), 163-186.

Recommendations for action:

Put gender equality on the leadership agenda. Define what is valued in your leaders, exploring unconscious bias, assumptions and any mismatch between the current leadership culture and what you aspire to.

Work across a network of INGOs to better understand the leadership qualities, both 'masculine' and 'feminine', of most value in INGOs.

Build a recognised value in mutually empowering and collaborative behaviours and skills for leaders, both men and women. Integrate these skills and behaviours into management and leadership development programmes and support structures across the organisation.

4. Bringing about change

Defining the issue:

The methods and approaches to bringing about change on the issues of gender equality in our agencies have brought up some significant issues.

- The issue of gender equality and leadership is not a simple problem, with organisations in every sector recognising similar issues in differing contexts. There is no tried and tested approach or formula for change that we can take from others and directly apply. The complexity of the issue and context means we need to develop an approach that is embedded in the international development sector.
- There are differing levels of awareness and appetite for change around the issue of gender equality and leadership; one approach will not suit all.
- The process of bringing about change needs to be at several levels, from individual insight and awareness; to enabling change in others through relationships; to enabling systemic change in organisations through collaborative leadership. These are complex but parallel processes required for transformational change.

Researching the issue:

Each of the participants experimented with different kinds of 'spaces' for conversations about women in NGO leadership in order to bring about change. Approaches included:

- One-to-one meetings and interviews

- Focus groups
- Mentoring
- Catalytic conversations
- Informal spaces for women to share experience as leaders e.g. breakfast meetings

One-to-ones: with female managers.

- **What was useful** – *‘the fact that they had recently completed a development programme meant the women reflected on their strengths and weaknesses having been in the ‘space’ of reflective learning. I think this meant it was easier for them to consider the concepts and be open to the discussion. Sharing examples from other conversations and citing research helped the discussion, perhaps it got them thinking, but really I think it gave them permission to say what they were experiencing, i.e. ‘if others have mentioned it then it’s ok for me to mention it too.’ People shared perhaps more personal reflections and concerns than they may have done in a group.’*
- **Outcome** – *‘some hadn’t given gender equality much thought until I asked them to think about it. A couple in preparation for the call had discussions with their friends and colleagues to check how was it for them, was their experience the same as others? This was the ripple effect in practice. All were really open to talk and prioritised the call above other work. I think they felt good that someone was asking their opinion. Some said they didn’t feel it was an issue for them, life was equal. The outcome for me was that I had examples to cite in workshops or other conversations to generate further discussion.’*

Focus groups: with female participants on a management development programme.

- **What was useful** – *‘everyone knew each other well already and were really comfortable which meant much more open conversations with some challenge and encouragement. These were much richer than the one-to-one discussions also conducted. There was a sense of lots of energy in the room. The approach let people talk and was more organic than the interview format. The ‘women only’ space felt good and you can see the difference to when men were in the workshop, where it was more likely we would get into debate about ‘this is right, this is wrong’. This showed the importance of creating that separate space for women.’*
- **Outcome** – *‘unclear at this stage, but the data gathered was essential for understanding the level of awareness and key challenges to culture change.’*

Mentoring: a method to support women to become aware of gender, the barriers that are standing in their way of progressing in the organisation, and to develop the confidence and knowledge they need to start taking steps up the leadership ladder.

- **What was useful** – *‘The mentor starts by observing the dynamics that are being played out in shared spaces, such as during meetings, in interview situations, in corridor conversations, at events or even on nights out with other staff. The mentor can then reach out to more junior women to offer them support as they navigate through the organisation. The mentor starts conversations around what she sees, and how the woman feels about her experiences. The mentor proposes suggestions, ideas and practical tips for the mentee to develop their skills and approach as a leader. This can either be done as one-to-one conversation, or through an informal forum where the ideas can be discussed. The process requires the*

mentor to build a high level of trust with those she mentors and to be entirely confidential in her approach.'

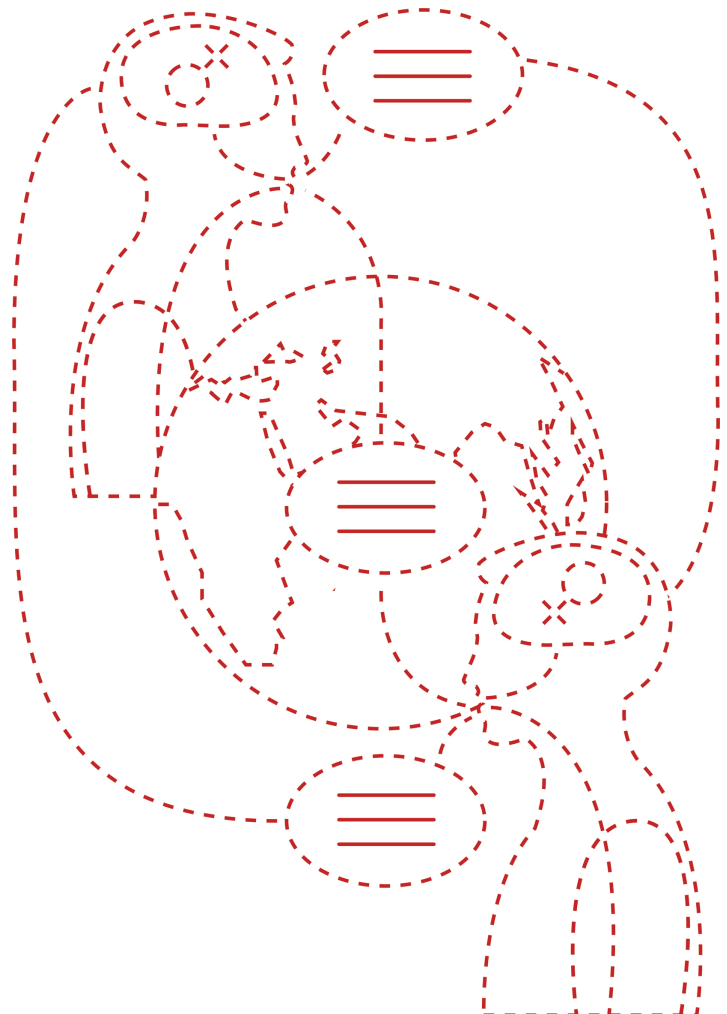
- **Outcome** – *'A good mentor will soon start creating a network of people who come to her for advice and support. This comes with a responsibility for the mentor to take the time to support the relationships, or hold regular informal meetings, or simply be there at the right time to make the change happen when it is most needed.'*

Catalytic conversations: taking opportunities as they arise to enable change, these conversations don't need to be pre-planned!

- **What was useful** – *'posing the right question at the right time, and allowing it to sit for a while. They could even be rhetorical questions or just reflecting on what I was 'noticing' in the room/in conversations. This is about being intentional in raising the 'gender' card and asking the 'awkward' question. Look for 'ins' such as linking the gender issue with organisational priorities, e.g., organisational health or leadership development priorities. And finally, choose your battles – the key is to know when to raise an issue and sense the readiness for change. This could just be around a seemingly small issue but one that could be a significant step forward on the gender awareness continuum.'*
- **Outcome** – *'Aware that I am a role model for more junior women in the organisation and sharing my journey and imperfections, being vulnerable, giving encouragement these all help others along their journey. This is also about creating champions who are the 'voice' in the organisation that bring up the key messages for change.'*

Informal spaces: to enable women to have the important conversations they want to have.

- **What was useful** – *'It is easier to come together for a purpose – hosting a breakfast in the fringes of a larger meeting seems to work quite well. It is useful for someone to lead or facilitate the meeting. Think about some key questions which can trigger the conversation – you might need to do some research on this beforehand! Just the act of creating a space and time for women will be seen as recognition – but saying thank you to the group will ensure women go away feeling that their contribution is recognised. Having all-women meetings periodically in certain contexts enables women to voice concerns and raise issues which otherwise might go unsaid. Some gathering are just for the*



conversation – some will need action to be taken – be clear what will happen at the end of the meeting. It is often useful to have a formal 'leader' (from the organisational hierarchy) to support or sponsor the event – people are usually curious about what they have to say.'

- **Outcome** – *'It puts women on the map within the office or at the event, they are recognised and able to make connections with each other at social, experiential and potentially emotional levels. Voice is given to important issues and women of all levels and positions have a chance to meet together and share experience in a forum for mutual learning and development.'*

What we know now:

The research group recognised that all the approaches they chose to use were informal and not part of the 'normal' structures and hierarchies. These methodologies are driven by the desire to enable connection and learning on issues with no clear agenda, answer or expectations.

What was recognised was that most of these approaches, without official organisation endorsement, rely on a few passionate individuals who really want something to change. The tipping point for sustainability comes when there is shared leadership which can bridge the gap between the more traditional structures for organisational change and these less formal approaches.

I'm exploring how can I share this (gender awareness) with others. Initially I thought this is something I want to train people in – actually this is not possible, it's more about what's going on under the surface and how do I create change?

The action research approach used to develop this report brought about change in and of itself. The stories of change, awareness raising and learning here are all a result of five individuals supporting each other to take action and do something differently in their organisations. Through the action learning process, participants described their role as 'catalysing grassroots culture change.'

At the beginning of this process and journey, we maybe didn't think we'd get very far – however let's have a reality check on how far we have got?! And how far we have come, what we have been able to do and achieve – we're creating movement and momentum.

There is a need to use relevant and engaging ways to create a movement for change in the complex organisational systems of INGOs. We are proposing that we need to move towards a more collaborative, relational and mutually empowering leadership approach. As such the methodologies for change need to reflect these principles. The questions or solutions may not always be obvious, but as one member of the research group noted *'I recognised that conducting the research in itself will have an impact in and of itself. By simply posing the question I was asking women to reflect upon their own experiences.'*

Change starts with individuals, so our methodologies must also start at this level, providing forums, support and expertise for individuals to raise their own awareness and engage with their own agency to bring about change. This is also about starting small, often simply looking to the next adjacent step rather than trying to tackle the whole organisation or even sector-wide challenges.

The research group put together several case studies of successful, collaborative and relational approaches to change, noted in the appendix. These are not exhaustive, but a sign of the difference this approach can make.

Recommendations for action:

Use new and appropriate ways to generate a conversation on gender equality. Facilitate processes for men and women to explore gender equality and leadership issues, whether in one-to-ones, as part of a development programme, or specific organisation development interventions.

Develop a feedback loop - through focus groups, 'pulse' or engagement surveys or annual performance conversations and assessment tools (such as 360 feedback) to track changes in behaviour, skills and perceptions of gender equality and leadership.

Build skills in collaborative and mutually empowering approaches to change - this could include action research methodologies, reflective learning practices, peer-led development, and facilitative learning approaches.

In Summary:

This research clearly indicates a need to shift the issue from women to the collective responsibility of INGOs in driving leadership culture change. The solution is not to simply provide potential female leaders with more skills development or support. It is more fundamental than that. It is about re-defining what we want to value in our leaders in order for people, regardless of their gender, to create an impact as INGOs on some of the most complex development issues in the world. This change process will need a combination of approaches; from raising awareness through data and benchmarking to developing a 'business' case for change; to policy change and HR strategies to challenge unconscious bias and lack of pay and role parity; to exploring the changing nature of what we value in our leaders, using methodologies that reflect this and the complexity of the systems within which we work.

Key to the success of the women involved in the research has been translating their awareness and insights into direct action for change. Finding people in your organisation who are passionate and have the drive to take the lead in the collaborative change process will be crucial in spreading culture change. The potential is for a renewed and fundamentally more inclusive culture of leadership to emerge in the INGO sector.

References and further reading

Buchanan; Smith /Scriven. *Leadership in Action*, Alnap Report, 2011. <http://www.alnap.org/resource/6118>

Desvauz, G. Devillard-Hoellinger, S., & Baumgarten, 2007. *Women Matter: Gender Diversity, a Corporate Performance Driver*. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from: <http://www.europeanpwn.net>

Fletcher, J.K. *Relational Practice: A Feminist Reconstruction of Work*. Journal of Management Inquiry, 7(2), 1998
Gerzema John and D'Antonio Michael, 'The Athena Doctrine: how women and the men who think like them will rule the future', 2013.

Ibarra, Herminia; Robin Ely and Deborah Kolb. 'Women Rising, the Unseen Barriers' HBR reprint, September 2013. <https://hbr.org/2013/09/women-rising-the-unseen-barriers>

Jarbo, Norma. Women Count Report, 2012. <http://women-count.org/Women-Count-Report-2012.pdf>

Lewis, Rowena. Close to Parity - *Clore Leadership Report*, 2010.

Mohr, Tara. *Playing Big: Find your voice your mission and your message*, 2014.

Pedler. *Action Learning Research & Practice*, Vol 9 No.1, March 2012.

Ramalingam, Ben. *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, 2013.

Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, 2013.

Appendix A: Bringing About Change – Tool Guide

1. Hosting or Creating Spaces for Women

Purpose:

- To enable women to have the important conversations they want to have.
- To create a safe environment where women can have confidential conversations.
- To bring together groups of women to focus on key issues which are important to them e.g. leadership.

When and how to use this:

- It's easier to come together for a purpose – hosting a breakfast in the fringes of a larger meeting seems to work quite well.
- It's useful for someone (s) to lead or facilitate the meeting – completely open space is intimidating!
- Think about and prepare some key questions which can trigger the conversation – you might need to do some research on this beforehand.
- Just the act of creating a space/time for women will be seen as recognition – but saying thank you to the group will ensure women feel that their contribution is recognised.
- Having all women meetings periodically in certain contexts enables women to voice concerns and raise issues.
- Some gathering are just for the conversation – some will need action to be taken – be clear what will happen at the end of the meeting.
- An initial meeting could be called to see if women are interested in meeting more regularly or at all.
- Don't respond to 'and what about the men?!'
- Provide food! Or some other incentive!
- It's often useful to have a 'leader' support or sponsor the event – people are usually curious about what they have to say!

Potential impact:

- It puts women on the map within the office/event

- Women are recognised
- Voice is given to important issues
- Women of all levels and positions have a chance to meet together
- Women make connections with each other
- Awareness is raised and change can happen!

2. The 'Guerrilla Approach' to Catalytic Conversations and Creating Change through Convening Groups

Purpose:

I am all about looking for opportunities – inserting myself into conversations that matter – and I am a firm believer in the power of the collective – so I like to get people together and see what happens – and it's often really powerful! I am often the catalyst – and then I like to support others to keep bringing people together – it's the multiplier effect.

What's special about the approach of creating spaces for women and what makes them sustainable?

They tend to be informal – not part of the 'normal' structures and hierarchies – they are driven by the desire to connect on issues or with groups of people.

They do have leaders – although they might not recognise themselves as such.

The groups meet a need – so they could meet on a one-off basis, or a regular commitment and survive without the 'endorsement' of the organisation.

However the groups may become mainstream once people see the benefits of addressing those issues – the group will need to decide whether it wants official backing or not!

The groups often rely on a few passionate individuals who really want something to change – there are also a number of followers – who can be called on occasionally for help. The tipping point for sustainability comes when there is shared leadership!

3. Taking an Informal Mentoring Role

Purpose:

The purpose of this method is to support women, particularly younger women who may have recently joined the organisation, to become aware of gender, the barriers that are standing in their way of progressing in the organisation, and developing the confidence and knowledge they need to start taking steps up the organisational ladder. Importantly, it should inspire them to notice what is happening around them – to wear a gender lens – and take on a more transformational role in designing their future.

When and how to use this:

It's important to identify one or more people, preferably women, who are willing to take on a role of mentor. The process requires the mentor to build a high level of trust with those she mentors and to be entirely confidential in her approach.

The mentor starts by observing the dynamics that are being played out in shared spaces, such as during meetings, in interview situations, in corridor conversations, at events or even on nights out with other staff.

The mentor starts reaching out to younger women – and offers to support them as they navigate through office life. This is probably best done indirectly, to avoid an uncomfortable situation, or the young woman feeling singled out.

The mentor starts conversations around what she sees, and how the young woman feels about her experiences.

The mentor collects the various insights and experiences, and starts proposing suggestions, ideas – practical tips to start making more of a mark as a woman in an organisation. This can either be done as one-to-one conversation, or through an informal forum where the ideas can be discussed.

The types of things the mentor might raise in discussions include:

- Where are you seated in meetings, and what do you think this is saying about you? Have you considered moving forward, away from the other junior staff and sitting at the table?
- How do you feel about contributing to a conversation in a team meeting? If you're not contributing much, why do you think that might be? What is holding you back? What is it that you want to say? How can you take a risk to say it?

- You mention you have been stuck in your role and that you're getting bored? Have you considered speaking to your line manager about this? Do you think this could be a gender issue in any way? Have you ever looked at it that way?
- You mention you'd like a better position, but that you don't feel confident moving up, and that you don't know if you'd be good at it. Has someone told you that? Is that a real fear – or do you think it's just your 'inner critic'? Your inner critic exists to protect you from harm, what would you like to say to your 'inner critic'?
- Do you want to be bolder? What do you think it would take to be bolder? Is there anything you think I could help you with? Is there anyone you feel you need to speak to?
- Have you started networking in the organisation? And if so, do you only mix with people at your Grade level – or do you reach out to others at other levels? Do you think there's anything you might be able to learn from them? Or do they intimidate you? And if so, why is that? Do you think it might be a gender issue?

Potential Impact:

A good mentor will soon start creating a network of people who come to her for advice and support. This comes with a responsibility for the mentor to take the time to support the creation of relationships, or hold regular informal meetings, or simply be there to have the conversation at the right time when it's most needed. This may involve speaking to people within your own network, who may be able to provide the person being mentored with additional support.

4. Bringing about Change through 1:1 Interviews

Purpose:

The environment in my organisation did not feel conducive for holding focus groups or women's breakfasts / lunch discussions. When I asked Our Human Resources lead about hosting a women's breakfast, I was advised to seek permission from the Senior management team, was questioned about whether it would be in work or private time, was not offered any budget for snacks. So I set up 1:1 interviews with women in management roles.

When and how to use this:

Interviews lasted roughly 30-45 minutes. I was clear about the purpose of the interview and how what they shared would be used, as well as setting out expectations around confidentiality and anonymity. I shared four questions in advance by email when agreeing the time / date and then we talked through these question in the face to face interview.

I wrote notes during the interview, typed these up and sent them back to the interviewee for their amendments / agreement, before sharing the notes with the Action Research Group.

I needed to manage the time as the tendency was for the interviewees to spend more time on the easier questions which came first and less time the more personal question that came last.

During the interviews I was consciously balancing the mixture between a straight interview whereby I would just ask the questions and listen and a two-way conversation where I would also respond to their questions and share my observations and experiences. Finding a middle way wherein I was mostly prompting and listening, but also sharing enough to make it feel a (hopefully) warm, safe space and a mutual endeavour felt best.

Potential impact:

The interviews provided a snap shot of where women in the organisation felt things stood with respect to gender and leadership, including examples, and ideas about what they would like to see happen differently. I also felt that the opportunity to speak candidly about this topic brought into the open something that had been latent, present but unarticulated and built the relationship between me and my colleagues.

Learning and next steps:

I felt a bit anxious about the interviews initially, wondering whether the other women would consider the interaction time well spent. However in all cases the interviewee women seemed happy to help initially and then when we got into the interview they seemed really interested and glad to have the chance to talk about something which is not talked about in any other space / at any other time in the organisation

I noticed that I shied away from asking women who I felt might be sceptical about the topic and project for interviews. On reflection I would like to have had the courage to interview those women and to have pushed ahead with an open discussion space for women. Perhaps I will!

5. Using your Gender Lens in Conversations

Purpose:

Taking the opportunity to have a conversation and raise the gender issue as and when, or asking the question. Then noticing what happens, and seeing what the possibilities are for change.

When and how to use this:

- Access the opportunities as they arise, they don't need to be pre-planned!
- Using the role you are in and posing the right question at the right time, and allowing it to sit for a while. They could even be rhetorical questions or just reflecting on what I am 'noticing' in the room/in conversations.
- Use the opportunities you have e.g. I have been working with senior leaders on what the role of a leader should look like so, both in focus groups and 1:1 conversations I was able to be intentional about raising the 'gender' card and asking the 'awkward' question.
- Looking for 'ins' e.g. linking the gender issue in with organisational priorities, e.g. organisational health, leadership development
- Maintaining an approach and mind-set of curiosity, rather than judgement!
- Choosing your battles - knowing when to say something/raise an issue and when to stay quiet!
- Being aware that I am a role model for more junior women in the organisation and sharing my journey and imperfections, being vulnerable, giving encouragement, a 'word in season' to help others along their journey.
- Having the courage to show up and be seen; to have that difficult conversation, to ask that awkward questions that others are probably thinking but not voicing!

Potential impact:

- Sensing the 'readiness for change'. This could just be around a seemingly insignificant issue but one that could be a significant step forward/ help move us along the gender awareness continuum.
- Championing/easing the way for initiatives, e.g. women's retreat, that enables women to have time together and time to think away from the 'busyness' of organisational life. Being the 'voice' in the organisation that brings the key messages back.

- Having the 'art of the long view'. Recognising that we are on a journey and it will take time, so be patient! Thinking ahead to what the next conversation/intervention needs to be, which will enable us to take that next step and facilitating/orchestrating this.

Appendix B: Case Studies

1. Creating a Leadership Profile through a 'Gender Lens'— World Vision UK

As an organisation WVUK recognises the lack of diversity at senior levels and over the last two years has taken several positive actions to address this. We now have a greater representation of women at senior levels (up to 28% from 5.5%). However, our biggest challenge is still around building a more diverse leadership pool for the future, and in particular, ensuring a more diverse pipeline to Director level. Defining what 'good leadership' looks like and building a cadre of leaders across the organisation at all levels of leadership that demonstrate these behaviours is a key step towards this.

Within this context, in 2014 we embarked on designing a Leadership Development Programme (LDP) for WVUK. As suggested above, the first task was to define what 'good' leadership looked like for us at this time and going forward. This presented an opportunity to be intentional about gender bias and, as far as possible, create a model that articulated what a good leader looked like, irrespective of gender. For us as a Christian organisation, this also needed to reflect what a 'Christ Centred' leader would look like.

A task force of senior managers was formed to work on this activity with myself as the facilitator. This comprised of seven senior managers including the sponsor, who was also female. Through a series of meetings over several months the group debated and discussed different leadership models and began to create the core leadership behaviours around which we wanted to focus our leadership for the future. We used the 'critical incident' technique to look at situations that were common to leaders across the organisation and to distil out effective leadership behaviours.

I was mindful of gender diversity when facilitating the discussions/focus groups that grappled with what the role of a leader should look like for our organisation moving forward. Working with this collaborative research programme gave me an opportunity to discuss my approach and be more intentional about it. The result, I feel, is a far richer and more rounded framework with a diversity of behaviours that might not have been present had I not intentionally applied this lens.

The emergent behavioural framework is encapsulated in the acronym SERVES and stands for the following core behaviours:

Seek to influence - listen to understand

Empower and energise others

Release potential - in yourself and others

Vulnerability in our strength

Expect the best - hold yourself and others accountable

Show the way - collaborate to achieve

Although I was not aware of any male/female bias throughout the process, I did not explicitly ask the gender question, which, if I was to do the exercise again, I think I would. Why? Partly to increase awareness around gender and to explore if there was a difference, either real or perceived, in the way effective women leaders behaved as opposed to effective male leaders and which, if any was valued most.

This SERVES framework formed part of the foundation of our Leadership Development Programme design. Whilst designing the programme itself we were also mindful of gender diversity, e.g., when selecting who should deliver it and when constructing the action learning groups that formed an integral part of the programme.

We have now taken 63 leaders within the organisation through the programme, over 50% of whom were women (33 out of 63).

The output for each delegate is a Personal Development Plan which outlines what he/she needs to do to bridge the gap between where they are now and where they need/want to be. Potentially therefore, a great opportunity to influence what the role of a leader will be for our organisation for the future and enabling our current leadership pipeline. The ripple effect of this is also intentional across the organisation. Taking the top 63 leaders through this programme together and working on their personal development will have a profound influence on behaviour and culture throughout the organisation. The next step will be to incorporate these behaviours into our Performance Development System.

2. Creating an Informal Mentoring Programme

What was the Problem or Opportunity:

The Women in Leadership research opened my eyes to the dynamics that were taking place within my office, particularly amongst the younger women who were joining the organisation and the role I could play to support them in their growth.

I had noticed during several team and staff meetings that the women, particularly the younger and newer ones to the organisation, rarely spoke out in meetings, sat timidly together at the back of the room, or were seated around the room, rarely at the main table. They didn't speak out when they were interrupted (mostly by men) and when they did speak out, wrapped their thoughts and comments in self-apologies, were not confident in sharing their ideas or opinions and felt that the main way they could contribute to the discussion was by validating someone's else's ideas. They repeatedly said things such as: 'Sorry if this sounds stupid, but ...' 'I don't know if I'm right, but ...' 'Maybe we could consider ...', 'Yes, I agree with John that ...'

After the meetings, I would raise this with them and discuss it with various of the newcomers, who usually agreed that they felt far too intimidated to speak out, primarily because they felt excluded and inexperienced, and because they felt that there were many people in the room who clearly knew far more about the topics being discussed than they did. In summary, they felt their thoughts would not be valued, and that by speaking out, they might sound 'stupid'.

What was I trying to achieve?

The purpose of the conversations, in hindsight, was to support women, particularly younger women who may have recently joined the organisation, to become aware of gender. It was about helping them to develop the confidence and knowledge they need to start taking steps up the organisational ladder.

What did I do?

After various lengthy lunchtime discussions and conversations in the pub, I quickly found myself taking on an informal mentoring role amongst the younger women in the organisation, particularly the interns. Within weeks, they came to me on a regular basis for advice on how to tackle difficult gender-related situation, how to manage their male colleagues in meetings or how to move out of their unpaid intern positions into more interesting, stimulating and paid positions.

What went well and not so well?

Within two months, I found that I had supported one intern to apply, interview and take on a new part-time position at Plan (which subsequently became a full-time position). She mentioned that she would never have done it had I not encouraged and supported her.

I also supported another young administrator to take a courageous step to speak to her manager to consider her for a higher position in her team, which we believed was about to be offered to a new male intern who had just joined. The young woman was clearly far better qualified for the position, but had somehow been 'overlooked', largely because she hadn't dared speak up and ask to be considered – and also because she wasn't confident she could actually do the job. After several discussions, and running the idea past her manager, she interviewed for the position and was offered the position. She is now performing beautifully in her new role, and has finally stepped out of an administrator's position, which she had felt stuck in for several years.

Learning and next steps:

These two successes helped me recognise the value a mentor like myself can provide to younger women in an organisation; how a helping hand, some support and practical advice, and a sense of belief from another female colleague can be all that's needed to help young women take their first steps up the organisational ladder. Insecurities in a patriarchal context can clearly run deep for a number of women, especially at the entry level in organisations.

3. Personal Leadership Journey and Reflections on being part of the Research Process

Being part of the Women in NGO Leadership research process has been an exceptional, yet also mysterious and empowering learning experience, both personally and professionally.

Interestingly, during the eight months it took to complete the process, I had developed a sufficient level of knowledge and confidence on the topic, enabling me to take a significant step forward professionally in my career and to move into more of a leadership position in my organisation. And ironically, because I was expected to take on a far higher level of responsibility in my work and put in far longer hours, I almost jeopardised my contribution to the research, to the point that I came close to having to resign from it due to the heavy workload (this was avoided by putting in a few long hours at the 11th hour!)

I also saw a significant change in my attitude towards my personal opportunities for growth in my organisation during the course of the research. When I starting the process, I felt angry and partially disillusioned about the

position of women in leadership in my organisation. This was fuelled by a number of negative examples around me. I had recently seen men bypass women, and men who worked relatively little be promoted, valued and respected over other hard-working women. I had also seen multiple examples of the few women we had in leadership be unjustly criticised by men, as well as other women in the organisation, for being 'out of their depth', 'bitchy', 'fat and ugly' or simply 'difficult'.

However, after reading a number of inspiring books (such as Sheryl Sandberg's book 'Lean in') sharing articles, stories and experiences with my colleagues throughout the research process, and deciding to wear my 'gender lenses' a little more often, I soon noticed that I had in fact adopted the role of 'victim in a patriarchal world', which was not very different to what I had seen amongst some women I had worked with in South Africa. I recognised that rather than seeking to actively change some of the critical factors, influences and attitudes in my life, I was simply analysing my context within a tight framework of oppression, and largely complaining about it, rather than managing it. I saw that I had in fact rendered myself powerless, almost as a way of justifying my lack of courage to make a change. No doubt the barriers were there, but I felt it was time that I learned how to identify them more clearly, and then tackle them the best I could with the resources and imagination I had.

The discussions we held in our research group played an important role in this process. As I talked through the issues, and listened to others, I gradually climbed out of my hole, and started thinking up practical solutions to the multiple issues I was facing. Others in the team encouraged me on, and appeared to genuinely care about the difference I could make.

One of the most explicit manifestations of this was my reaction to being turned down for a leadership position that I had applied for several months before. Rather than simply accepting the situation, as I had at the time, and believing the reason I'd been rejected for the position (that I apparently hadn't demonstrated the required level of leadership behaviour in my interview), I decided to adopt another approach – one that was truer to who I was as a woman, which played to my key strengths and which felt more aligned to how I naturally operated in social situations. Simply put, one that was more 'me' - I reached out to other women I trusted.

I particularly reached out to women who I believed had been confronted with similar barriers, and who might be able to provide some guidance or support on how to overcome the stifling barriers that lay ahead of me. This is the strategy I had instinctively used in many other streams of my life; perhaps it would work here too. If anything, it would be genuine.

I also knew that if this was going to work, I needed to supplement it with bold, innovative ideas – ones that were slightly out of the box and could provide real value or answers to issues the organisation was facing.

Within a week, after speaking to several of the women in leadership positions, and making full use of the collective knowledge we had between us, I identified a role which was similar to the one I had applied for, and which hadn't yet been filled, largely because it was a temporary position. Several days later, I proposed filling the position through a secondment – and that I would in fact be very happy to do it myself, if I had the support of my line manager. Two days later, the message had filtered through and I was invited to interview for the position and was offered the position, which I currently hold and which has transformed my work experience.

I recognise now that had I not stopped to consider following a different process, and not recognised that some of the barriers that were holding me back were of my own making, I would not have had either the courage or the inclination to design my own future in the organisation and to actively take the step forward into leadership.

4. Personal Leadership Journey

I am the Chair of a small domestic rights charity. I have realised that I feel and act differently in that role compared to the way I behave in my paid INGO role. The title of 'Chair' and the formal recognition of the position as a leadership role help, but the main difference comes, I think, from the way others relate to me, what they expect from me, as well as from what I expect from myself. I still work in a facilitative and consensus building style but the imperative for me to make decisions, set direction and clarify priorities feels stronger. The facilitators and group process helped me to see that I was not 'stepping up' and using the leadership skills I was demonstrating as Chair as much as I could be in my INGO role. They challenged me on this.

What stood out for me as I thought about this more were two questions: first what was I taking and not taking responsibility for and second how was I seeing myself in my INGO role including in relation to colleagues. I also realised that I was not recognising when I had shown leadership: not giving myself credit for what I was already doing and achieving. I see that these aspects, the inner and the external, are inter-related.

So what is the next step for me? Further reading, reflection, and experimentation, ideally supported by a coach, as this helps me to articulate progress, challenges and commit to further action.

5. Concern Worldwide: Creating space for women in leadership development

What was the opportunity?

In 2013 Concern introduced a new leadership development programme targeted at mid to senior level managers working overseas. The programme includes content on diversity, particularly the importance of gender awareness in managing effectively. These sessions are usually lively with divergent views expressed.

Having facilitated the programme with a number of groups I recognised an opportunity for further support of women in their personal development.

In order to determine what additional interventions might look like I decided I needed more information about what it was like to be a female manager in Concern. I recognised that conducting the research might have an impact in itself. By simply posing the question, I was asking women to reflect upon their own experiences.

What was I trying to achieve?

The topic feels so large what could I hope to achieve? In essence I was looking for data and experiences to inform next steps for the Learning and Organisation Development team in identifying initiatives to help develop our female managers and leaders. Part of me also hoped that by asking questions I might generate some change in perspective or attitude amongst the women I was speaking with.

What did I do?

During the second workshop of the programme and across a number of cohorts, I held focus groups with the female participants. I explained the purpose of the research and asked two questions:

- What's it like to be a female manager in Concern?
- How does it feel to progress in the organisation? (here I was hoping to hear about the challenges but also what's working well)

I also conducted one-to-one interviews with female managers who had completed the programme previously. The same questions were asked.

What went well and not so well?

I found everyone was really happy to talk and share! For some of the groups it was the most animated they had been. The focus groups really generated discussion, one story building on the next. The one-to-one interviews allowed for more personal reflection, perhaps sharing stories of a more intimate nature.

Providing space to talk as part of a development programme really helped. By the second workshop they knew each other well and were comfortable with reflecting personally and sharing their experiences. It also allowed for diverse groups of women from different countries and at different levels to discuss together. I felt this was really valuable opportunity, hearing others' experiences.

Providing examples from other conversations or citing research helped the discussion, perhaps it got people thinking but really I think it gave permission to say what they were experiencing, if others have mentioned it then its ok for me to mention it too.

Overall the group approach worked better than the individual approach. I think it's important for people to hear other people's experiences and in a way that reinforces or validates their own. In fact, for the one-to-one interviews many spoke about 'checking' their experiences with friends and colleagues before speaking with me.

Learning and next steps

Providing space for women in leadership development allowed time to reflect upon and share experiences. Ultimately I believe this helped participants understand and recognise their capacity to be role models for others.

For me the next steps are to provide more of these spaces, they have the potential to be catalysts for change in themselves. Alongside this the data gathered is helping inform the development of a number of initiatives designed to support and develop female potential across the organisation.