

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFRICA LEARNING FROM OXFAM'S WORK

"There are 22 in our council. We women are only 8...but the men are noisy but not effective. If men are not accounting, we will. We're showing a different way of doing things." Councillor, Kitgum, Northern Uganda

Gender inequality is the most serious and pervasive form of discrimination in Africa and globally – almost universal across cultures and countries. It is a key driver of poverty for women and girls in Africa and represents a fundamental denial of women's rights. Gender inequality is also expressed in social norms such as unequal inheritance practice and sexual and gender-based violence which continue to shape and limit opportunities for men, and which, at their worst, drive and deepen conflict and impacts for all. When it comes to gender inequality, *everyone* loses out. Oxfam is therefore deeply committed to gender equality as central to our mission of ending poverty and reducing inequality – and as a key pillar of our long-term organisational strategy.¹

Oxfam' believes that women's own agency is central to achieving lasting change at all levels - in households, communities, businesses, and decision-making spaces across the world. Our 'Gender Justice' work – in Africa and globally - therefore focuses on supporting women themselves to occupy positions of power and influence in their communities and organizations; to support developing their own visions and strategies for change; and support building the organizations and movements required to affirm that achieving women's rights is a foundation for *all* development goals.² This is echoed in UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.5 which commits nations to "*ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life*".³

"Our engagement in the political sphere has resulted in judges agreeing to cite the [African Women's Rights] Protocol in their decisions, the Ministry coming on board to push for an anti-Gender Based Violence Bill...and Parliamentarians understanding and referring to the Protocol in a more informed and open manner. This, in turn, has enabled the project and women's rights organisations within Tanzania to engage with the Constitutional review process within a supportive and open atmosphere."

Across the continent, our work has seen support for women's **smart, effective and inclusive leadership** in a myriad of spaces and places – always responding to the critical issues of local contexts – and always seeking to test and strengthen learning and practice across the sector about what makes for truly transformative leadership for women's rights. In Northern Uganda, for example, our women's leadership programme⁴ focuses on high levels of violence against women challenging women's unequal access to and ownership of land – recognising this as a primary cause of intergenerational poverty and a barrier to women's economic empowerment...

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

¹ The Power of People Against Poverty: [Oxfam International Strategic Plan](#) 2013-2019

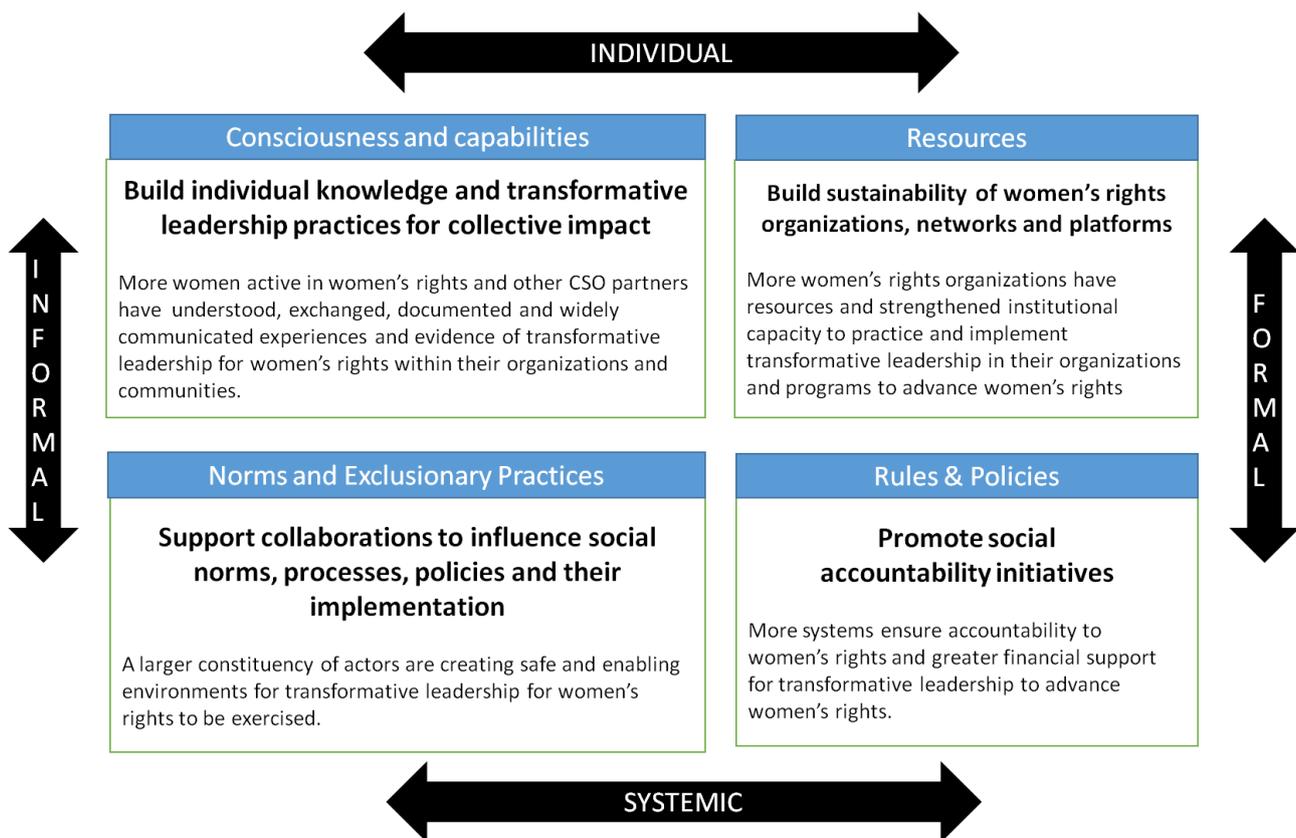
² Across sub-Saharan Africa - as of 1st August 2015 - the average male representation in national parliaments (lower and upper houses) was 77% (women's representation: Single House or lower house: 23.4%, Upper House or senate: 20.1% Average, across both: 23.0%). In informal institutions and local structures, women's participation and influence is often even more limited. At the household level, where critical decisions are made, women often have little or no say over decisions directly affecting them.

³ UN Women (July 2015). "*Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*"

⁴ http://raisingheroice.ning.com/video/end-violence-against-women-fostering-local-activism-in-uganda?xg_source=activity

Oxfam defines transformative leadership for women’s rights⁵ as “an approach and a strategy for social justice which challenges and transforms power relations and structures, into an enabling environment for the leadership potential of individuals (*purpose*). It embodies the principles and values of human rights, gender equality, participation, consultation and respect for the dignity of all people. Transformative leadership for women’s rights also directs others to bring about fundamental change, and facilitates collective efforts to transform inequitable institutions whether it is in the home, the community or more broadly (*practice*)’.

In our programming, we see transformative leadership for women’s rights (TLWR) as a process of people working together to safely and effectively challenge and transform systemic oppression against women for the long-term realization of women’s rights and gender equality. TLWR inspires and encourages us to think about men as well as women as champions and leaders for women’s rights – both as individuals and collectively, in their organisations and networks. **The four core dimensions of our TLWR approach** are shown in the table below:



In 2015 Oxfam’s carried out analysis of our TLWR work with partners in 12 countries globally – which has provided rich learning about both the WHAT and the HOW principles and practices required for effective programming and investments. These include:

- TLWR is fundamentally about **promoting a women’s rights agenda**. It goes beyond a focus on *numbers* of women in positions of leadership and power to focus on strengthening the *quality* and intention of that leadership.
- This means strong support for **collective leadership** that promotes women’s rights – for safer and more effective influencing within the women’s movement and with allies in other critical sectors.

⁵ Oxfam and key partners have invested in developing a wealth of experience on TLWR bundled currently in 3 core documents that form the main reference of this document: 1) *Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights: An Oxfam Guide* (2014) <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/transformative-leadership-for-womens-rights-an-oxfam-guide-317242> 2) TLWR: Lessons and recommendations from Oxfam experiences (2015, being prepared for publication end 2016) and 3) *A Global Programme Framework for TLWR* (being prepared for publication end 2016)

- At an individual level, it requires support for women leaders' **technical and influencing skills, negotiation and consensus-building**, drawing on the best of our governance analysis, techniques and strategies to support transformative change.
- It also means new attention to the **politics and practice of power** – rethinking leadership and modelling and supporting more equal and inclusive leadership styles as individuals, movements and organisations – including within Oxfam and our partners.
- TLWR is also about **engaging men more effectively as partners and leaders for women's rights**.
- Finally, we know we cannot do any of this without **transforming the political, economic and social systems and institutions** we work in – creating the enabling environment necessary for gender equality and women's rights to live and breathe.

The analysis also found TLWR to be an effective strategy across sectors, such as those related to women's economic empowerment and secure livelihoods – helping development actors to avoid a narrow sectoral focus. Designing programmes and interventions based on the issues prioritised by women themselves also helped Oxfam and our partners to address the interconnectedness of key gender equality issues more effectively.

"Poverty is in the head, not the pocket.....a person who doesn't know how to think will never get anywhere" Ahlem, community leader, Kesserine, Tunisia

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN PRACTICE: AN APPROACH AND A STRATEGY

The following sections describe the four central pillars of Oxfam's TLWR programming and practice – with examples throughout from projects and partnerships from across Africa.

Individual Power for Collective Impact: Worldwide, strong and autonomous women's movements have proven vital to the achievement of women's rights - and more effective than other factors such as GDP, political quotas, or the political alignment of government policy⁶. Collective action is a fundamental part of our approach and partnerships for TLWR – and our evaluations clearly demonstrate how collective action is critical for women's safety, for demands to be made unapologetically and for them to be taken seriously by those in power. Oxfam's TLWR programme evaluations found some of the strongest and most sustainable impacts where projects contributed meaningfully to the strengthening, collaboration, and organisation of civil society organisations working for women's rights⁷.

"In South Africa, explicit attention to the development of a multi-sectoral approach to the way in which women experience HIV and AIDS, VAWG and poverty, has changed the way that POWA and coalition members - many with little experience of addressing these interconnected issues in their full complexity - now work."

Slowly but surely, nationally and locally, a growing number of women in positions of leadership has been credited with tangible improvements in access to quality services such as water, education and childcare. In Tunisia for example:

"in the villages of Kef and Kasserine, the women's demand was to have clear and transparent eligibility criteria for the free/reduced-fee healthcare cards and for these women to be represented in the commission deciding on individual's eligibility to access these cards. The director of the Tunisian Union of Social Solidarity, and after lobby meetings, pledged to fulfil this demand nationally - not only in these

⁶ S. Laurel Weldon & Mala Htun (2013) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2013.802158>

⁷ Raising Her Voice: The Power to Persuade. How women's voice and influence is strengthening governance and challenging inequalities. Evaluation Summary, Oxfam 2014 <http://bit.ly/1rKZOVK>

villages - and to have NGOs represented in the committee. Now we are working to ensure the director's words are converted into actions and that the women themselves be represented in the commission."⁸

In fragile and conflict contexts, the security and effectiveness of women's collective action is even more important. Research into 40 peace processes since the end of the Cold War evidences that where women's groups were able to exercise a strong influence on the negotiation process, there was a much higher chance that an agreement would be reached than when women's groups exercised weak or no influence; in fact, an agreement was almost always reached in these cases, and there was a greater likelihood of agreements being implemented.⁹

'Before the conference began, men and women would be outside. I was one of two women from the Somaliland Women's Organization that sought to take part in the conference. The elders were distraught at seeing us at such a conference, asking: "My God, what is this?" After I spoke at the conference, those same men who were shocked that we came were now asking us to remain with them. They mentioned that they cried at the power of the words we spoke, saying "we wept in our sleep the other night".' Annab Omer Eleye, co-founder of Nagaad¹⁰

Social Accountability - Changing the Rules of the Game: Oxfam's TLWR partners have understood how power works, where it lies and how to influence it. In Nigeria, for example, successful advocacy for the passing of the 2013 Violence Against Persons Prohibition Bill, led by women's rights organisation WRAPA, included hiring a former legislator to navigate the corridors of power, text message barraging of Ministers and highly publicised mock tribunals. Pre-election campaigns in Nigeria and Mozambique used 'Vote for the Domestic Violence Bill or We Won't Vote for You!' slogans to push for legal reform in the face of continued impunity for rights violations. Many projects engaged directly with political parties, recognising that these are critical spaces for long-term policy influencing. In South Africa, Oxfam's partner women's networks signed agreements with newly elected councillors to ensure that representatives deliver on a list of clearly articulated commitments made on priority issues.

"They questioned the local administrative departments about the progress of the implementation of allocated funds to improve the infrastructure. This insistence pushed the president of the Kelibia infrastructure committee to re-submit his project of building 2.5 KM of roads to the governor; as a result the works started early 2015, and the women are closely monitoring the implementation." AMAL, Tunisia

Transforming Social and Institutional Norms and Practices: Despite gains made in women's leadership on the Continent, significant social and political obstacles remain for women in political office and decision making positions¹¹. Political institutions at all levels often feature well-established, patriarchal norms and are dominated by men. While some women challenge these masculine norms, many women feel unable to avoid reproducing them themselves¹². More work is required to support women modelling strong alternative and transformative leadership styles and to create enabling environments for women's leadership in the widest possible range of sectors and institutions¹³.

Further, it is not automatic that elected women will share or serve the interests of other women. Gender bias against women in positional leadership (e.g. political representatives)

⁸ AMAL in Tunisia – Oxfam project summary <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2015/03/amal-tunisia> and video <http://raisingheroice.ning.com/video/poverty-is-in-the-head-not-in-the-pocket-tunisian-women-leaders-5>

⁹ Coomaraswamy, Radhika (2015). "Preventing Conflict. Transforming Justice. Securing Peace." Global Study on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325

¹⁰ <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/somali-solutions-creating-conditions-for-a-gender-just-peace-561272>

¹¹ Overseas Development Institute on the critical nature of family support and shared-family care responsibilities. [The Political Economy of Women's Decision-Making from Women and Power: Overcoming Barriers to Participation and Influence](#), Feb, 2016

¹² Tripp, Aili Mari (2013). "Women and Politics in Africa Today" in Democracy in Africa.

¹³ Joy Rice (2007). "Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices"

directly affects their ability to perform.¹⁴ For example, across Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania 59% of men agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'men make better political leaders than women'.¹⁵ Forms of bias include intentional exclusion and less overt manifestations, including women not being 'seen' as leaders; roles and responsibilities being assigned according to gender norms rather than skills and capabilities; and a lack of role models for women in leadership. With the possible exception of systems where decisions are made by consensus, the legitimacy and authority of women representatives as leaders is often undermined due to norms that undervalue their contributions and participation¹⁶. A TLWR approach builds on the best of inclusive, democratic feminist principles to help us to think about, redefine and strengthen the practice of a *different* kind of leadership.

TLWR Politics and Principles in Practice: Feminist movements have long played a critical role in institutionalizing core ideas, values and principles of gender equality and social justice in international norms and development practice. These concepts also provide the foundations for Oxfam's core TLWR principles and politics. This includes the re-centering of the feminist maxim that "*the personal is political*," where issues once considered private e.g. sexuality, gendered division of labour, and domestic violence, are made visible and political. However, our TLWR approach also emphasises the principle that responsibility for social and political transformations to achieve gender equality lie with society at large, and *not* with individual women themselves.

Feminist thinking also reminds us that the beliefs and values we want to see in the world at large *must* be reflected in how we live our own lives. Our TLWR approach therefore seeks always to build from an understanding of the *diversity of women's intersecting identities* - of race, ethnicity, religion, age, class, and sexual identity for example - and how these shape different women's experiences of exclusion and oppression. There is a particular need too today, for spaces to develop more mutually-respectful, intergenerational collaborations between women activists that capture the resources, skills, and energy of each generation. Finally, within our organisations and institutions too, our own decision making processes and cultures, our own practices of power, *must* themselves be democratic and inclusive.¹⁷

"In Nigeria, the NGO Baobab had learned from previous experience that any policy influencing efforts will fail unless they build from what they called a 'viable women's movement'. Thus Oxfam's support in strengthening the Nigerian Feminist Forum was seen as the springboard which allowed individual organizations to engage effectively and consistently with state and non-state actors.¹⁸"

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS LOOKING FORWARD

With gender equality firmly at the heart of new SDG commitments, and with new development and private sector actors making strong business cases for women's leadership, there is clear and growing global momentum for women's rights champions to build on. However, a great deal remains to be done to ensure that new commitments and investments focus on supporting women themselves to occupy positions of power and influence in their communities and organizations; to develop their own visions and strategies for change.

¹⁴ The White House Project (2013). "*Benchmarking Women's Leadership*".

¹⁵ UNICEF, State of the World's Children 2007, p6 – aggregated stats from 1999-2004

http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/docs/sowc07_figure_4_2.pdf

¹⁶ Christopher F. Karpowitz, Tali Mendelberg & Lauren Mattioli (January 2015). "*Why women's numbers elevate women's influence, and when they do not: Rules, norms, and authority in political discussion in Politics Groups and Identities*"

¹⁷ Batliwala, Srilatha (2011) "*Changing Their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements*", AWID.

¹⁸ *Transformative Leadership For Women's Rights: Lessons and recommendations from Oxfam experiences*. Ines Smyth for Oxfam. November 2015, due for publication end 2016.

Future initiatives also need to support and nurture leadership principles and practices that enable personal *and* collective transformation and that actively confront inequalities of power – in our social norms, our institutions, processes and policies - and which offer positive, transformative leadership alternatives. Finally, this means long-term and core financial support to women’s organizations - to build the organizations and movements required to affirm that achieving women’s rights is a foundation for *all* development goals.¹⁹ This is particularly urgent in a context where funding for women’s organisations is declining whilst becoming increasingly de-politicised, and where religious fundamentalism and economic crises are eroding women’s rights, voice and freedoms.

The rich and diverse work of so many organisations, activists and leaders across Africa to promote women’s rights and transform women’s lives provides us with myriad examples of TLWR in practice on which to model and mature future work. Oxfam continues to partner with local organisations and alliances to test and mature our TLWR thinking and working – and to use the programme learning, knowledge and research generated here to strengthen development and donor practice. Where appropriate, we will use our organisational influence and convening power to continue supporting the best of this transformative work - by women, for women, for lasting change.

***“Kyandiro Zainabe is a female member of the Poroporo Multipurpose Group which started to provide functional adult literacy training. Zainabe is one of the founder members of the group. She lives alone and was one of the first people to return from exile and rebuild her homestead. She is the third wife in a polygamous family with three co-wives and has eight children. She, however, only knows one of the other co-wives and does not know the other co-wives and their children. Zainabe works hard to pay school fees as well feed her children. She takes full responsibility for her family as her husband comes home once in a while after tending the animals. He helps where he can with school fees. Zainabe participated in a project using the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) which has helped her to analyze her situation and plan how to use the resources available to her better. She has opened up more land for her sesame production. She learned the importance of strategic trading in order to get a decent income and she took an active role in collective trading together with the Poroporo Multipurpose Group, supported by the project.*”**

The community recognized Zainabe’s good leadership skills and have entrusted her by electing her as the chairperson of a larger community organisation. She has been advocating for women’s rights especially on land ownership based on the Land Act and a guide book on land rights. Zainabe has also been appointed as the chairperson of the Land Committee of Kuru Sub County. She is now a highly respected member of the community; she has transformed her family as well as the community.”

¹⁹ Across sub-Saharan Africa - as of 1st August 2015 - the average male representation in national parliaments (lower and upper houses) was 77% (women’s representation: Single House or lower house: 23.4%, Upper House or senate: 20.1% Average, across both: 23.0%). In informal institutions and local structures, women’s participation and influence is often even more limited. At the household level, where critical decisions are made, women often have little or no say over decisions directly affecting them.