

Feminist Leaders for Feminist Goals

An agenda for change for the social impact sector

Thank You!

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Key terms used in this paper

Women: When we use the term women we include everyone who identifies as women.

Intersectionality: The term was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to acknowledge the ways in which systems of inequality and discrimination overlap and “intersect”. Intersectional approaches and intersectional feminism acknowledge the effects of multi-dimensional inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination. So, when we use the term intersectionality, we aim to reach beyond the current buzzwords (e.g., diversity, inclusion) which many times do not encompass a holistic approach to address intersecting inequalities.


Social Impact Sector: We use this term to describe the universe of organisations aimed at improving the world, including non-profit organisations, civil society organisations, coalitions, organised movements, donors or social businesses.

Leadership/Leaders: We use the term “leadership” to describe our understanding that leadership can be exercised on all levels, and both within and outside organisational structures. When we refer to people with titles and positions within organisational structures, we use the term “formal leader”.

Transformative change: Most of us have been part of a number of organisational change processes. These tend to focus on effectiveness, the use of new technologies or the introduction of new policies and processes. For example, after the so-called „safeguarding scandal“, many organisations responded with codes of conduct and regular staff trainings but very few with a deep reflection about the culture in which sexual and power abuse could even occur and how to change mindsets and values in the long run. Our vision of change is therefore transformative, striving to create a new paradigm of leadership, based on feminist values and principles.

BIPoC: The acronym stands for Black, Indigenous & People of Colour. The term does not intend to claim that all groups face the same levels or types of discrimination, but to declare that all forms of discrimination are acknowledged in solidarity.

Executive Summary



We need a new leadership paradigm for the social impact sector — an understanding of leadership that lives and breathes equality and social justice, and that ensures organisations operate free of inequality, racism, sexism, discrimination, or abuse of power.

The FAIR SHARE Action Circle is a newly formed group of six intersectional feminists, aiming to bring their different perspectives and experience to the debate over what feminist leadership could look like in the sector. We will explore how feminist leadership principles can drive this change and how people and organisations within the sector can start their journey to become feminist leaders.

Based on the multiple voices and perspectives that have explored feminist leadership over the years, we introduce an Agenda For Change, founded on questions around Purpose, People, Power and Process, to start a much-needed conversation about how the social impact sector can and should transform. We challenge the sector to embrace this agenda as a starting point for conversation and transformation!

Introduction: Our story and the purpose of this paper

In 2018, the social impact sector was hit by a series of disturbing reports of sexual violence and abuse. For many people working in non-profit organisations, civil society organisations, development agencies or donor institutions (especially women but also men), this was a watershed moment highlighting the inequalities and shortcomings of a sector that is supposed to do good, and that is meant to contribute to a more equitable and just world. The sector was faced with a credibility gap between its external programmes and advocacy versus its internal practise and values. Two challenges are at the core of this gap: the need for a radically different leadership model that would create organisational cultures free of sexism, racism, and any form of abuse of power, and the need for greater accountability in representation, diversity, inclusion and equality within organisations.

Against this background, a number of initiatives were started to challenge injustice, discrimination and inequalities in the sector. Two of these were the starting point for the collective vision that is introduced and explored in this paper. The Feminist Leadership Project¹ was set up to showcase what a different and feminist leadership model could look like, and how leaders in the sector were striving to practice this in their daily professional life.

FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders was founded to measure the representation of women in leadership positions within the sector and to launch a call to action to ensure gender equality by 2030.

When these two projects decided to join forces to push together for feminist leadership and accountability, the Action Circle was founded as a feminist governance body to co-create a shared vision and a collective voice for the changes we want to see in the social impact sector. The Action Circle, who collectively developed and wrote this paper, is made up of six diverse and intersectional feminist leaders with very different experiences of the social impact sector: individually and together, we strive to do things differently.

In 2020, the social impact sector is facing another watershed moment, requiring us to painfully recognise structural shortcomings, persistent inequalities and a growing awareness of the need for deep, transformative change. This paper is the result of a number of strategic conversations and working sessions by the Action Circle, most of which took place virtually as the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of the global pandemic further illuminated existing injustices and inequalities around the world, which also influenced our collective conclusions as well as discussions

with recognised feminist leaders. The racial justice movement and the amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement further raised sector-specific debates about racial injustice, white supremacy and neo-colonial roots within organisations of the social impact sector. In this context, we collectively developed an Agenda For Change around four themes - Purpose, People, Power, Process - which we will lay out in this Action Paper.

Our contribution presented here is based on our experiences in both our professional and personal lives, the insights of The Feminist Leadership Project and the data collected by FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders, as well as the collective learning journey we began as a group in 2019. In this collective paper, we explain why we need a feminist leadership paradigm now, why the social impact sector has a responsibility to transform and suggest how to start the journey. We know we do not have all the answers, nor do we propose a fully-fledged blueprint for feminist leadership: this is why we start by asking a lot of questions. We know that there are many dedicated people out there who are keen to be part of that change, who work tirelessly to bring answers and concrete changes to harmful models, institutions, and behaviours. We stand in solidarity with all the people doing this work and are always eager to learn with them. Our approach is driven

by these voices who have called out injustices and demanded action and accountability. This is only the beginning of a journey!

Why us: Embarking on a collective learning journey

We, the Action Circle members, are committed to fast-tracking a sector-wide transformation, and to uniting those who want to be part of this transformation into a strong and impactful community for whom women in leadership as well as intersectional feminist leadership are strong priorities.

We see feminist leadership as a powerful, but as yet underutilised tool to transform the social impact sector. In our approach, we build on the ideas and approaches of many other amazing feminist leaders, activists and practitioners before us who have created and shaped the concept of feminist leadership.

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¹The Feminist Leadership Project:
www.feministleadership.org



“Being surrounded by these women is an inspiration. And working with them allows me to continue learning and growing along with my personal feminist leadership journey. Simultaneously, due to all the opportunities that were given to me, I feel a sense of duty to give back. To share amongst this group the multiple and diverse stories of Black and Muslim women so that they are taken into consideration and are seen and heard.”

- Aïssata Lam



“The #metoo movement brought to light how the international development sector, too, is permeated by patriarchal structures. Thus, I am glad to be part of the Action Circle and bring my voice to the table instead of being a token or an item on a checklist to tick off. This project presents a chance to change something from within the international development sector and I can draw strength and power from this remarkable group of women to pursue this endeavour.”

- Anusha Bharadwaj



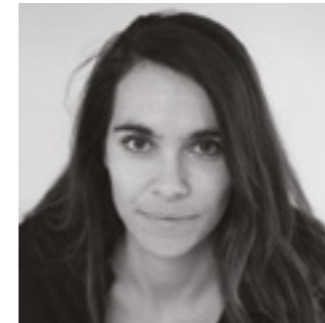
“Everything is interconnected, whether we are combatting racism, confronting patriarchy, or dismantling white supremacy. Therefore, I aspire to engage in an exchange with other women around the world to ensure that I expand my work beyond my current frame of reference. As a member of the Action Circle, I aim to foster Black Feminist Leadership and at the same time challenge this group not to fall victim to a Eurocentric mindset. I do not believe that the way we construct solutions to the most pressing issues we are facing in this world should model a coloniser’s map of how to do things. Despite the damage done in the international development sector, the policy area and in the human rights field in the last 25 years, I am convinced that if we collaborate to interrogate the standard, we can start to heal the injustice that has been done to women and so many communities over centuries.”

- Zakiya Carr Johnson



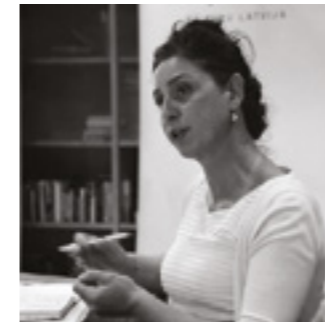
“When I took on the leadership of FAIR SHARE, I knew that I would not want to do this alone. After years in the civil society sector, I was searching for a different, more collective leadership model, centred around support, instead of control. Exploring feminist leadership individually and together with the Action Circle is challenging me to define my own leadership path and re-think the models and structures we have been trained to accept for decades.”

- Helene Wolf



“This project to me is something different. It is about six experienced feminist women joining forces - their ideas, individual stories and expertise - in a space where there is similar energy, the same understanding and same vision, to create something beneficial for others. It is about knowing that we do not hold all the answers, but that we are collectively powerful enough to lead with the right questions, and not accept the traditional answers for them. By questioning and pushing, we lay the path for a new feminist toolbox for our sector.”

- Emily Bove



“As a child I wanted to become Chancellor of Germany, because I could experience even at a young age that I was treated differently than the boys around me. Today, after years of working in the social impact sector and advocating for gender equality and intersectionality, a lot still remains to be done. Yet, I cannot stand a one-size-fits-all approach to this challenge. It is vital for the cause that we six come from different regions and form an intersectional group. As Action Circle, we can shape the future and nurture both an organisational culture and a form of leadership that places people and communities at the heart of attention instead of destroying them like patriarchy and colonialism do.”

- Serap Altinisik



Read more about the Action Circle members, their profiles and experiences on page 26/27.

Why Now: The next decade is (yet again) critical for women's rights

2020 was supposed to mark the beginning of a new decade for gender equality: The international community was preparing for the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which remains the most comprehensive agenda for gender equality and advancing the rights of all women and girls, and launching “Generation Equality”. This next decade will also be measured against the “Leave No One Behind” promise of the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, which includes gender equality as one of the key goals to be achieved by 2030.

But despite fundamental gains and an increasing commitment to gender, and social justice as a key issue among others, we are still miles away from fully realising the commitments that were made 25 years ago: not one country is currently on the path to achieve gender equality by 2030.²

And any progress that has been made is now threatened by the implications of the global Covid-19 pandemic:

- Women and girls are heavily affected by the pandemic, increasing the risk of undermining achievements around gender equality in previous years.³

- Women of colour and BIPoC communities are even more disproportionately hit by the effects of Covid-19, as research on the US and Brazil is highlighting the intersecting inequalities.⁴
- Yet, women are widely underrepresented in decision-making around Covid-19 responses, increasing the risk that the decisions and solutions do not address key issues such as sexual and reproductive rights, sexual and domestic violence, and unpaid care work.⁵

The lack of women in decision-making and formal leadership roles across all sectors was again highlighted through Covid-19. We listened mainly to men for expert advice and analysis when we turned on our TVs, radios or mobile devices. Academic and scientific panels that advised governments were dominated by men. Most heads of states and ministers making decisions on measures and priorities in fighting the virus are men.⁶

But there are also opportunities for and some small signs of change:

- International leaders such as UN Secretary General António Guterres are stepping up to lead by example, committing to gender parity in their top decision-making bodies.
- 19 international civil society organisations have signed a commitment to achieve a fair share of women leaders by 2030.⁷
- Women-led initiatives have started to speak out on structural injustice and inequality in social impact organisations including feminist organisations; their calls for change have sparked a number of investigations and public debates as important first steps.

The disruptive moment of Covid-19, as well as the bold and loud voices of the intersectional justice movement, offer the opportunity to create a different post-crisis world with social justice and intersectionality at its core. Furthermore, the social impact sector has a unique role and responsibility to step up to this opportunity and contribute to this much needed new vision. However, this will only be possible if the sector is willing and able to question and transform their own organisational structures and cultures.

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² Equal Measures Index (2019): Global Report 2019 - Harnessing the power of data for gender equality p.48f

³ UN Women Policy Brief (2020): The impact of Covid-19 on women

⁴ J. Edward Moreno for the Hill (April 2020): Black, Latino communities suffering disproportionately from coronavirus, statistics show

⁵ Care (2020): Where Are The Women?

⁶ UN Women (2020): Twenty-five years after Beijing Declaration, the world “cannot afford” so few women in power

⁷ To see who has signed the FAIR SHARE commitment, see www.fairsharewl.org

Why the Social Impact Sector: Key actors for change must walk the talk

Social impact organisations have contributed to the progress on women’s and girls’ rights, gender equality and social justice over decades. Yet, as we have witnessed especially over the last years, they have also done harm and have been complicit in upholding unequal and discriminatory structures. Some of the key advocates for gender equality and women’s rights do not live up to the standards they fight for externally. The lack of women in top leadership positions, which FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders started to measure in civil society organisations (CSOs), is just one example that organisations are not walking the talk on gender equality. Currently only 15 out of 32 large international CSOs have a fair share of women leaders. 15 out of the 32 are currently led by a woman.⁸ Based on the aggregated data of the FAIR SHARE Monitor, a man is currently three times more likely to reach a formal leadership position than a woman in these organisations.

The underrepresentation of BIPOC and especially the women among them is even worse. Of the 32 organisations the FAIR SHARE Monitor currently lists, only four organisations are led by a woman of colour. A recent survey of US non-profit employees also identifies a “white advantage” in the sector, and that increasing efforts towards diversity and inclusion have not yet led to significant changes in equal representation and opportunities in the sector.⁹

The limitations and challenges of this status quo have become increasingly evident over the past few years and especially in recent months:

- Devastating reports about sexual misconduct and other forms of abuse within several international agencies, including feminist organisations, showed a culture of male and/or white dominance and disrespect for women’s and BIPOC’s rights.
- Organisations have neither recognised nor leveraged their full potential of voices and decision makers by excluding diverse women from leadership positions. And they have not leveraged the power and impact of diverse teams, which would lead to better results.¹⁰
- The slow progress towards gender equality worldwide suggests that organisations do not currently have the impact necessary to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Nr. 5. As gender equality is a cross-cutting issue, affecting all other SDGs, this gap risks the success of the entire SDG agenda.

- Publicly stated gender equality commitments are vulnerable to tokenism, and purportedly feminist strategies are advertised by organisations without actually doing the work of pursuing feminist goals.

This illustrates two gaps that the sector needs to address urgently: a credibility gap between women’s empowerment programmes, and persistently patriarchal and post-colonial internal organisational cultures; and a legitimacy gap between external goals and advocacy around women’s rights and social justice, and an internal lack of representation of the communities the organisations claim to work for.

If the social impact sector is to remain the leading voice on gender and social justice and truly stand in solidarity with social, racial and gender justice movements, organisations must lead by example, ensure equal career opportunities and a fair share of diverse women leaders in senior management and governance bodies, as well as collectively affirming feminist leadership as a shared standard.

We deeply and truly believe in the power and potential of the sector all of us have dedicated our professional lives to. We are convinced things can be different; we are also convinced that feminist leadership is a powerful means to chart the way for-

ward and to embrace a vision of a diverse, inclusive and equitable social impact sector. We need feminist leaders to achieve feminist goals.



⁸ The FAIR SHARE Monitor can be accessed at www.fairsharewl.org/monitor

⁹ Race To Lead (2020): Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap

¹⁰ World Economic Forum (2019): The business case for diversity in the workplace is now overwhelming

Why Feminist Leadership: Transformative organisations need transformative leadership

The visions of the vast majority of social impact organisations centre around ideas of justice, rights, inclusion, representation and equality. These values are deeply rooted in feminist ideas and thinking. For vision-driven organisations of the social impact sector, the feminist leadership perspective is therefore a powerful approach to explore and tackle areas where change is needed. It offers us means to analyse our own organisational structures and power dynamics, and to reveal our systemic shortcomings. But it is also a tool to reconnect us to our vision, to inspire us to think outside the box and imagine what our organisations could look like in the future – and how to get there.

Feminist leadership is a concept developed and practised mainly by women and women’s movements in the Global South. Over the last years it has started to make its way into the international social impact sector, with organisations such as ActionAid¹¹ and Oxfam¹² embracing and implementing feminist leadership as part of their organisational strategy.

There is not one final and full definition of feminist leadership, and we will not attempt to write one here. One of the main thought leaders and practitioners of feminist leadership is Srilatha Batliwala, who has written extensively on the concept and elements.¹³ In her contribution to The Feminist

Leadership Project she describes feminist leadership as “*a process of transforming ourselves, our communities and the larger world to embrace a feminist version of social justice. It’s the process of working to make the feminist vision of a non-violent, non-discriminatory world, a reality. It’s about mobilising others around this vision of change.*”

The following attempts to unpack feminist leadership and how it can be practised are part of this process of embracing a feminist vision for the sector. Before we start to lay out what we have identified as core elements and values of feminist leadership, we would like to point out what feminist leadership, in our vision, is not:

- It is not a concept for women only. Everybody can and is invited to embark on a journey to become a feminist leader – and not every woman leader is a feminist leader
- It is not a concept based on so-called “female” leadership qualities, which usually includes attributions such as team-minded, communicative, emotionally intelligent, etc. Not all women have these qualities and quite a number of men do have them.
- It is not a concept for people in formal leadership positions only. Everyone has the potential and power to become a feminist leader regardless

of their title within an organisational hierarchy or structure. Instead, the very definitions of leadership we have become so accustomed to need to change.

Through our discussions and learning processes within the Action Circle, and by listening to the voices of The Feminist Leadership Project, we see the following values and principles as key:

- Feminist leadership is a journey. There is no ready-made programme or checklist for “How to become a feminist leader in 30 days”. How can we embrace the complexity and the need for a long-term process, while starting to act differently on a daily basis?
- Feminist leadership must be transformative. The structural changes needed within organisations require courage and willingness to question and transform deeply rooted policies and practises. How can we challenge ourselves to think boldly and to imagine how we would like to work in the future?
- Feminist leadership must change power structures. In order to achieve transformative change, we must analyse and question existing power structures and how they affect decision-making. How can we redefine, value, use, share and distribute power differently?

- Feminist leadership must be intersectional. Understanding and addressing intersecting identities, needs and resulting inequalities both within our own structures and in our work is the basis of ensuring representation, inclusion and diversity. How can we dismantle structural inequalities and what are potential ways forward to address them?
- Feminist leadership must be collective. While it is a deeply personal decision to embark on a feminist leadership journey, we must strive to learn, perhaps fail, but move forward together within our organisations. We have witnessed the power of collective voices who have raised concerns about organisations’ shortcomings, who have rallied in support and who have committed to change. How can we include currently undervalued voices intentionally, bring along allies, invite sceptics and collectively agree on new ways of doing things?



¹¹ Action Aid (2020): Ten Principles of Feminist Leadership

¹² Oxfam (2014): Transformative Leadership for Women’s Rights

¹³ Srilatha Batliwala (2011): Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud

Voices from the Feminist Leadership Project

“Feminist leadership requires an ability to see your role within a wider social and political ecosystem, and to be brave enough to work with others to fundamentally redefine that. Feminist leadership is fierce in dismantling inequality, but it is also grounded in meaningful connection and collaboration, and there is warmth and joy in it.”

Hilary Matthews, Senior Director
Gender Justice, CARE US

“It’s exciting, it’s transformative and essentially it’s a paradigm shift to everything we see in the world today. It’s rooted in feminist principles, that is social justice and inclusion for all. It is rooted in understanding, feminist histories across the world, it’s intersectional, it’s bold, it’s very much needed in our current times, and essentially the root of it is an ability to share power, which, when it does occur, in a way that’s rooted in feminist principles, really amplifies power and creates space for us to advance transformative change.”

Niyati Shah, Senior Gender-Based
Violence Specialist, The World
Bank

“Feminist leadership is just leadership as it was originally intended to be, which is egalitarian, which is thoughtful of as many different identities as possible, and it is an opportunity to take all the systems that we have right now, which were created for one very particular identity group, and expand them, change them, flip them, redirect them, give them entirely new life.”

Joy Donnell, Center for Intersec-
tional Media and Entertainment

Our Agenda for Change: Purpose, People, Power, Process

Feminist leadership is a holistic and long-term approach towards social justice and social transformation, and it is the opportunity to connect external goals to internal organisational structures. A key difference in the large number of leadership concepts (whether they are called inclusive, transformative, adaptive, agile or servant) is a strong connection of an external vision of a just world with internal values and practises. This goes beyond leadership as a necessary management tool to keep an organisation running and staff happy, and puts a strong emphasis on the goals and vision that one aims to achieve through their actions and decisions – personally and professionally, as well as internally and externally.

So, what could a journey towards feminist leadership look like?

The approach laid out above requires reflection, learning and persistence at the individual and collective levels. Ultimately, every person and organisation will have to define and develop a process based on their context, needs and goals.

However, we call on the sector to start now with meaningful conversations. Based on the values and principles explored above, we define **four areas** that need to be explored throughout a feminist leadership process:

Purpose

Feminist leadership should be the means to an end and be explored as a tool to increase impact. Why do we embark on a change journey and why do we embrace the concept of feminist leadership?

People

Feminist leadership starts with a personal commitment but aims at a new collective commitment to ensure participation, representation and intersectionality. Who do we need to include, how do their different lived experiences contribute to our collective goals and how can we support them and move together towards a shared vision?

Power

Feminist leadership reframes and redefines hierarchical concepts of power by challenging us to analyse current power structures and how they support or harm our colleagues and partners. Where is power based in our structures and how can we leverage but also redistribute power towards transformative change?

Process

Feminist leadership calls for clear commitments, together with accountability and transparency in

how it is practised. How do we measure progress and change towards feminist leadership practises within our structures?

Based on these four pillars, our Agenda For Change is a set of questions. At this point in the process, we offer questions instead of tips or toolkits because we know we do not have all the answers to what feminist leadership can look like to every person or for organisation, but we know we need to have the conversation. Questions – and the readiness to listen and process the answers – are a great way to start a dialogue, even if it is an internal conversation with oneself. However, we do see the clear need for more practical and tangible tools and will explore this further in our section, “What’s Next?”.

Taking on a feminist leadership perspective is the opposite of a status quo or what is typically called a change management process. There are no clearly defined milestones or results you can tick off to get a certificate as a feminist leader or organisation. It is rather a commitment to continuous learning, reflection and a shift in mindset. You don’t reach “feminism”, you grow more committed and educated about how to be feminist.

Many people we talked to about feminist leadership were intrigued by the vision but – very understandably – asked for concrete actions or guidelines.

The Feminist Leadership Project was a first step to collect some of these answers, to showcase how different people strive to practise feminist leadership.

Our Agenda For Change aims to take this one step further, by bringing the conceptual framework together with practitioners’ voices to inspire a sector-wide conversation. Our ambitious vision is to pave the way for feminist leadership from an individual commitment, towards an organisational strategy, and ultimately to a leading paradigm for the social impact sector.

In our Action Circle work sessions, we discussed at length how we can possibly ensure that our Agenda For Change is not misused for whitewashing, gaslighting or lip service. We acknowledge this risk but are convinced that the risks of not trying is more costly. More work and many more perspectives will be needed to turn the idea of feminist leadership into a fully-fledged and applicable action framework.

As we discussed and wrote this, we did not think primarily of the formal leaders in our sector but of the many people we mention above who have been looking for a starting point to reflect on what is going on, what is wrong in their spaces and how they could contribute to a new way forward.

Our Agenda for Change: Purpose, People, Power, Process

Individual

| Purpose Why? | People Who? | Power Where? | Process How? |
|---|--|--|---|
| Why do I want to reflect on my understanding of leadership? | Who do I want to be as a leader? What values do I stand for? | Where does my voice count? In which spaces and settings is it undervalued? | How do I practice power in every role I play – in personal and organisational spaces? |
| Why am I in the position I currently hold? | Who do I accept, recognise and value as a leader? What limits my understanding of forms of leadership; what experiences have made it richer? | Where do I go with concerns, questions or needs for advice? | How do my values drive the processes I design or am part of? |
| Why do I look at feminist leadership as a guiding approach? | Who is on my team and who might be missing? Who should be there? | Where do I feel safe, recognised and valued? Where do I not? | How do I inspire, lift, support and empower others? |
| Why do I want my organisation to change? | Who is holding me accountable to values and best practices? | Where do I have the power to influence decisions? Where do I not? | How do I show up as an ally to others in institutional processes? |
| Why am I uncomfortable (or comfortable) with the existing status quo? | | Where do I hold power over others, and how do I use it? | How do I choose team members, partners or coalitions? |
| | | Where do I benefit from my privileges? Where do I face discrimination? | How am I accountable for my actions? How do I hold myself accountable? |
| | | | How do I take care of myself to sustain my engagement long-term? |

Collective

| Purpose Why? | People Who? | Power Where? | Process How? |
|---|--|--|---|
| Why do we see the need to change the way we work? | Who is making the strategic decisions? Who is excluded, and why? | Where is the decision-making space and who is in it? | How do we define skills and competencies within our teams? |
| Why does (some of) our work not align with our values? | Who is being consulted and heard during the decision-making process? | Where is the space for debates, different views or opinions? | How do we define success in our programmatic work? |
| Why do we choose to explore feminist leadership as a guiding principle? | Who is considered to be a leader in our structures? | Where do we allow failure and mistakes? | How do we recruit, promote and nurture staff at all levels? |
| Why have we achieved some objectives but collectively failed on others? | Who is considered a partner? | Where is the harmful use of power defined, and how is it sanctioned in our organisation? | How do we design and approve our public and official shared values? To what extent do they reflect everyone's interests and perspectives? |
| | Whose voice doesn't count, and why not? | | How do we ensure our collective wellbeing and the wellbeing of our movements? |

Let's start the conversation!

We acknowledge that the vision and agenda laid out above is overwhelming in its call for systemic and long-term change. The questions posed above do not call for easy answers. In our conversations for this paper, we have been challenged personally and as a collective to accept the scope and complexity of the required change and not shy away from it. There are two important disclaimers that must be made:

1. There is no quick fix.
2. No individual or organisation can tackle this challenge on their own.

This is why we decided to start with questions, questions that we hope will spark the deep and uncomfortable conversations needed to start the journey we lay out in this paper. Starting with questions also underlines the importance of conversations on the collective process: as suggested in our Agenda For Change, the journey includes both the individual and collective level.

Part of this work was the exploration of how organisations in the sector could potentially use our Agenda For Change. In line with our four pillars, we consider the following elements as crucial in operationalising the Agenda For Change.

The process should be guided by feminist leadership principles from the very beginning because:

- It matters why you explore feminist leadership as a guiding principle. A commitment to explore feminist leadership as a guiding principle is the basis for change. (Purpose)
- It matters who participates in the discussion and process. A meaningful and transformative process will have to include different voices and experiences. (People)
- It matters where the conversation takes place. The conversations have to take place in an accessible but also safe and trustful environment. (Power)
- It matters how the conversation is organised and how priorities for change are being identified and agreed upon. A basic meeting structure and shared commitment to participate helps to build trust and continuity. (Process)

We, as the FAIR SHARE Action Circle, envision a growing network of Action Circles (or whichever name feels powerful to those involved) around the world in which individuals come together with a commitment to change and the vision to put feminist leadership principles into action as a collective. Based on our own experience over the last year, we are convinced this process is a powerful starting point to create a movement of feminist leaders within the social impact sector.

Through our own process, we have so far learned the following:

- Purpose: Just get started. When we founded the FAIR SHARE Action Circle, we only knew that we shared a vision for the sector based on feminist leadership and that we were keen to learn together. Based on this, we developed a collective process together.
- People: Start with a few committed people - but people with different perspectives and experiences. Among the six of us, we can build on different professional backgrounds in different parts of the social impact sector and personal experiences. Many of us did not know each other before we started our collective journey, but we trusted each other's recommendations. Some of us met in person, but we wrote our collectively founding statement virtually.
- Power: Build collective and bilateral trust to establish collective power rather than distributed power within your group. Next to our collective work, we call on each other bilaterally for advice, collaboration, or particular tasks. We are transparent about our collective process: for example, as we wrote this paper. Based on this, we were able to have very open and trustful, but also uncomfortable discussions.
- Process: Commit to the process and a basic meeting structure. We meet about every two

months virtually and so far none of us missed a conversation even though some of us have had to get up very early or stay up late. We usually start by sharing personal experiences or challenges and reflect on them together. One of us is in charge of coordinating and preparing these meetings.

“This is the work that needs to be done globally, sometimes in discomfort, but always in community. It takes different perspectives, accountability and commitment to create something bigger than any of our one effort to accomplish the goals we have set for ourselves and our organisations. I am both humbled by this experience and thrilled to tap in the collective power we have to transform the societies in which we live.” – Zakiya

“The Action Circle is a beautiful experiment of beautiful minds and feminist intents coming together. Through the collective, we realised that the first step is just the creation of an Action Circle. It signified that intent was ready for action and brought together not just the purpose but a process. We are looking forward to replicating this across organisations globally. I am sure that this will lead to creating much needed conversations about feminist leadership within social impact organisations.”
– Anusha

“Being on this journey with these incredible women has not just been about learning but also discovering... discovering our collective power when we merge our perspectives and share the creative space. It’s beyond rewarding and transformational!” – Emily

We know that many similar conversations are taking place around the world and that there are many different ways to have them. We are not calling for a single streamlined approach nor do we promote a formal Action Circle formation methodology. We envision a process through which we can learn from these different processes and co-create a much more comprehensive Agenda For Change. So wherever you are in the journey, as an individual or as an organisation, join the movement for feminist leadership!

If you are looking to start, here are some suggestions how to form your own Action Circle:

1. **Why:** Start asking yourself the individual questions of the Agenda For Change. This will clarify for yourself why these questions are important to you and what you would like to discuss and achieve together with others.
2. **Who:** Invite colleagues, friends or partners to form an Action Circle and together explore the individual and collective questions suggested in the Agenda For Change. This can include people within and outside your organisation.

3. **Where:** Develop together a trusted and safe setting in which to explore and discuss. No matter whether conversations take place face-to-face or virtually, some collectively developed principles (e.g., confidentiality) and structures (e.g., frequency of meetings) are useful.

4. **How:** Constantly reflect on your individual and collective process, objectives and lessons learned.

If you have started the conversation, please share your experience and learning, but also your challenges and barriers. We hope, our Agenda For Change adds useful questions to your conversations. Together we can establish a collective understanding of how to create the spaces and processes for meaningful conversation.

If you are part of a strategic feminist leadership process, share your successes and your failures. We would like to learn what an organisational feminist leadership process looks like in practise and how to inspire others.

We encourage everyone, independent of their formal position within or outside of an organisation, to start, join or continue an Action Circle for feminist leadership. As a formal leader, you can be part of an Action Circle or encourage and support the establishment of Action Circle(s) within your organisation.

What’s Next: Expect something different!

The challenge for all of us will be to turn our conversations into tangible action, changing the way we are doing things within the sector. How do we change formal decision-making power? How do we empower feminist leaders across organisations? How do we end the culture of silence and silencing in the sector? How do we change our perceptions of what a leader looks like?


When we reflected on our own process, one of us stated that she joined the Action Circle “expecting something different” than other working groups, network meetings and the like. With this mindset, we were able to establish a culture of trust, confidence and creativity in order to be bold, uncomfortable, powerful and vulnerable. Having this collective space has started to make a difference for us as individuals in how we act in our workplaces, make decisions, tackle challenges and dilemmas.

And so, after coming up with a lot of big and difficult questions, we would like to start looking for answers; together with the many committed feminist leaders in the sector, we want to embark on a collective learning journey towards:

- A collective understanding of the conditions and success factors for feminist leadership conversations, whether they are taking place within an Action Circle or not;
- A set of concrete recommendations for organisations how to implement feminist leadership;

- A network of feminist leaders to learn, share and co-create a path forward.

To support this collective learning approach, we envision the development of a virtual Feminist Leadership Hub: a platform for exploration, learning and sharing. We would like to showcase, inspire and mobilise feminist leaders throughout the sector to take on the challenge of change together. We cannot and do not want to do this on our own. Our suggestion to the feminist leaders around the world is to build a platform for inspiration, acknowledgement, and collective advancement to push for feminist leadership as the new paradigm in the social impact sector. We aim to come up with first ideas and tools how we can share our knowledge and experience but it will need many more to turn this into a movement of feminist leaders.

 **We are committed to continuing our work and to doing it together.**

The Action Circle members

Aïssata Lam

Aïssata is the co-founder and President of the Youth Chamber of Commerce of Mauritania, an organisation created in 2013 with the mission to bridge the gap for young Mauritanian Professionals and Entrepreneurs. A Mauritanian national, Aïssata has a background in agricultural finance and microfinance, has worked for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, as well as African Risk Capacity, an institution of the African Union. Besides her work in development, she is passionate about youth and women empowerment matters on the continent; she participated in several task groups on peace, stability and women empowerment in the Sahel Region with UN Women, the European Union and the US Government. She was recently appointed by President Emmanuel Macron on the Gender Equality Advisory Council for the G7 to advise on matters related to girl's education, gender-based violence and women's economic empowerment, specifically in Africa.

Anusha Bharadwaj

Anusha believes in the power of girls to transform communities and nations. It is with this conviction that she leads a group of passionate individuals at VOICE 4 Girls, a social enterprise that educates and empowers marginalized adolescent girls with the vision to eliminate gender inequality and violence.

She is also the Founder Director of SoCh for Social Change, a platform that offers young women a chance to become 'future-ready' and to develop their leadership capacities and enable them to become agents of change. Anusha is an alumna of the Asia Pacific Leadership Program, East West Center, USA; 1st Cohort of Harvard-Dasra Social Impact Leadership Program; and a Cordes Fellow. She is also a Board Member of the Bodhi Education Society (an NGO that runs an affordable English medium private school in rural Telangana), the NSS Advisory Committee at the Hyderabad Central University, an Executive Member of the Andhra Pradesh Mahila Samata Society (APMSS) and an Executive Committee Member of the RVBRR College for Women.

Emily Bove

Emily is an executive leader within the global women's rights movement and the international development sector. She has been recognised for her feminist leadership and constant support of grassroots-led and feminist programming, as well as for her strong experience in movement-building, collaborative leadership and philanthropy. She currently serves as the Executive Director of the Batonga Foundation. Emily is the 2018 recipient of the One World Award for Feminist Leadership in International Philanthropy, as well as the founder and curator of the Feminist Leadership Project. She also serves on the World Pulse Global Advisory Network.

Helene Wolf

Helene is co-founder and Executive Director of FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders. She has been developing FAIR SHARE collectively with others such as the Action Circle since 2019, first on a voluntary basis and now together with a small team based in Berlin. She previously served as the Deputy Executive Director at the International Civil Society Centre, where she led and managed its development from a start-up to a mid-sized organisation. In this capacity, she also worked closely with the top leadership of the largest internationally operating civil society organisations on issues such as governance, accountability, and cooperation.

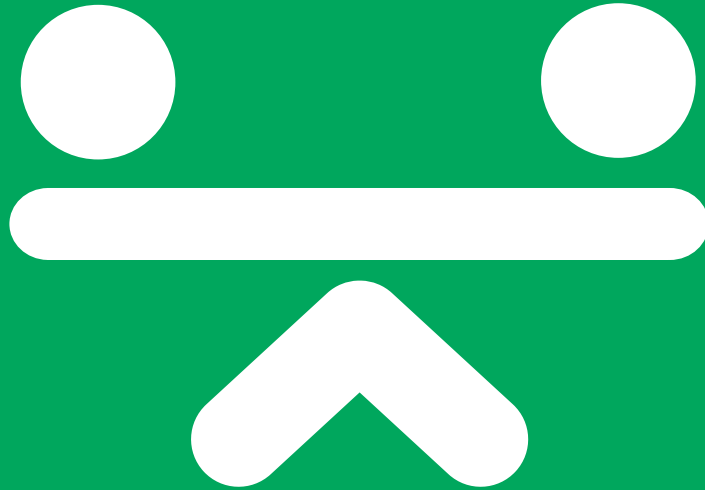
Serap Altinisik

Serap, a passionate intersectional-feminist activist, is the Head of Office and EU Representative of Plan International. Previously, she held the position of Programme Director at the European Women's Lobby (EWL), leading their Fundraising & Programme Strategy. Serap has also led the Campaign Unit at the European Network against Racism (ENAR), where she played a critical role in establishing the first European Foundation against Racism. She also spent several years at the largest women's rights organisation in Germany, TERRE DES FEMMES. She has co-founded the EU Civil Society network (CSOs FPN) and is currently a Board Member of CIVICUS Alliance. A published author and scholar, Serap has written a book on the effects of domestic violence and also led the first study in Germany into

implementation of workplace policies favourable for those experiencing domestic violence.

Zakiya Carr Johnson

Zakiya is a social inclusion, diversity and equity expert and strategist, with extensive experience in international development including over 20 years shaping public policy. Prior to founding ODARA Solutions, LLC and launching the Black Women Disrupt Initiative, she served as Senior Advisor and Director of the first Race, Ethnicity and Social Inclusion Unit at the US Department of State, and co-chair of the White House Inter-Agency Committee on Gender-Based Violence Monitoring and Evaluation during the Obama Administration. Prior to that, she was Foundation Representative for Venezuela and Ecuador at the Inter-American Foundation and Senior Technical Advisor for the Social Inclusion Trust Fund at the Inter-American Development Bank. Zakiya has been at the forefront of promoting equality by supporting Black women and historically marginalised groups in community-based development, leadership and entrepreneurship, and building bridges of transnational solidarity.



FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders e.V.

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