Anchors in a Crisis:

Women's Humanitarian Leadership in Faith and Secular Contexts

Caritas
AUSTRALIA

Contents

Dedication

This report is dedicated to all women humanitarian workers around the world whose invaluable efforts in their communities and organisations make all the difference to people experiencing disasters, conflict and unrest. We also dedicate this report to all the men who support them.

We make a special dedication to the late Puletini Tuala. Puletini, or Tini as he was most often known, was a champion of women's leadership and rights in Oceania and beyond. In his many years as Executive Director of Caritas Samoa and then Regional Coordinator of Caritas Oceania, and in his village and community, he worked ceaselessly to create an atmosphere where women and women leaders would flourish.

ACFID MEMBER

Acknowledgements

HUMANITARIAN ADVISORY GROUP

We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. At Caritas Australia, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which our offices are based. This land always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Caritas Australia offices are located on the lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation in Sydney, the Boon Wurrung People and Woiwurrung (Wurundjeri) Peoples of the Kulin Nation in Melbourne, the Whadjuk of the Noongar Nation in Perth, the Turrbal and Jagera People in Brisbane, and the Ngunnawal People in Canberra.

We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future, for they hold the memories, traditions, culture and hopes of First Australians. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to this country and we commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

Foreword

Looking at the global picture for women and girls, it can be hard to see past the ways in which they are disempowered: boys in many parts of the world, for example, are chosen for schooling over their sisters while girls might not get to choose who they marry.

For those of us privileged enough to have worked in the humanitarian sector, there is another side where women are pillars of strength in their communities. All over the world, women play a vital role as first responders, carers, peacekeepers and community-builders before, during and after a crisis. Their participation in these crises is also crucial given women and girls are disproportionately affected during emergencies.

We have called this report Anchors in a Crisis, to reflect the stabilising role women play in emergencies. This title also recognises that they are steadfast in the face of discrimination and inequality, with many actively resisting it, much like an anchor resists the tides that may wash a boat astray or run it aground.

The strength of women is something I've witnessed firsthand throughout my years in the international aid and development sector, as well as work with the UN and in the field of international peacebuilding.

However, I've also witnessed the disproportionate and gendered challenges that women face when participating in humanitarian decision-making. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions and decision-making spaces within the humanitarian sector.

As a member of one of the world's largest humanitarian networks, we wanted to understand why this gendered reality exists. We also want to understand the factors that foster women's leadership in the humanitarian sector, including in faith-based contexts.

This report shines a light not only on the challenges but also the opportunities and success stories in dismantling the barriers to women's humanitarian leadership. It shows how women's leadership contributes to an inclusive and sustainable humanitarian response. Equally as important, it underscores that women's participation in decision-making in matters that affect their lives is a human right.

This research also demonstrates that faith actors are key players in humanitarian response. Like local women's groups, local faith actors are embedded in their communities and are typically the first responders in an emergency. In many countries, churches provide the primary physical infrastructure used in emergency response, and faith leaders are highly influential figures who hold great potential to shift social norms and attitudes on women's participation and leadership.

Through collaboration in research, advocacy and support for community-level disaster preparedness and response programs, we can all work together to listen to and amplify the chorus of women's voices in humanitarian response. I invite you to read this report, discover what resonates with you and use it to spark conversations about how we can keep investing in women's humanitarian leadership.

In solidarity,

Kirsten Sayers

**Kirsten Sayers
Interim Chief Executive Officer**

Executive Summary

This report investigates women's leadership in humanitarian contexts with a particular focus on faith-based humanitarian networks.

It is the result of a rapid research project comprising a literature review, 16 key informant interviews, and an online survey of 70 people crossing gender, faiths, geographies and organisational roles, conducted in May and June 2024.

The focus of the research was defined by:

- Women playing a key role in humanitarian response and improving its outcomes.
- The vital role of faith networks in humanitarian response, given that 84% of the world identifies with a faith.
- A lack of research into the barriers and enablers to women's leadership in faith-based humanitarian settings.

We found that:

When women are part of humanitarian leadership teams, communities benefit.

Research participants believe that gender diverse humanitarian leadership teams are more likely to produce more inclusive responses, listen to the views of communities and have better decision-making. However, there is a lack of visibility of women's leadership in humanitarian contexts and the associated enablers and barriers.

Women's humanitarian leadership is highly dependent on prevailing social norms, which faith-based actors can either challenge or reinforce.

Oppressive social norms perpetuate gender inequalities and create many barriers to women's leadership. These barriers are intersectional and complex. This highlights the importance of transformative humanitarian action.

Faith-based networks play a pivotal role in humanitarian response. They have the ability to influence community attitudes and behaviours, which can either challenge or reinforce social norms. In many faith-based spaces there are increasing opportunities for more meaningful and active participation of women in decision-making processes.

It's important to foster both formal and informal leadership.

Leadership encompasses both formal and informal power and influence, and women should be supported to build both.

Key enablers include providing spaces for women's peer support, mentorship and coaching; engaging men to actively support women's leadership; fostering supportive boards; and policies that promote women's inclusion and leadership.

Women's leadership needs securing before a disaster, not during.

Emergency situations typically perpetuate and amplify existing norms, while also demanding urgent responses that likely use existing social and organisational structures. Gender transformative humanitarian approaches are therefore needed in development and humanitarian settings, including in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action.

Investing in local women-led organisations and local women faith actors is a win-win for localisation and women's leadership.

Local women-led groups and local faith actors are often the first responders in situations of crises. To promote women's humanitarian leadership at the local level it is essential to partner with local women-led groups and to foster women leaders in local faith groups.

Recommendations

Recommendations for donor governments:

- Embed a gender transformative, inclusive and intersectional approach into all aspects of humanitarian and development programming, especially in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action; and provide increased levels of multi-year funding for such approaches.
- Commit to humanitarian policies and approaches that incentivise the inclusion of local women-led organisations in humanitarian response, and that promote indirect cost recovery and organisational development for local partners.
- Seek opportunities to leverage the potentially transformative role of faith actors in supporting women's leadership and locally-led humanitarian action.
- Support women in the humanitarian sector to access leadership training and capacity-building opportunities.

Recommendations for humanitarian organisations (both faith-based and secular):

- Mainstream a gender transformative approach into all aspects of humanitarian and development programming, including in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action, to address the root causes of gender inequality and build women's leadership.
- Provide capacity-building and training on gender equality and safeguarding for all staff including executive leaders and board members.
- Support women's access to skilled roles in humanitarian contexts, and to safe, supportive spaces for leadership development such as women's leadership networks.
- Support men's engagement and allyship of women's leadership, both in organisational and community contexts.
- Promote locally-led women's leadership in humanitarian response by supporting and partnering with local women-led organisations and providing dedicated funding for indirect cost recovery and organisational development.
- Seek opportunities to leverage the potentially transformative role of faith actors in supporting women's leadership and locally led humanitarian action.

- Continue to build evidence on women's humanitarian leadership by:
  - Documenting success stories in achieving gender equality and diversity in humanitarian leadership teams, including in faith-based networks, to share and replicate good practices.
  - Researching the intersection between supporting localisation, local women-led organisations and local faith-based actors.

Recommendations for faith-based institutions (including churches and faith-based humanitarian organisations):

- Provide leaders of faith-based institutions with training and capacity-building on gender equality and women's leadership; and support them to embed inclusive decision-making processes and spaces within their institutions.
- Continue to develop theologically-based resources and training programs to raise awareness and commitment on gender equality and women's leadership, both within the church and in the community.
- Invest in and empower women's commissions/committees within faith-based networks.
- Support women in faith-based networks to access safe, supportive spaces for peer sharing and learning, such as faith-based women's leadership networks.
- Support initiatives to encourage men's engagement and allyship of women's participation and leadership, both in organisational and community contexts.

Section 1:

Women humanitarians in Ukraine, 2022. Photo: Caritas Ukraine.

Introduction

Women play vital roles in humanitarian crises as first responders in their communities, staff and leaders of humanitarian response organisations, peacemakers in conflict or volatile settings, and advocates.

The rights of women to actively and meaningfully participate in all levels of decision-making are enshrined in international legal frameworks. This has been reflected in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which requires all parties to address all barriers to equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making[1].

The international community has also long recognised women as a critical part of humanitarian response, and that investing in their leadership and prioritising gender equality are essential in effective humanitarian action. Women's rights to leadership in humanitarian situations are reflected in the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and various UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security. The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 embraced gender equality as a core commitment, echoing the words of then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that *"Women and girls' full and equal participation [...] at all levels must become the standard."* Complex challenges in recent years posed by multiple crises such as pandemics, climate change and protracted conflicts, have intensified efforts to achieve equitable and inclusive representation of women in leadership and decision-making[2].

There is empirical evidence that women's leadership results in better emergency preparedness and risk reduction, more efficient, effective and inclusive humanitarian response, as well as more sustainable post crises and recovery initiatives[3][4]. Their knowledge of the local context, and ability to mobilise and influence local communities allows them to be effective humanitarian actors. For example, a UN Women 2015 case study of four countries showed that women's participation in humanitarian response and decision-making significantly improved health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), food security, and gender-based violence outcomes[5].

However, women remain grossly underrepresented in leadership positions in the humanitarian sector, despite making up about 40 percent of the workforce. A survey by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) noted that achieving work-life balance, unsupportive environments for women and the lack of opportunities to advance

Why focus on faith-based humanitarian contexts?

Faith-based actors are a vital part of humanitarian response efforts at every level across the world. A better understanding of faith-based approaches, and unique opportunities and challenges, could enhance the role of these actors in promoting women's leadership across humanitarian responses.

as major challenges women face in the sector[6].

This report contributes to the evidence base on the role of women's leadership in humanitarian contexts and how to strengthen it, with a focus on faith-based settings.

Faith-based actors have a unique contribution to humanitarian contexts for the following reasons:

- **Faith actors have extensive reach and established relationships with local communities**
  84% of the world's population is religious, with Christians comprising 32% of the world's population, Muslims almost 26% and Hindus 15%[7].

  Faith-based actors therefore have an extensive reach and established relationships with local communities, ensuring they play a critical role in humanitarian responses worldwide. As UNOCHA notes:

  "Many religious institutions and faith-based NGOs have a unique comparative advantage in humanitarian contexts: they have an established relationship of trust and familiarity with most local communities in which they are embedded. Due to their presence before a crisis they are first responders and key providers of assistance and protection during crises, and they will stay after international organisations leave." – Agenda for Humanity, 2016

  The combined reach and footprint of faith-based humanitarian networks worldwide is significant. Exact numbers are hard to pinpoint but in just one indication, the Caritas Internationalis confederation has over 160 member organisations working at the grassroots in almost every country, and a Caritas Internationalis survey completed by 68% of their member organisations reported a combined total of over 37,000 staff[8].

As a result of the reach and influence of faith actors in local communities, the push towards localisation in the humanitarian sector, which sees local actors better funded and empowered, increasingly involves the engagement of local faith actors. It also enables efficient communication – a vital factor in emergency response. As one interviewee noted, *"Faith-based*

organisations live with the community, they are there before, during and will be there after crises. The flow of information is very quick in the community—from the grassroots to influencing disaster management in all levels is quicker".

Faith-based leaders can be highly influential.

In many communities, faith leaders are respected and influential members of society, and can help shape social norms. As one survey respondent noted, *"People tend to listen more attentively to messages delivered by faith-based organisations, which are held in high regard, especially in the Pacific Islands...the respect afforded to this sector significantly enhances the acceptance and success rate of messages advocating women's leadership compared to other strategies."*

A handful of examples include:

- Pacific faith-based leaders having long played a critical role in challenging a widely held understanding that disasters are a form of punishment from God for sinful behaviour. This has enabled faith to have a positive impact on disaster resilience[9].

- Pacific faith-based leaders having taken a key role in challenging misinformation circulated through social media about Covid-19. This enabled people to follow more effective health and prevention advice[10].

- In Africa, the All African Council of Churches has highlighted the crucial role of faith-based leaders in the campaign against violence against women and girls[11].

The ability of faith leaders to either challenge or reinforce social norms is discussed in Finding 2 on page 20.

Finally, faith is a source of strength and comfort for many people in crisis, as well as a source of personal strength and guidance for themselves as humanitarian staff, according to many of our research participants.

In January 2022, the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano eruption and tsunami severely impacted over 84% of Tonga's population. Photo: Caritas Australia.

Section 2: Methodology
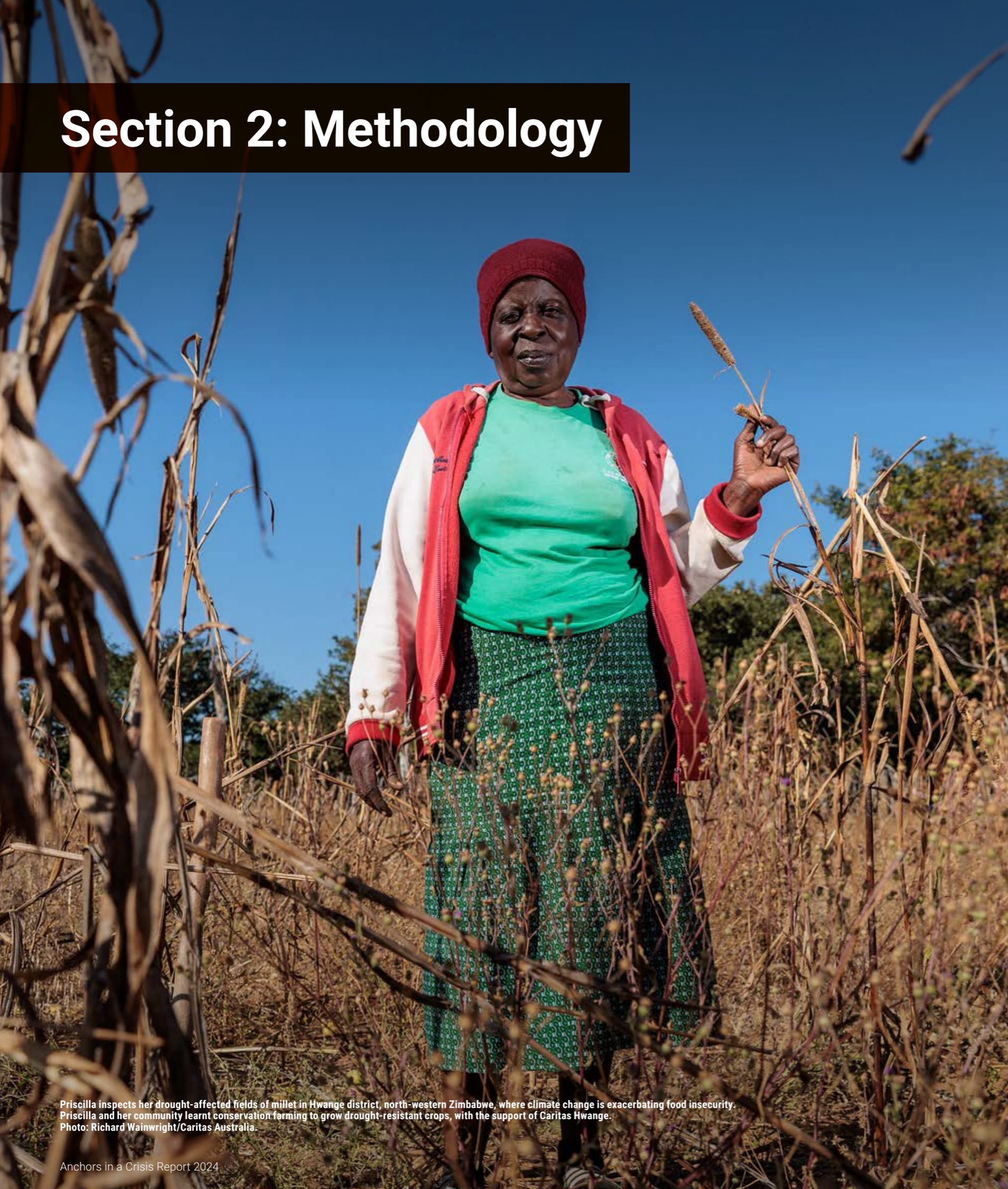
Priscilla inspects her drought-affected fields of millet in Hwange district, north-western Zimbabwe, where climate change is exacerbating food insecurity. Priscilla and her community learnt conservation farming to grow drought-resistant crops, with the support of Caritas Hwange.
Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

This research used a mixed methods approach. A literature review was conducted of academic literature, grey literature and internal documents to the Caritas network. 16 key informant interviews were conducted. A global survey received 70 responses. Two validation workshops with key informant interviews were held.

Research participants included both women and men (about three quarters women). About 90% were from faith-based organisations, from at least two different religions (Christianity and Islam) and within the Christian organisations, from three different denominations. A small minority worked within secular organisations. Participants came from six geographic regions.

Literature review	16 interviews	70 survey responses	Validation workshops

Key informant interviews:
- **12** women, **4** men
- Regions: Asia **6**, MENA **4**, Oceania **3**, Africa **2**, 'Global' **1**
- **12** from FBOs, **4** non-FBOs
- Almost all from senior executive level

Survey
- **70** responses (see Figure 1 for geographic spread)
- **65** from FBOs, **5** non-FBOs
- **76%** women, **24%** men
- Mix of leadership levels (see Figure 2 for more details)

Validation workshops
- **2** workshops
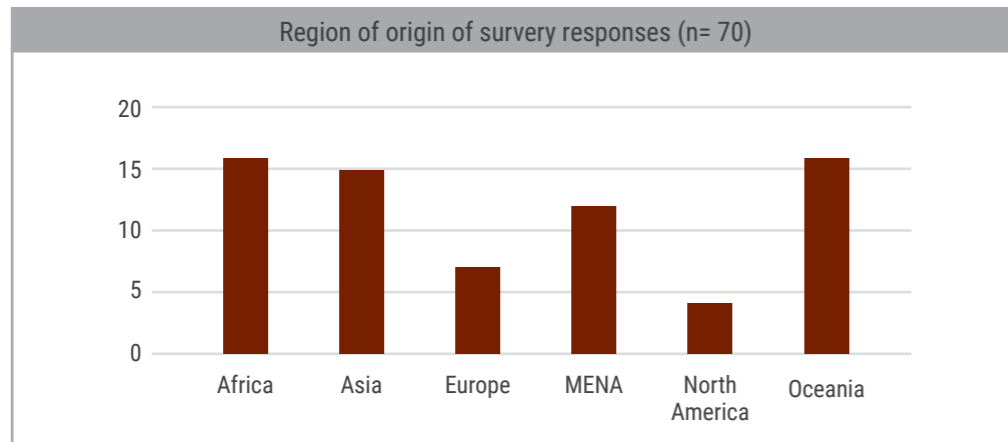- **5** key informant interview participants overall

Figure 1: Regional spread of survey responses

Figure 2: Positional level of survey respondents

Limitations

This was a rapid research project, with the start of data collection and the finalisation of the report spanning six weeks. This the limited number and scope of interview and survey participants and thus the range of views represented. It also limited the range of organisational faith backgrounds represented; while we know that participants came from a range of faith backgrounds, we believe most were from Christian organisations. Another factor was that interviews and survey were conducted in English language only which limited engagement in non-English speaking countries. This was most evident in the lack of engagement in Latin America. We acknowledge these limitations and their impact on the data gathered.

Box 1: Defining women's leadership in humanitarian contexts.

Women's leadership in humanitarian contexts means women having genuine power and influence over decision-making in humanitarian contexts.

That is the theme that most strongly emerged from the interview and survey data and reflects the general narrative in existing literature. In this report, we often refer to women's leadership in humanitarian contexts by the term 'women's humanitarian leadership'.

For example, one interviewee described women's humanitarian leadership as *"going beyond responding to the needs and vulnerabilities of women … really facilitating and recognising the voice of women, the representation of women, the participation of women in decision-making in the humanitarian setting."* Another interviewee described it as *"autonomy of decision-making… rather than tokenism where everything has to be run past someone."*

Different aspects of leadership were also raised by interview and survey participants, including:

- Formal vs informal power: this is discussed on page 26.
- Genuine vs. tokenistic leadership: that simply having women in positional leadership roles does not guarantee their genuine leadership - they also need to be empowered with appropriate support, resourcing and decision-making authority to exercise genuine leadership.
- Leadership as systemic change, not just individual change. This relates to gender transformative humanitarian action. See page 21.

Finally, what makes leadership in humanitarian contexts unique?

First, humanitarian contexts are characterised by the need for rapid decision-making, often without having access to all the information. This means it is critical for humanitarian leaders to be able to establish trusted relationships within their team, and to wield both formal and informal power well.

Second, humanitarian emergencies require humanitarian leaders to interact and negotiate with existing power structures such as governments or warring parties; thus, the ability to influence and navigate those power relationships becomes even more crucial. Several interviewees gave examples of situations where women successfully led the way on negotiations in conflict settings.

This study did not delve deeply into the impact of these factors on women's humanitarian leadership however this provides a contextual frame for reflecting on the role of women in humanitarian contexts.

Section 3: Findings

Finding 1:
When women are part of humanitarian leadership teams, communities benefit

Laxmi at her old school in Jajarkot district, western Nepal. Through her community's Child Club, she developed the skills and confidence to become a leader, advocating for clean water taps at her school. She is a mentor to other girls in her remote village community, encouraging them to stand up for their rights.
Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

Evidence shows women in gender-diverse humanitarian leadership teams contribute to better outcomes for communities.

Specifically, gender-diverse humanitarian leadership teams are thought to be more likely to produce more inclusive responses, to have better decision-making, and to listen to and act upon the views of communities (see Box 2).

Box 2: Perceptions on the impact of gender diverse leadership teams

In the survey, respondents were asked to what extent they agree with various statements about the impact of **gender diverse humanitarian leadership** teams:

- 66 out of 70 respondents agreed or strongly agreed gender diverse humanitarian leadership teams are more likely to **produce more inclusive responses**.

- 60 out of 69 respondents agreed gender diverse humanitarian leadership teams are more likely to **have better decision-making**.

- 60 out of 70 respondents agreed or strongly agreed gender diverse humanitarian leadership teams are more likely to **listen and act upon the views of communities**.

Question:

Please identify to what extent you agree with the following statements:

'When women are equitably represented in humanitarian leadership teams, those teams are ... '

Legend:
- Don't know
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree
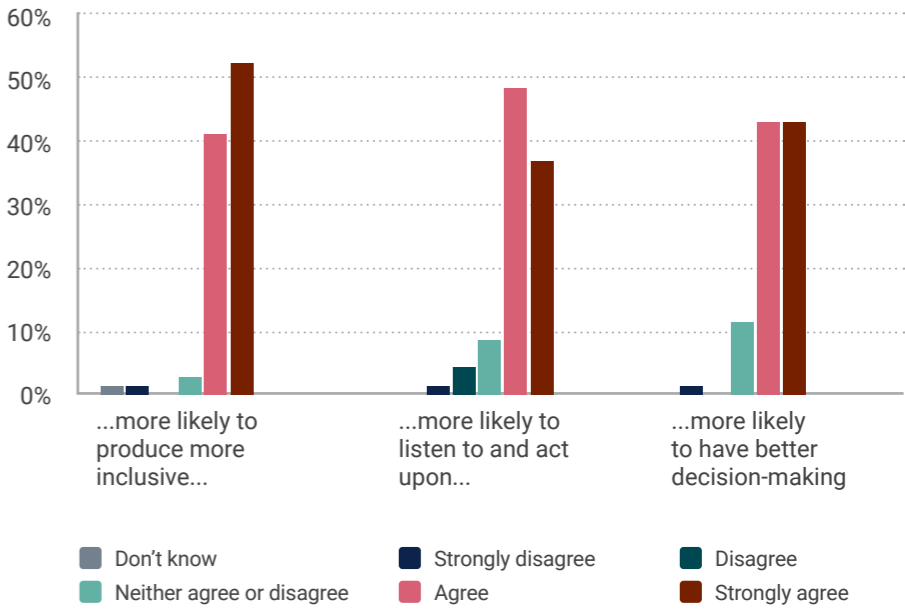
Reasons why women's inclusion in gender-diverse humanitarian leadership teams would lead to improved humanitarian programming include:

1. **Greater awareness and approachability on the needs of women in communities**

   It was widely expressed by research participants that women humanitarian staff have greater awareness of the needs of women in communities, and that women in the community find it easier to approach and trust female humanitarian staff. These views are also reflected in literature[12].

   This was noted as particularly important given that women and girls are disproportionately and distinctively affected, and placed at higher risk, in humanitarian crises.

2. **Women bring diversity to male-dominated teams**

   Some research participants associated certain qualities or characteristics more strongly with women, with empathy the most mentioned. Others included 'getting things done' and being more likely to volunteer without pay or work at low pay (we examine this latter point on page 35). This view led two interviewees to comment that women were better in protection and/or safeguarding roles, with one saying, "I observe that women have a much louder and consistent voice in pushing for safeguards."

   Conversely, some interviewees questioned whether qualities or characteristics commonly attributed to women, such as empathy, were the result of social conditioning and/or stereotyping rather than innate qualities.

   They instead felt that women in humanitarian leadership teams simply brought diversity to a traditionally male-dominated sector, and it is this diversity that is the key factor.

   As one interviewee said,

   "You have empathy for someone who's experiencing similar things to yourself and into that can inform project activities or methodologies or approaches that are more suitable to that kind of person. And that's why diversity and leadership is important in general."

3. **Shaping views and social cohesion.**

   It was noted that women play important leadership roles in building social cohesion and peace, and that women are highly influential in shaping the views of people in the community.

These factors are broadly similar to the results of a 2019 survey conducted by UNOCHA[13], canvassing over 1,000 women humanitarians in 115 countries. In that survey, the top three attributes that women bring to humanitarian action were: the ability to speak with women from affected communities, different perspectives due to gender, and a different style of leadership. Empathy was the sixth-most nominated attribute in that survey.

Addressing the lack of visibility

This research finds that there is a lack of visibility of women's humanitarian leadership. This was supported by our interviewees, who could readily provide specific examples of the impact of women's leadership, but all recognised the lack of documented evidence.

The following are potential contributing factors identified in literature[14] and interviews:

- **Women's work being taken for granted and undervalued.** Women's roles and responsibilities are typically defined by socially constructed norms which renders women's contribution to humanitarian response invisible and undervalued[15]. Similarly, the literature notes a lack of value placed on grassroots women's organising by external actors who measure and record this work[16].

- **Societal expectations for women to act humbly.** As one interviewee said: *'Women also feel very much compelled to follow the values of humility, so we really don't speak about it [...] so I think these things are taken for granted and I don't think it's documented anywhere."*

- **A lack of time and staff capacity within grassroots women's organising.**

> **Recommendation:**
>
> - That humanitarian actors document success stories in achieving gender equality and diversity in humanitarian leadership teams, to share and replicate good practices.

Rosalie and her children in their community, Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo: Arlette Bashizi/CAFOD.

Finding 2:
Women's humanitarian leadership is highly dependent on prevailing social norms

Discriminatory social norms continue to embed gender inequality before, during and after a disaster and severely limit women's access to leadership and decision-making at all levels.

Oppressive social norms give rise to many barriers to women's leadership. As noted by research participants and existing literature, these include:

1. **Gendered responsibilities**

   Disproportionate caring responsibilities within the family or community mean that at a community level, women often have less time to attend decision-making discussions or attend training. At an organisational level, women are less likely to seek humanitarian roles which require extended travel with little notice or deployments where they have to leave their family behind.

2. **Negative perspectives and lack of visibility of women's leadership**

   Women are often not perceived to be leaders or capable of leading. Interviewees said this meant that women were more likely to be overlooked for leadership roles, face greater scrutiny than men in the workplace, and must 'prove themselves' more than men. This both contributes to, and is exacerbated by, a lack of visibility of female role models.

3. **Exclusion from decision-making spaces**

   Women can be excluded from formal and informal spaces for a variety of reasons. For example, decision-making can take place in spaces where women are not welcome, or at times when they are typically occupied with gendered care responsibilities. One interviewee explained that in her context:

   "Many of these decisions will be taken around meetings in late hours... You're talking about a director of an organisation, she's a woman, but it reaches a time like after the working hours and she has to go and be a mother in her house. And that is the main time other fellow director men are taking beer with other men and discussing funding …She misses the opportunity."

4. **Lack of education**

   Education is often prioritised for boys rather than girls, meaning that globally women have lower education levels than men. At a societal level, this means that girls are less likely than boys to gain qualifications, a lack of which can block women for certain jobs or prevent them from having the confidence to apply. At an organisational level, an interviewee noted that a lack of formal credentials can block women from certain jobs even though they may be capable, or alternatively erodes their confidence that they can apply for the job.

5. **Sexual harassment**

   One interviewee noted that this was experienced even by senior women leaders in a workplace context. Another interviewee noted that they had spoken to several women who had resigned from their workplaces, ostensibly for another reason, when in reality it was because they felt unsafe in their workplace.

6. **Perceptions of risk**

   Some interviewees spoke of the increased risk to female humanitarian staff due to safety and security issues in certain humanitarian contexts.

   On the other hand, one interviewee raised it as a barrier of perception, saying *"people think if she's a woman, she cannot move around. We need to really protect her"*, but opposed this view, adding that *"these kind of notions really stop us being recruited for such positions."*

How do discriminatory social norms bear out in humanitarian emergencies?

The impacts of harmful social norms are exacerbated in an emergency setting, as shown by our primary data and existing literature[17]. This means that during emergencies, prevailing social norms can exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls, putting them at greater risk. Additionally, conceptualisations of women as victims, alongside other socio-cultural and economic barriers can severely limit women's agency and access to opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making[18].

It is therefore necessary for humanitarian actors to pay greater attention to the role they can play in instigating gender transformative change, i.e. change that challenges unequal power relations that perpetuate discrimination against women, and that seeks to uplift their status in society.

Ronita overcame many challenges to complete her secondary education in Quezon City, Philippines. Access to education is a crucial factor in fostering women's leadership. Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

Box 3: Transformative humanitarian action

Transformative humanitarian action means working on all the inequalities that exist in any given context. In women's humanitarian leadership, this means:

- Challenging unequal power relations by lifting the status of women in society[19][20] and addressing the backlash this might cause.
- Addressing the unique needs of women and girls by building on their strengths and capacities.
- Leveraging opportunities created by crises to transform social norms that box women into specific roles and limit their access to leadership and decision-making spaces.

I think that what we're really trying to understand, analyse, study, measure and support is the practise of feminism in leadership. [This requires supporting] women who will behave and lead by addressing all of these inequalities. (interview participant)

Unique levers exist in a faith-based context

Faith-based networks have unique characteristics that enable them to play a pivotal role in humanitarian response. One of these characteristics is the ability to influence community attitudes and social norms. This can either challenge or reinforce social norms, according to our research participants and literature.

For example, survey participants noted the power of faith-based organisations to challenge existing norms around women's leadership:

"Faith-based organisations are key players in the humanitarian sector, providing a powerful platform for advocating women's leadership in humanitarian contexts. People tend to listen more attentively to messages delivered by faith-based organisations, which are held in high regard, especially in the Pacific Islands ... The respect afforded to this sector significantly enhances the acceptance and success rate of messages advocating for women's leadership compared to other strategies."

"Faith-based organisations are usually influential due to the influence of religion on community, so when they adopt women leadership enhancement, they set the pace as well in the community."

There are also good examples of women's leadership existing in a faith-based humanitarian setting. One example comes from Caritas Oceania, a grouping of the seven Caritas member organisations in the Pacific, where five of the seven Caritas agencies are headed by female executive directors. Another example comes from North America, where 85 of the 168 Catholic charities in the US and its five territories are led by female executive directors[23].

On the other hand, examples where social norms were reinforced by faith actors, or examples where the governance structures of some faith actors have influenced the spaces for women's leadership were noted by some participants and have been cited by literature. This is relevant as women's humanitarian leadership is contingent on women's access to leadership and decision-making spaces in broader contexts, as outlined in more detail in Finding 4.

However, reflections on the role of the laity and women religious in leadership and decision-making are increasing new opportunities for more meaningful and active participation of women in faith-based decision-making processes[24][25][26][27]. There is a need to support and sustain this momentum to make sure these changes are realised at all levels especially within organisations, and in communities where humanitarian faith-based organisations operate.

Opportunities for faith-based actors to promote women's leadership

Research participants identified several opportunities for faith-based institutions to continue to promote gender equality and women's leadership, both within their faith-based networks and at the community level.

1. **The provision of training on gender equality for faith leaders.**

   This was one of the most common recommendations amongst interview and survey participants and in the literature. This work should be anchored on theological underpinnings of gender equality.

2. **Encouraging church leaders to build inclusive decision-making processes** which, dependent on the faith-based context, could involve formalising inclusive listening and consultation mechanisms for decision-making.

3. **Empowering existing women's leadership structures within faith-based institutions.** For example, some faith-based institutions have a women's unit, such as a 'commission' or 'council' for women.

4. **Harnessing spiritual and theological approaches.**

   Across faiths, the power of taking a theological approach was recognised by research participants who said:

   - *"Faith-based organisations have significant opportunities to promote women's leadership in humanitarian contexts by leveraging their core values of respect, dignity, and equality. These values provide a strong moral foundation for advocating gender equality and empowering women."* (survey participant)

- *"I believe our organisation is thriving up until now because our core values is anchored by Islamic perspective and still culturally sensitive despite that we advocate for gender justice and women empowerment. And that cuts across in all our programs including humanitarian context."* (survey participant)

- *"Recognising that God gives gifts of leadership to various people, including women, is an important aspect to encouraging people of faith to empower women in leadership. Also recognising that women in leadership doesn't violate tenants of faith but supports it and can often support it in unique and complementary ways."* (survey participant)

Examples of how theology is being used to frame women's empowerment and leadership in development and humanitarian work include:

- Caritas Internationalis' resource *'Equality, Encounter, Renewal: A Caritas commitment to the promotion of women's leadership and participation, based on the Holy Scriptures and Catholic Social Teaching values and principles'* [28]. This resource explores how the Catholic Church's teachings support the participation of women in leadership and decision-making.

- In the Pacific region, another example of a theologically-framed resource used to raise awareness about gender equality is the Theology for Gender Equality, developed by Uniting World[29].

CARITAS AFRICA CASE STUDY

Fostering women's leadership in African faith-based humanitarian networks: the Caritas Africa Women's Leadership Forum

The Caritas Africa Women's Leadership Forum aims to support women and increase their representation in leadership roles within the 46 member organisations of Caritas Africa. It does this by creating supportive spaces for peer learning, sharing, coaching and active empowerment of current and future women leaders.

Lucy Esipila, Regional Coordinator of Caritas Africa and a coordinating member of the Caritas Africa Women's Leadership Forum, said that this initiative reflects the Church's commitment to recognising and valuing the contributions of women in leadership and service within the Church and broader society. She pointed to the progress that has already been made to promote women's leadership, including the fact that there are twelve female Executive Directors of national Caritas organisations in a region where wider societal norms have not generally encouraged women's genuine leadership.

The value of creating supportive spaces for women leader's peer support and learning cannot be underestimated. According to Ms Esipila, fostering women's leadership goes beyond just providing training, it is vital to create an enabling environment. *"The important thing is to create a supportive environment where we can test what women's leadership means and compare what works,'* says Ms Esipila. The space allows women to discuss different leadership models and strategies, and to explore their self-awareness as leaders and the dynamics that affect their self-confidence and ability to effectively carry out their roles in senior management.

She also emphasised the importance of engaging men and encouraging their allyship, which in faith-based contexts often involves senior church leaders. Another key enabler in the faith-based context is to embed discussions about women's leadership in theological and church teachings. In many faith-based contexts, a secular aspect will be ineffective and may lack the capacity to address sensitivities.

In future the Women's Leadership Forum plans to continue to foster supportive spaces for capacity-sharing, coaching and training for women leaders, and also to create constructive spaces for dialogue between women humanitarian leaders and church leaders to mutually address challenges to women's access to decision-making spaces.

By focusing on empowering women leaders within Caritas Africa, the Women Leaders Forum and their allies can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive organisational culture that supports women to lead effectively in serving their communities.

Recommendations:

- That governments increase support and multi-year funding for humanitarian and development actors at all levels to mainstream a gender transformative, inclusive and intersectional approach into humanitarian and development programming, including in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action.

- That government and humanitarian actors seek opportunities to leverage the potentially transformative role of faith actors in supporting women's leadership and locally led humanitarian action.

- That governments and humanitarian actors strengthen safeguarding mechanisms in humanitarian response.

- That humanitarian actors mainstream a gender transformative approach into all aspects of humanitarian and development programming to address the root causes of gender inequality and build women's leadership.

- That humanitarian and faith-based actors continue to provide capacity-building and training on gender equality and safeguarding for all staff including leaders and board members, and embed inclusive policies and decision-making processes within their institutions.

- That faith-based actors continue to develop theologically-based resources and training programs to raise awareness and commitment on gender equality and women's leadership, both within the church and in the community.

- That faith-based actors invest in and empower women's commissions/committees within faith-based networks.

Finding 3:
It's important to foster both formal and informal leadership

Memory is the only female carpenter in her village in Mwanza district, southern Malawi, and is a role model and trailblazer for other young women. Photo: Caritas Australia.

Leadership encompasses both formal and informal power, and women should be supported to build both.

The complementary roles of formal and informal leadership

In this report we refer to **formal or positional leadership** where someone is in a leadership role that is vested with authority to make decisions and is typically renumerated for their work.

We also refer to **informal leadership**, referring to using personal leadership qualities to exert influence, which can be exercised at any level.

The case for formal leadership

Formal leadership is a surer means of having decision-making power and influence.

> *"If we just say everyone who has influence is a leader, I think that minimises what we're trying to do in terms of promoting women in leadership in a real sense…. that's not to say that women who have influence, but not necessarily decision-making authority are not leaders in their own right. But… to make a real difference to equality, they need to be beyond the influence phase and in actual decision-making autonomy."* (interview participant)

The case for informal leadership

Notions of leadership are informed by culture and context. In some cases, active participation and the exercise of one's agency have equal value as holding formal leadership positions or titles[30].

Informal leadership can still enable strong influence and power and can be a stepping stone to formal power. It may be particularly important in situations where women are blocked from positional leadership roles.

Effective formal leadership generally also requires informal leadership.

> *"Before someone reaches positional leadership, they are already practicing personal leadership. Both men and women do that, but because of the gender gap in leadership positions, even if women don't have formal positional power, they tend to use personal."* (interview participant)

Gendered perceptions of power

However, gendered social norms can mean that a woman's demonstration of personal power is perceived negatively, one interview participant said,

> *"When women try to exercise personal influence and power, they often experience pushback. They're seen as pushy, always asking questions, making an issue'. Another interview participant said, "If a man is passionate, it's normal, it's good. But if a woman is passionate, it can be seen as 'does she have her period'? No, it's because you've done something that makes me angry, not my period."*

Enablers of women's formal and informal leadership

Key enablers of women's formal and informal leadership, as gleaned from our research participants (see Box 5) and the literature, are often similar across different regions and contexts, although there are variances between organisational and community contexts. Not surprisingly, they are often mirrors of key barriers (see Box 6).

Key enablers commonly include:

- Supportive cultures and environments at all levels, including society, community and organisation (as they are all linked). Amongst our survey respondents, social and community norms were thought to be one of the most dominant determinants of women's humanitarian leadership.
- Gender transformative programs and policies
- Support for women's care and domestic responsibilities, including flexible working arrangements
- Targeted investment in women's leadership training
- Safe, supportive and collaborative spaces for women's peer learning and sharing
- Engaging men and building male allyship
- Funding for women-led organisations

We expand on some of these enablers of women's leadership below:

Peer support, mentorship and coaching for women

There is a clear need for women to have access to safe, supportive spaces for peer sharing and learning to help build formal and informal leadership in the humanitarian sector.

An effective way to do this is through women's leadership networks. In our research we encountered two networks which are successfully providing female humanitarian leaders with a supportive platform to meet other female humanitarian leaders, access leadership training and share knowledge and experiences.

Some research participants spoke of the influence that mentoring and coaching had on their personal leadership journey.

One interviewee said:

> *"I had this kind of mentorship network that provided me with guidance and support. And so at the end of the day, it's an opportunity to grow professionally. I think that this is very important and this kind of network, this kind of safe space are very important for women in humanitarian leadership."*

Another interview shared that:

> *"What helps me is I have an executive coach who I am able to sit down and run through [things]. Because at the top is very lonely, you don't want to talk and be quoted, so you need to find safe spaces to navigate."*

Engaging men to support women

The importance of engaging men, especially male leaders, in promoting women's equality and leadership is a common finding in this research and the literature. For example, one interviewee commented that in the faith-based context:

"The real value of [faith-based] organisations like ours is to look at men in leadership, at men adopting a more gender progressive attitude, to ensure that men are trained and become advocates for the voice of women and women's leadership…. [and to] ensure that those local women are supported with male leaders and not relying on outside lenses of gender, but instead have people at the local level really advocating for women's voices. So I think that piece around engaging men is really important for faith-based organisations more broadly." (interview participant)

The importance of engaging men is also evident at the community level. One interview explained that when implementing programs in communities:

"[Women] need to have a permission from their husband to join the activities. So our approach is to include not only the women but their husbands. We [explain] the benefits, we share the stories from other villages, make them believe that is a good activity, that they gain more knowledge and income from these activities." (interview participant)

Targeted training and support for women

Investing in strengthening the capacity and confidence of women through education, training and mentorship, can help them take up leadership roles. This was commonly recognised in the research data and literature.

Doing so requires intentional resourcing and building into program design. As one interviewee said,

"Mostly donors do not consider this separate allocation for capacity building … If we have enough budget allocation for stand-alone women's capacity building then it will help the organisations to have dedicated programming for women's empowerment outside of their project activity …. [without dedicated funding], it's difficult for them to have dedicated staff on gender."

Board support for women's executive leadership.

The importance of Board support for women's executive leadership was raised by research participants and in the literature. As one interviewee said, "Boards are the ones which can make the executive lead or not'. Existing literature also shows diversity in leadership makes a difference, but diversity itself does not produce dividends without the voices of those diverse leaders being heard[31]. There is therefore a clear need for humanitarian and faith-based actors to support Boards to empower women executive leaders.

This was noted as being particularly important in contexts where members of the Board may be largely comprised of male leaders.

Policies on gender inclusion

The importance of policies to embed the above enablers into organisational practice was raised by research participants. It was also noted that many faith-based humanitarian NGOs have values and policies that promote inclusiveness and gender equality within their organisational structures and recruitment processes. For example, the 160+ members of the global Caritas confederation receive training and capacity-strengthening support to enable them to uphold the compulsory Caritas Internationalis Management Standards which include equality and inclusion standards.

Box 5: From the survey: enablers of women's humanitarian leadership

Survey participants were asked to nominate the main enablers for promoting women's humanitarian leadership, firstly in their organisation, and secondly at the community level. Up to five responses could be selected from a list of issues derived from a thorough review of existing literature.

Enablers in organisations (n = 65)	%*	Enablers at community level (n = 66)	%*
Supportive internal culture	72%	Local community support for WHL	62%
Employment policies that encourage women's participation	58%	Wider societal culture values WHL	52%
Flexible working arrangements	52%	Mainstreaming gender-inclusive design into humanitarian programming	52%
Safe, collaborative spaces for women's peer learning and sharing	49%	Women have support for care/domestic responsibilities	39%
Policies to address gender discrimination and/or GBV	46%	Having a local 'champion' of WHL	38%
Targeted investment in developing women leaders	45%	Adequate resources for training and support in the community	36%
External/cultural support	31%	Funding for women-led organisations	32%
Existing evidence	22%	Development partners provide targeted support for WHL	26%
Quotas/targets for women in leadership positions	18%	Flexible working arrangements	26%
Other	2%	Existing evidence	21%
		Safe, collaborative spaces for women's peer learning and sharing	21%
		Quotas/targets for women in leadership positions	20%

* % is the percentage of survey respondents who nominated this as an enabler n is the number of responses.

In a separate question, survey participants were asked, "What can governments and other stakeholders do to strengthen their support for women's humanitarian leadership?" Fifty-one survey participants provided open text responses that fall into the following thematic topics.

- **Providing training and capacity building** was mentioned 17 times
- **Providing more or equal opportunities for women** was mentioned 14 times
- **Culture change / normalising and promoting women's leadership** was mentioned 13 times
- **Policies to promote women's leadership** was mentioned 10 times
- **Supporting childcare responsibilities** was mentioned 4 times
- **Quotas** were mentioned 4 times
- **Other:** creating safe and supportive spaces (e.g. for women to meet and train), funding for women-led organisations and gender inclusive humanitarian programming.

Box 6: Barriers to women's humanitarian leadership

Survey participants were asked to nominate the main barriers preventing women's humanitarian leadership, firstly in their organisation, and secondly at the community level.

The results are broadly a mirror of the enablers to women's humanitarian leadership (see Box 5).

Barriers in organisations (n = 66)	%*	Barriers at community level (n = 66)	%*
Lack of targeted support for women's leadership	39%	External/contextual cultural barriers	62%
External/contextual cultural barriers	32%	Lack of targeted support for women's leadership	56%
Lack of policies that encourage women's leadership	30%	Care/domestic responsibilities	42%
Lack of resources	30%	Lack of opportunities	38%
Organisational cultural barriers	29%	Lack of self-confidence	35%
Lack of opportunities to advance	29%	Organisational culture does not normalise women's leadership	33%
Lack of flexible working arrangements	26%	Lack of resources	29%
Lack of self-confidence	26%	Low literacy levels	29%
Care/domestic responsibilities	24%	Lack of safe, collaborative spaces for women's peer learning and sharing	26%
Safety concerns related to unsafe country context	17%	Lack of flexible working arrangements	23%
Lack of evidence base	12%	Lack of support from development partners	21%
None of the above	12%	Safety concerns related to unsafe country context	21%
Lack of safe, collaborative spaces for peer learning and sharing	11%	Lack of evidence base	9%
Other	6%	Other	0%

* % is the percentage of survey respondents who nominated this as a barrier n is the number of responses

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Recommendations:

- That governments support women in the humanitarian sector to access leadership training and capacity-building opportunities.
- That humanitarian actors and faith-based organisations:
  - support women's access to safe, supportive spaces for peer sharing and learning, such as women's leadership networks.
  - implement initiatives to encourage men's engagement in women's participation and leadership, both in organisational and community contexts.
  - Provide capacity-building and training on gender equality for board and executive members to support them to empower women leaders.

Memory on her family farmland in Malawi. Photo credit: Caritas Australia.

Finding 4:
Women's leadership needs securing before a disaster

Laxmi walks four hours to reach her technical school to study civil engineering. Photo: Richard Wainwright/Caritas Australia.

To support women's leadership in disaster response, we need to support women's leadership in disaster preparedness and development contexts.

The level of women's leadership pre-disaster is a pre-determinant of women's leadership during the disaster, given that emergency situations typically perpetuate and amplify existing norms, and that they demand urgent responses using existing social and organisational structures.

This was a strong theme emerging from our study, consistent with previous studies[32][33][34][35].

For this reason, it is imperative that governments and humanitarian actors understand humanitarian response in a way that situates it within a continuum, rather than a singular event in times of crises. This can better embed gender transformative approaches that encompasses disaster preparedness and anticipatory action before a crisis, as well as into all aspects of humanitarian programming during and after disasters.

To illustrate the point, an interviewee said:

> *"Bearing in mind that all of this in the humanitarian setting takes place very, very quickly …. you don't drag in token people just to make up the team. You use the people who are already on your team in your organisation, who are in those roles, which means in order to have women in humanitarian leadership, you have to have women in organisational leadership."*

The same interviewee then spoke about dynamics at the community level:

> *"If we're using church volunteers, for instance, or various church assets say a Church as an evacuation centre or something like that, the leaders tend to be men just because of the nature of the church hierarchy. And then it comes down to what those individual men think about working with a woman… So what's really important, as with any aspect of humanitarian programming, is that prior relationships in peacetime set the stage for a positive impact for humanitarian response. You can't create those relationships during our response. It's too late."*

It is worth noting that in some circumstances humanitarian response can also take advantage of the junctures created by crises to further the participation of women[36]. The social upheaval that might often result from conflicts or disasters may create opportunities for humanitarian actors to facilitate the empowerment of women and girls. During such times, women may take on new social, economic and political roles. However, the extent to which women remain in leadership after the crisis ends is debatable[37]. As such, humanitarian response should not only build on existing gender equality development initiatives but also create the foundations for longer-term gender-transformative work post crises[38].

Recommendation:
- That governments and humanitarian actors embed gender transformative approaches into all aspects of humanitarian and, as well as development programming, especially in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action.

Finding 5:

Investing in local women-led organisations and local women faith actors is a win-win for localisation and women's leadership

Ayoyo is a complaints officer serving her community in south-western Ethiopia as they battle consecutive years of drought and hunger. Photo: Zacharias Abubeker/Caritas Australia.

Women play a vital role as first responders in their local communities during and after an emergency. We examine three elements that intersect to shape the spaces for local women's leadership: the push for localisation, support for women-led organisations and engagement of local faith groups.

Localisation

Localisation in humanitarian response can be described as the 'process of giving more decision-making agency, funding, leadership, and power to local and national actors throughout all stages of a humanitarian response'[39].

Local faith actors are a vital part of local humanitarian response

As outlined in the Introduction of this report, they are often key first responders in an emergency, have established networks of local volunteers which facilitate the fast flow of information and humanitarian assistance, have established infrastructure which is often used for emergency shelters and aid distribution, and are a source of spiritual comfort and support.

Local women-led organisations

Local women-led organisations are also pivotal in local humanitarian response. As one interviewee noted: "They are there before the crisis, during the crisis and after the crisis, and they know best the needs of the women who are very much affected by all sort of crisis."

However, there is a chronic lack of visibility of, and investment into, local women-led organisations. Reasons for this include:

- **Structural issues within the wider humanitarian sector that focus on larger agencies and short-term funding cycles.**

  Funding priorities are typically defined according to the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster System. There is no gender cluster in the coordination system and while in practice gender issues often sit in the Protection cluster, this system has "failed to consistently integrate women's rights and gender equality measures" into humanitarian response. This structure means that funding is largely controlled by large multilateral agencies, and leaves little space to include local

actors, including women's organisations.

When funding becomes available, they are mostly for projects on a short-term funding cycle that focus on specific lifesaving projects and immediate needs rather than longer term opportunities for gender transformative work. There may also be an unintentional mismatch between the type of areas where disaster funding often flows and the focus of women's groups. As one interviewee said:

"When there's a disaster, funding flows largely for infrastructure, or for basic needs. And neither of those things are the traditional playgrounds of women's groups. And so, I think some of it is maybe just unintended just by virtue of the core business of the way that partners work in that space."

- **A lack of funding to meet indirect or overhead costs** is another reason why women-led organisations may struggle to establish formalised systems, according to existing literature.

- **Unequal partnerships and collaborations:** Other humanitarian actors often seek the participation of women-led organisations in humanitarian programming for their knowledge of the local context and language, their extensive network and their ability to mobilise and influence communities. However, in many instances their participation is facilitated through community consultations, rather than through formal and genuine collaborative partnerships. Because of this, women's organisations and groups are often not adequately or fairly compensated for their contributions and their time.

This lack of support and investment to local women-led organisations also contributes to the lack of investment into locally led gender transformative humanitarian action (see Box 6: Valuing women's work at the local level).

It also means that while women's groups have strong capabilities, they often lack institutional capacity and formalised structures/processes. As one interview participant explained:

"The emphasis on partnering with women-headed organisations needs to be stronger. When we look at localisation, most often there are tendency to go for organisations led by men because of various factors…. We need to have conversations with donors to see how they can prioritise women-led organisations under localisation."

Another interview participant said:

"Many [funding partners] will go for men-led organisations. It is important to understand the reason behind it. The limitations around women-led organisations are because they don't have the resources and the structure is limited."

Box 6: Valuing women's work at the local level

Many interviewees touched upon the issue of renumerating women for their humanitarian work, especially at the local level where their efforts are pivotal but often unpaid and undervalued. For example, one interviewee said:

"Disaster response at a local level is often unpaid. And I think when you pay you value …. [for example], if the UN staff are men and they're being paid, and your volunteers are all women from the church and they're all unpaid, there is a dynamic there. There's a power dynamic there, but there's also our value question: do we value you? And so I do think that unpaid work in disaster response needs some reflection from the NGO community. Certainly in the church setting, it's something that we see a lot of. If I reflect on all of my [past] deployments, the work of women was essentially fuelling all of the success of the program."

There is a clear need for governments, multilateral and faith/non-faith humanitarian actors to explore and support mechanisms to renumerate local community organisations, including women-led organisations, for their humanitarian response efforts.

The intersection between localisation, support for women-led organisations and engagement of local faith groups

The intersection between these three important issues is a complex and intriguing area without a sizeable evidence base in the literature. When asked in the interviews and survey, most research participants believed that there is a link between these issues but many felt unsure how to describe the nature of the relationship.

While this study has only touched the surface of this question, five main sub-themes have emerged from our research:

- **Empowering local leaders often includes recognising and elevating the contributions of women within the community.**

- However, **local leadership is often influenced by cultural norms which may not generally promote women in leadership.** For this reason, promoting local leadership does not necessarily result in the promotion of women's leadership.

- **International and national humanitarian partners can be a positive force for change in supporting gender equality at the local level.** Research participants mentioned several pathways of influence. Firstly, INGOs and national NGOs can incentvise local actors to have more gender inclusive leadership and programming. One example provided by an interviewee was to offer funding for a leadership program with in-built gender balance targets. Secondly, INGOs and national NGOs can ensure that their own programming takes a gender transformative or inclusive approach. Thirdly, INGOs can 'set an example' through their own hiring practices. As one survey participant noted, "*Local INGOs promoting women in leadership sets an example for those organisations, governments & cultures that we work in / with. They can see that it works & could be inspired to try it themselves*".

- **Localisation often involves engaging local faith-based actors**, given the critical role that local faith-based networks play in local level disaster response. Research participants spoke of the importance of women in these local faith-based humanitarian responses, yet there seems to be a lack of evidence and documentation to give them visibility or to allow a better understanding of how women's leadership in local faith-based humanitarian groups can be supported. In some

contexts, local female faith leaders have a strong and influential presence on community-level decision-making. This includes women religious but also female members of the laity; for example, some of our research participants mentioned the influence that women can have both formally (e.g. in parish committees) and informally (e.g. influencing church leaders' positions behind the scenes). However, in other examples provided, women lacked a voice in community-level decision-making.

- **Members of local women-led organisations are also members of their local faith groups** in many communities where the population is highly religious.

Other research studies have reported that secular humanitarian organisations have a distrust of religion and/or low religious literacy, while local faith actors can feel misunderstood or sidelined, or 'feel disconnected from the international humanitarian system' and desire training and formalisation.

We recommend further investigation on the intersection between the important thematic issues of localisation, the promotion of women's leadership in local women's organisations and the promotion of women's leadership in local faith organisations.

> **Recommendations:**
>
> - That governments commit to humanitarian policies and approaches that incentvise the inclusion of local women-led organisations in humanitarian response, and that promote indirect cost recovery and organisational development for local partners.
>
> - That humanitarian organisations promote locally-led women's leadership by supporting and partnering with local women-led organisations and providing dedicated funding for indirect cost recovery and organisational development.
>
> - Humanitarian actors conduct further research on the intersection between localisation, the promotion of women's leadership and the engagement of local faith actors in humanitarian response.

Women from Mwanda Parish of Bukavu learning how to make soaps.
Photo: CAFOD DRC.

Case Study: Supporting local women-led organisations – the partnership between Centre Olame and CAFOD DRC

Centre Olame is a local women-led organisation in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of The Congo (DRC) working for the integral promotion of women and girls and their households. Like many local women-led organisations, in the past they struggled from being overlooked for funding and support due to a lack of institutional capacity. This case study is about their partnership with a national faith-based organisation, CAFOD DRC.

Centre Olame was originally established by religious laity to improve the economic, social, pastoral, psychosocial and well-beings of women and girls. Its mission is to coordinate the activities of women and girls as well as their households in the Archdiocese of Bukavu. Centre Olame is now run by local women, including former beneficiaries of its services. Its interventions mainly support the initiatives of rural and urban women and girls to access the knowledge, skills and competencies that enable them to improve their well-being through income-generating activities. Beneficiaries of the program are diverse groups of women and girls, including those with disabilities, accused of witchcraft, survivors of sexual violence and abused children.

Centre Olame provides Psychosocial assistance through confidential spaces for survivors to share their stories and heal from traumatic experiences; by the medical assistance the survivors of violence cure from their physical wounds and for more sustainable care and effective delivery of crucial services, Centre Olame work with local authorities through referral systems. To enable the program beneficiaries become autonomous, Centre Olame provides economic and entrepreneurial skills, training and support women and girls to take on leadership roles in their communities, including in peacebuilding initiatives, through capacity strengthening programs.

CAFOD DRC, a national Caritas organisation, has been responding to humanitarian and development needs in the country for over 28 years. The Organisation benefits from the Catholic Church's network of social services, including schools, hospitals, community radios, and a good relationship with sister agencies and other faith-based organisations that facilitate access and outreach. CAFOD DRC and its partners are well rooted in the communities, enabling us to identify and respond to local needs.

CAFOD DRC began partnering and supporting Centre Olame in 2002. Katy Katonda, Deputy Director of CAFOD DRC, explained that they saw the need not just to provide funding but also to provide support and accompaniment for strengthening administrative structures, processes and policies. Mrs Katonda also spoke about the need for equitable risk sharing between the two organisations. The results of the partnership between Centre Olame and CAFOD DRC have also had a ripple effect in that other donors became attracted to Centre Olame; as an example, additional Caritas members including Caritas Australia are now supporting the organisation amongst many other partners.

The CAFOD-Centre Olame Partnership not only provides technical and financial support but also strengthens administrative and professional skills. It is a partnership that ensures respect and consideration by encouraging partners to move forward and, above all, by giving them opportunities to learn and share experiences, to participate in advocacy meetings through regional, national and international travels that increases the communication at international levels and make known the work of Centre Olame. Thérèse Mema Mapenzi, the director of Centre Olame says *"I owe it all to CAFOD, and I have a lot of experience compared to many other women-led organisations"*.

Photo: CAFOD DRC.

Section 4:

Conclusion and the way forward - embedding transformative humanitarian action

The importance of changing social norms and shifting culture to achieve women's humanitarian leadership was one of the strongest themes emerging from the research data.

This speaks to transformative humanitarian action. However, this approach is often overlooked as an important aspect of humanitarian response as it requires longer term programming and funding, and outcomes are not always immediate. Consequently, there is a need to situate humanitarian response within a continuum to ensure gender transformative approaches that encompasses disaster preparedness and anticipatory action as well as response during and after crises. In addition, donors must adopt appropriate funding models to sustain gender transformative initiatives and facilitate their transition into longer-term development programming at the closure of humanitarian programs.

This research finds there is a need to support models of leadership that align with the goals of transformative change, i.e. that enable social transformation and shifts in power relations not only within organisations but also in broader contexts.

Faith actors have a key role to play in promoting transformative humanitarian action. As outlined, they can and do use their position of influence to address the social norms that arise in humanitarian contexts and beyond. By providing additional institutional support and capacity-building on the empowerment of women leaders, and by harnessing their theological teachings and faith-based values, they can seize further opportunities to strengthen their contribution in this area.

We hope this research helps to highlight the importance of women's leadership in humanitarian contexts including faith-based networks, while also identifying areas for further collaboration and research.

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