

# WOMEN CSO LEADERS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

HOW TO SUPPORT FEMINIST  
LEADERSHIP IN EUROPE

*Céline Charveriat, Joanna Maycock, Eloise Bodin and Angela Philp*



Policy published in January 2024 by



### **THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)**

European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213  
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)  
[www.feps-europe.eu](http://www.feps-europe.eu)  
@FEPS\_Europe



### **FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG (FES) EU OFFICE BRUSSELS**

EU Office  
Rue du Taciturne 38, 1000 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://brussels.fes.de/>  
@FES\_Europa



### **GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION (GEF)**

Green European Foundation  
Mundo Madou, Avenue des Arts 7-8, 1210 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://gef.eu/>  
@GEF\_Europe



### **HEINRICH-BÖLL-STIFTUNG EUROPEAN UNION**

Rue du Luxembourg 47-51, 1050 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://eu.boell.org>  
@boell\_eu

**Legal deposit registration number: D/2024/15396./04**  
**ISBN: 978-2-931233-34-4**

Copyright 2024 by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union

Cover photo: Laura Palmer

Editors: Laetitia Thissen, Senior Policy Analyst for Gender Equality (FEPS) & Euléane Omez, Project Management Coordinator (FEPS)

Proofreading: Rosalyne Cowie

Layout: Downtown

Project team: Laetitia Thissen, Senior Policy Analyst for Gender Equality (FEPS), Euléane Omez, Project Management Coordinator (FEPS), Agnes Mach, Policy Officer (FES), Melanie Bernhofer, Project Officer and Head of Programme – Climate, Trade and Agricultural Policy (HBS EU), Alice Hubbard, Strategy Manager (GEF), and Laurent Standaert, Political Director (GEF).

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the women who have generously given their time, passion and energy to this project. For the authors, this felt like standing on the shoulders of giants. As we gathered all your testimonies anonymously, we will not be able to show the wonderful kaleidoscope of amazing leaders that we interviewed, with inspiring life stories and impressive accomplishments, which have often come at great personal cost. The many pioneer feminist leaders thinkers and practitioners who have shaped the theory and practice of feminist leadership have been a constant source of inspiration and their work is referenced throughout this report. We want to thank Aleksandra Fernandes Da Costa and Lynda Mansson for feedback on earlier drafts of this Report, and to Laura Palmer for gifting us the beautiful illustration on the front cover. We also feel an immense gratitude to the organisations behind this project, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Green European Foundation (GEF) and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, who gave us so many great ideas and accompanied us with great care.



This Policy Study was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ACRONYMS**..... 6
- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**..... 8
- 1. INTRODUCTION: INVISIBLE WOMEN DOING INVISIBLE WORK IN AN INVISIBLE SECTOR?**..... 11
  - WHY CIVIL SOCIETY?** ..... 11
- 2. WHAT IS FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?**..... 14
  - 2.1 EXPERIMENT, CONNECT, LEARN** ..... 15
    - 2.1.1 Power: Shifting from coercive to transformative power..... 17
    - 2.1.2 Care: Radical care for self, others, society and the planet..... 17
    - 2.1.3 Inclusion: Addressing discrimination and bias to intentionally build diverse and inclusive cultures ..... 18
    - 2.1.4 Collaboration: Moving away from competitive to deeply collaborative working models ..... 18
- 3. METHODOLOGY** ..... 21
- 4. SURVEY FINDINGS**..... 24
  - 4.1 WHAT WOMEN LEADERS ARE SAYING** ..... 24
    - 4.1.1 Purpose and drive..... 24
    - 4.1.2 Workload and work-life balance ..... 25
    - 4.1.3 Health and wellbeing ..... 26
  - 4.2 CARE FOR SELF, OTHERS AND SOCIETY** ..... 28

4.2.1 Power and responsibility.....	29
4.2.2 Gender equality diversity inclusion (GEDI).....	30
<b>5. PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION</b> .....	<b>32</b>
5.1 CENTRING CARE AND SHIFTING SOCIETAL NORMS.....	32
5.2 RADICALLY REIMAGINING POWER AND LEADERSHIP CULTURES.....	33
5.3 ADDRESSING THE STRUCTURAL FINANCIAL INSECURITY WITHIN THE SECTOR.....	34
5.4 INVESTING IN GENDER EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION.....	35
<b>6. KEY ACTORS OF CHANGE</b> .....	<b>38</b>
UNLEASHING THE POWER WITHIN.....	38
<b>7. IT IS HIGH TIME TO VALUE THE INVISIBLE WORK OF INVISIBLE WOMEN IN AN INVISIBLE SECTOR</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>8. RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>44</b>
8.1 BOARDS AND SECTORAL ORGANISATIONS.....	44
8.2 PHILANTHROPIC ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL FUNDERS.....	46
8.3 POLICYMAKERS.....	47
8.4 DEEPENING AND STRENGTHENING THE GENDER DIMENSION OF THE EU.....	47
<b>9. CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>49</b>
TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN LEADERS.....	50

<b>AUTHORS, ABOUT FEPS &amp; PARTNERS</b> .....	52
ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....	54
ABOUT FEPS & PARTNERS.....	56

## **Acronyms**

CSO	Civil society organisation
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
GEDI	Gender equality diversity inclusion
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

---

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Europe's civil society plays a central role in bridging societal divides, by providing essential services at a large scale, but also by supporting democracy, nurturing solidarity and building support for systems change. However, too often the sector remains absent from key policy debates and does not feature high on the priority list of policymakers.

Over the past decade, the sector has provided opportunities for women to find meaning in their work and contribute to societal shifts. As a result, women are now the majority of workers in the sector and are increasingly occupying leadership positions.

This study, which represents the first-ever study of its kind, aims to take stock of the progress of the last decade, as well as identify remaining barriers and new opportunities for women CSO leaders in achieving systemic change in Europe. The idea for this study grew out of dozens of conversations we have had with our peer women leaders over many years. We surveyed 148 women leaders to find out more about how women leaders are handling what they report as increasingly complex demands, how they are experiencing life and leadership as women in 2023, how they are innovating and transforming working cultures and structures, and the challenges and barriers they are meeting on their way. Through 25 structured interviews and two focus groups we worked to draw out recommendations for what more can be done by donors, organisations, and wider society to support and invest in transformative, feminist women's leadership. We also asked the women participating for their advice to other women and especially emerging leaders to start implementing feminist leadership.

## Key findings

The sector is burning out women leaders at an alarming rate. Those seeking to bring about

systemic change, both inside and outside their organisations, are still facing massive challenges within their organisations as well as within wider society. For most of them, being a transformative leader has come at a great personal cost, including structural overwork, exhaustion and poor health. While their deep sense of personal responsibility towards their mission, colleagues and society keeps them going, they are frustrated not to be empowered to bring about systemic change at scale in line with the mission of their organisations. In fact, they are constantly firefighting just to keep organisations alive.

Not surprisingly, care work, whether it is in the home, in society and at work, is still overwhelmingly falling on these women leaders' shoulders. Caring for others in the workplace has also become increasingly complex since COVID-19 due to the increase of mental health challenges, including eco-anxiety, the prevalence of interpersonal conflicts within teams and the challenges of managing virtual and hybrid teams.

The perfect storm many women leaders find themselves in is not only endangering women themselves, but it is also hurting the very mission of civil society organisations. At a time when unparalleled societal challenges require a giant reset, women leaders are not provided with the space, support and enabling environment they need. We heard repeatedly about the challenge of unrealistic expectations and workloads, combined with ever-worsening societal challenges, eroding the space to exercise leadership at a higher, more systemic and strategic level. This limits women leaders' ability to bring transformative change in our organisations, our leadership styles and our system at large.

The roots of this crisis are multiple, including unreasonable expectations, the persistence



of misogyny, exacerbated by other systemic intersecting forms of discrimination and even abuse, structural underinvestment in the sector, and grossly inadequate support systems within civil society organisations and in wider society. While transformative feminist leadership is essential for our civil society to fulfil its potential, there is little proactive investment in supporting its development and practice.

## Recommendations

To respond to the crisis, the women we surveyed for this project identified four priority areas for action:

(1) **Radically reimagining power and leadership cultures**, starting with space, time and resources to re-think and grow as leaders. This could, for instance, take the form of a feminist leadership academy program made available to support, connect and accompany women CSO leaders during their mandate.

(2) **Building more caring working cultures and shifting societal norms around care**, with policymakers putting in place concrete measures, including new investments in redistributing and supporting care work.

(3) **Addressing the permanent financial insecurity within the sector**, with networks of funders (both philanthropic and institutional) agreeing to a sector target for core funding (as a share of total funding) and to principles that would be independently verified, similar to the INGO accountability charter.

(4) **Investing in gender equality, diversity and inclusion**, with non-governmental organisation boards taking direct responsibility at an organisational and sectoral level for making progress on this issue through specific investments and initiatives.

---

# 1. INTRODUCTION

---

# 1. INTRODUCTION: INVISIBLE WOMEN DOING INVISIBLE WORK IN AN INVISIBLE SECTOR?

As feminist leaders in social movements for over 20 years, we have been part of many coalitions and movements taking strategic actions to address interlocking systemic challenges: inequality; poverty; erosion of democracy; climate change; deep misogyny; and racism. Often, we have been involved in winning specific campaigns for legislation, funding or international commitments. Progress has been uneven, and we are currently witnessing regression and backlash on several fronts all over Europe. This is because we are not able to build intersectional movements for deeper systemic change, and too often, civil society leadership and campaigning replicate the same patriarchal structures and behaviours of competition and power.

We believe that the complex and urgent challenges of the era, like climate change, the impacts of health crises, structural inequality and racism, the rising cost of living, erosion of democracy and gender-based violence, demonstrate the need for a paradigm shift towards more inclusive, sustainable and caring societies for the future. We believe that transformational feminist leadership is the key to unlocking the deep changes we need.

Over the past decades, civil society organisations (CSOs) have recognised and sought to address the lack of women in leadership positions. As a result, we have seen a generation of women leaders in CSOs at the front line of this systemic change. This happened in the context of the whole sector being feminised, with as many as 70% of staff and volunteers at non-governmental organisations (NGOs) identifying as women.<sup>1</sup> Yet, after a decade's worth of experience, it is becoming apparent that women leaders are undersupported, drowning

in unrealistic expectations, and constrained by outdated structures and systems.

Progress made in the past decade is now at risk. As we examine in this study, there is an increasingly complex and hostile environment for women. We have seen, from our own networks, how difficult it still is for women to flourish, even in progressive organisations: macho cultures prevail, with long working hours making it difficult for women and men to manage work-life balance. Although things are starting to change since #MeToo, women face everyday sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace. This is doubly challenging for women discriminated against on other grounds, such as their race, migration status, sexuality or disability. Our study has also examined the impact of health, including, in some cases, challenges relating to menstrual health, reproductive health or menopause, on women in leadership.

## Why civil society?

While the non-profit sector plays a significant social, environmental and economic role in Europe today, it is largely unstudied compared with business, for which much more research has been gathered, including the situation of women leaders. Yet, civil society is at the vanguard of societal dynamics, so trends within civil society can be instructive for other sectors and society at large. CSOs are also facing increasing expectations from policymakers to resolve many of the ills currently affecting European societies, including repairing democracy and political polarisation, poverty and inequality, violence against women and girls, systemic racism, loneliness and environmental destruction, as well

as directly providing services to society's most excluded people.

However, CSOs face several challenges, such as funding cuts, disproportionate restrictions and direct attacks. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges. A recent study based on a global survey and a series of interviews with over 200 activists and leaders by Fight Inequality Alliance members during March and April 2022 showed worrying results in terms of the impact on our collective capacity to mobilise and lead change:

The pandemic is undermining the capacity to fight inequalities by putting a strain on activists' health, resources, and ability to mobilise. Fight Inequality Alliance members and allies experienced a significant impact on their ability to mobilise and access funding (and human talent) as well as enduring strains on mental and physical health. <sup>2</sup>

This is part of wider challenges for civil society, including closing spaces, increasing complexity and rigid structures, that are failing to align values, culture and leadership practice. A report launched in September 2023, "Understanding the pathology of INGOs", states that:

For more than a decade there has been an increasing sense that the non-profit sector is dealing with an escalating number of serious internal institutional crises and challenges. These serious internal institutional challenges range from sexual and racial abuse to boardroom tensions – and everything in between. Large international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) play a critical role in the global community and therefore any threat to their efficiency and ability to properly carry out their mission must be fully understood. (p.3)<sup>3</sup>

In the EU, the past few years has seen a host of measures and legislation at EU level to advance women's rights and address gender inequality. The European Care Strategy includes a Council Recommendation on access to affordable, high-quality, long-term care and a Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care updating the 2002 "Barcelona Targets" with new, more ambitious and qualitative targets for member states to reach by 2030. The latest European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) gender equality index (2023) still shows us that we are only making incremental progress on gender equality in Europe, having reached a gender equality index of 70% for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, powerful EU measures to increase the representation of women on corporate boards and to support pay transparency have been adopted. However, CSOs, due to their size or status, fall completely outside the scope of this type of legislation.

---

## **2. WHAT IS FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?**

---

## 2. WHAT IS FEMINIST LEADERSHIP?



*Feminist leadership is a new way of imagining, framing and practising leadership for social and environmental transformation grounded in a feminist understanding of systems of power and change.*



We have chosen to approach this study through the lens of feminist leadership, a framework that, in our opinion, could help tackle challenges faced by women leaders in civil society, but also unleash profound transformation within society at large. The complex and interlocking challenges of the moment, like climate change, health crises, racism, rising economic inequality and gender-based violence, call for new ways of leading. These new approaches demand that leaders move away from traditional hero-style leadership towards relational approaches and emergence. Feminist leadership can contribute to systemic change by challenging the status quo and promoting more equitable and just systems.

The Systems Sanctuary's excellent work on "Bridging the fields of feminist and systems practice: Building ecosystems for gender equity"<sup>5</sup> is worth reading in full for a framework to understand how to link feminist leadership and a systemic change in thinking. The report asserts:

From a systems lens, we understand that we require new leadership and ways of collaborating to address the complex issues we are tackling as a society. With this in mind, we believe that feminist approaches and systems change can work together to address unhealthy systems in powerful ways.<sup>6</sup>

Feminist leadership is a new way of imagining, framing and practising leadership for social and environmental transformation grounded in a feminist understanding of systems of power and change. Feminist leadership is not only for those holding hierarchical or traditional positions of power because feminist leadership must be intersectional, collaborative and engaged with shifting power dynamics.

The concept was originally developed and documented by women's organisations in the Global South, most notably CREA<sup>7</sup>. Srilatha Batliwala from CREA is one of the main thought leaders and practitioners of feminist leadership. 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.<sup>8</sup>

In the course of the past decade, more and more organisations for social and environmental transformation and systemic change have been

inspired by the principles of feminist leadership and have begun developing ways to embed and implement it into their organisations. One of the first global organisations to do so was ActionAid International, whose “Feminist Leadership Principles” (2018) are centred on shifting the leadership paradigm from coercive power to transformative power.<sup>9</sup> As ActionAid defines it:

Patriarchal leadership reinforces a power dynamic of dominance and subordination. It makes power a zero-sum game: if I get some, there is less for you. Feminist leadership seeks to transform that dynamic: it tells us that we can become powerful by making those around us feel empowered, able and respected. It seeks power with others instead of power over others.<sup>10</sup>

#### A few other definitions and resources:

“Feminist Leadership at its most basic is a commitment to creating alternatives to traditional, hierarchical leadership and organisational cultures. This can take many different forms, from critical self-reflection on the individual level to developing new decision-making structures on the collective level. Most importantly, Feminist Leadership doesn’t have a fixed definition or step-by-step guide. It is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, both individually and together with others.”<sup>11</sup>

“The complex threats to women’s rights today, particularly in societies dealing with conflict, poverty, and inequality, require leadership that positions not just individuals but rather a critical mass of them to lead the way in shifting oppressive power dynamics that keep such harmful systems in place. Oxfam’s research demonstrates a strong relationship among practices of modelling of feminist purpose and principles; inspiring shared visions through reflecting, learning, and unlearning; empowering and enabling others to act; challenging oppressive norms and power; and encouraging the integration of heart, mind, and body among advocates for transformation.”<sup>12</sup>

Wakefield Shawna

## 2.1 Experiment, connect, learn

In the framing and practice of feminist leadership, it is important to recognise it is a radical shift from traditional power and leadership models and is therefore also experimental and a work in progress for us to build together and learn from one another.

Feminist leadership is not only for women and can be practised by anyone committed to feminism. It is not about an essentialist idea of women as inherently better leaders because not all women are particularly caring, inclusive and collaborative, even if women are more socialised to be so and more expected to play those roles in our society.



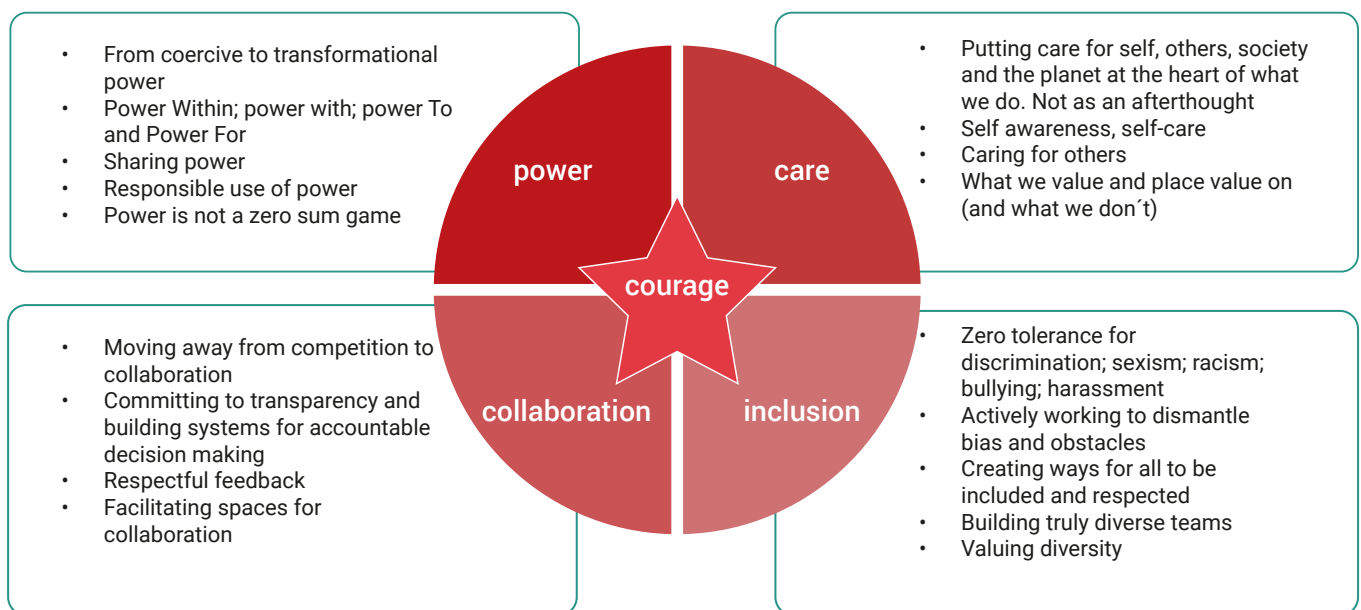
*Feminist leadership is not only for women and can be practised by anyone committed to feminism. It is not about an essentialist idea of women as inherently better leaders.*



In our approach, feminist leadership is deeply concerned with challenging patriarchy and toxic masculinity, achieving gender equality, and advancing systemic change. It has five main components that we have used to frame and shape our methodology, the study and the recommendations put forward:

- **Power:** shifting from coercive to transformative power;
- **Care:** radical care for self, others, society and the planet;
- **Inclusion:** addressing discrimination and bias to intentionally build diverse and inclusive cultures;
- **Collaboration:** moving away from competitive to deeply collaborative working models;
- **Courage:** to challenge and shift toxic outdated systems in our organisations and society

**Figure 1. The five dimensions of feminist leadership according to Joanna Maycock.**



Source: Joanna Maycock.





*Feminist leadership is not just about having more women or underrepresented groups in power in a system that is broken, but it is about transforming the very notion of power.*



While it is also important to build feminist leadership and better understand its practice in the traditional spaces of political power, this is not the purpose of the present study. For some groundbreaking thinking and practice on feminist leadership in politics, see in particular the work coming from new municipalist movements, such as Barcelona *En Comú*, Fearless cities and *Feminise Politics Now!* – a useful guidebook for the feminisation of politics.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.1.1 Power: Shifting from coercive to transformative power

Feminist leadership is about reimagining power and power relationships. Shifting from coercive to transformative power requires moving away from the notion and practice of power as a force to control or dominate others. Feminist leadership builds consciousness to liberate the **power within ourselves** and others. Feminist leadership also seeks to **build collective power to build movements and coalitions for change**. Finally, it is about the **power to make change happen**. This idea of power is deeply embedded in feminist theory and practice, as it recognises that power is relational and dynamic and that unequal power relations are embedded in the fabric and institutions of our society, as well as within the organisations we work in.

*“Women were living in a lot of oppression so when they realised the power within themselves they wanted to act on it to make sure that they are free. They also saw the need to use the power with their friends so they act in a collective and use the power to make sure that things are really transforming for everyone.”*

*Sibongile Chibwe Singile, JASS Malawi<sup>14</sup>*

Crucially, therefore, feminist leadership is not just about having more women or underrepresented groups in power in a system that is broken, but it is about **transforming** the very notion of power. We have seen many examples in our study of organisations and women leaders introducing more participatory and less hierarchical power and decision-making models in their work, although, too often, the structural and cultural reforms needed to enable this are inadequate. We have also heard of a lack of recognition of how complex this can be, and more support is definitely needed to design and implement more transparent, equitable power-sharing models.

### 2.1.2 Care: Radical care for self, others, society and the planet

Feminist leadership places the concept and practice of care as a central purpose of leadership rather than an afterthought: care for self; care for others; care for society; and care for the planet are part of the same ecosystem of building the society we want together. Care as defined in feminist literature is:

Care is an activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.<sup>15</sup>

In part as a result of COVID-19, we have seen huge shifts and potential for change in terms of flexible working. As we have explored in this study, women leaders in CSOs have also experienced the challenges of exercising caring, inclusive feminist leadership in such a difficult period. Often at the expense of their own self-care. Self-care is often seen by women leaders and activists as another source of stress: nothing more than something else to add to their inexhaustible to-do list or another demand to spend money on moisturiser to somehow make up for the exhaustion of fighting capitalism, climate change, racism and sexism. The activist and poet Audre Lorde already wrote about self-care in her 1988 essay collection *A Burst of Light* declaring that “[c]aring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”<sup>16</sup> At the time, the activist and poet was receiving treatment for cancer and continuing her work.

### **2.1.3 Inclusion: Addressing discrimination and bias to intentionally build diverse and inclusive cultures**

Feminist leadership is also about embedding fairness, equality, justice and inclusion for everyone, regardless of gender, race, age, socioeconomic background, disability or sexual orientation, in every action that we take as a leader. It is therefore also about using our power to put in place systems of accountability that ensure zero tolerance to discrimination or exclusion. Feminist leadership demands that we aspire to see, hear and value colleagues from non-dominant groups, and

recognise everybody's contributions. It is about identifying, acknowledging and dismantling barriers and building cultures that celebrate diversity and actively promote inclusion. Many diverse women responding to our survey and interviews raised the issues of tackling a lack of diversity in their organisations, boards and leadership. Many are struggling with finding time and resources to invest in the right kind of policies, practices and training to address barriers and build truly inclusive workplace cultures. There is a need to support this work at the individual, organisational and sectoral levels.

### **2.1.4 Collaboration: Moving away from competitive to deeply collaborative working models**

A transformative feminist leader promotes deeply collaborative styles and working models (instead of competition). This requires rethinking the competitive nature of our leadership and organisational models and moving towards much more deeply collaborative practice within and amongst organisations and changemakers. Time and again in this research, we have heard that the scope for collaboration is reduced because of the workload or because systems and structures do not support collaboration within teams, across teams and even less across organisations. At the same time, women consistently cite the importance of women's networks that they are part of in advancing their leadership practice and in building collaboration across sectors.

## The importance of women's networks.

Many respondents and interviewees pointed to the importance of women's networks in creating safe spaces of mutual support and guidance. Most of these networks are self-organised and receive no funding from organisations or donors, even though they represent an essential lifeline for many women leaders in CSOs.

"Brussels Women CSO Leaders" is a network of women in leadership positions in CSOs and non-profit organisations in Brussels. The network has been in existence for over a decade, when six women heads of Brussels-based NGOs gathered to discuss how to promote women in leadership and feminist leadership practice throughout the diversity of CSOs in Brussels. Over the past years, the network has grown to be a thriving and powerful, safe, mutually supportive space for over 120 members drawn from a very wide range of international and European civil society and non-profit organisations in Brussels.

The group is proud of the 12 years of herstory, as the network has continued to be important and impactful on many individuals and even more widely in creating a more connected and important space for the growing number of feminist women leaders in Brussels. It exists to provide a safe space for mutual support, learning and mentoring to strengthen the leadership of women in civil society seeking to promote culture change within their own organisations, and throughout civil society, by advancing gender equality and the principles and practice of inclusive feminist leadership. It is a learning space built on developing trusting and mutually inspiring relationships between and amongst members. The intentional culture of empathy, trust and authenticity continues to be a major source of power and strength for the network, which operates through regular meetings, networking, email exchanges and mentoring.

The network members adhere to the principles of feminist leadership for social transformation, which they aspire to advance and practice. They agree to support one another and other women to lead effectively in CSOs. A major practice of feminist leadership is the importance of creating networks and women-only spaces that are designed to support and lift up other women.

Many respondents to this survey are members of this network, and several women interviewed described the support and sisterhood of this network as essential to their leadership and wellbeing. Other interviewees described similar women's networks operating (again on a voluntary basis without funding) in Prague, Vienna and Berlin.

---

# **3. METHODOLOGY**

---

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The feminist methodology and framing for this policy study are very much inspired by the principles and practice of feminist leadership, and the belief that the world needs transformative, inclusive leadership models to support systemic change we are experiencing.

Feminist research methodology is one that follows a few guiding principles:

1. putting women's experiences at the centre of its investigation;
2. being mindful and considerate of the wellbeing of the participants in the research;
3. locating researchers and their lived experience within the research; and
4. seeking to transform gender relations.

We therefore designed and implemented the research to ensure the care and wellbeing of the participants, to capture and give space to women's experiences and voices. To ensure a free flow of communication and creative thinking, the individual responses and quotes are anonymous and the conversations confidential. We considered the inclusion of a diversity of perspectives and the opportunity to express a range of views. We also offered support and guidance as a gift to those that gave their valuable time to the survey, interviews and focus groups.

As feminist leaders and practitioners in civil society ourselves, we also brought our own perspectives and thinking into the analysis, and cross-referenced and validated our ideas through focus groups.

We were gratified by the many women who gave us feedback that even participation in the survey and

interviews was itself empowering and gave them the time to reflect on their wellbeing and leadership. We had several participants reflect back to us that they had never been asked about their leadership, their wellbeing or their health at work, so had really valued having space to be seen and heard. The fact that all women who responded to the survey were offered a free coaching session also contributed to these positive results. We offered all respondents the opportunity to have a free lightning coaching session with Angela Philp. The 50 women who accepted this invitation described the experience as transformative. We were also able to complement the findings of the survey, interviews and focus groups with some general perspectives and trends coming from the lightning coaching. Angela Philp and Joanna Maycock also drew inspiration from the omen leaders who have participated in the Feminist Leadership Retreats : "Stepping into your Power" that they hosted this year.

**The survey was conducted between April 2023 and July 2023** and was distributed directly through the networks of the authors and supporting partner organisations through email, social media and word of mouth. We received 148 responses to the survey.

Amongst the 148 women surveyed, 44% are executive directors or secretaries-general, and a further 34% are part of senior management teams. Thirteen of the respondents are responsible for more than 50 staff, with a further 50 respondents being responsible for between 11 and 50 staff, and 84 respondents managing teams or organisations of ten or fewer staff.

Bearing the European focus in mind, respondents' profiles correspond to a rather diverse scope, especially in terms of residence, nationality, age and household composition. Fifty work in Brussels, with 75 living and working in 19 other EU member states.

The other 23 respondents live in EU accession countries, plus the UK and Switzerland. In terms of nationality, there were 32 in total (including 22 EU member states, six other European and five international), plus 14 women holding dual nationality.

In terms of age, there was a wide range across all age groups, with around a third aged 31-40 and a third aged 41-50. 10% of respondents were under 30 years old.

Just 8%, or 12 women, of those surveyed described their ethnicity as other than white and/or Caucasian, and two of the respondents identify as non-binary.

Finally, in terms of household structure, a wide variety of different family and household structures were represented. 20% of the women surveyed described themselves as single; 24% live with a partner. More than half the respondents live with their children at home, with around 10% of respondents living alone with children.

In the following sections, we present the findings of the survey, which is accompanied by quotes and analysis gathered through 25 individual interviews and two focus groups (25 attendees).

---

# **4. SURVEY FINDINGS**

---

# 4. SURVEY FINDINGS

## 4.1 What women leaders are saying

### 4.1.1 Purpose and drive

Women who participated in this survey are almost unanimous in their purpose and drive. 80% fully see how they contribute to their organisation/mission, and more than 70% of respondents feel their job is rewarding and fulfilling. Despite their very high workload, 64% of them say they really enjoy work on a day-to-day basis. They deeply care for their colleagues and members, and especially for the staff they manage, and are dedicated and passionate about the mission of the organisation. They strongly believe they can contribute to systemic change and place very high demands on themselves. For some of them, who left their home country, working in an NGO abroad has emancipated them from the family and societal structures they grew up in. As a result, they feel a lot of gratitude towards the opportunities

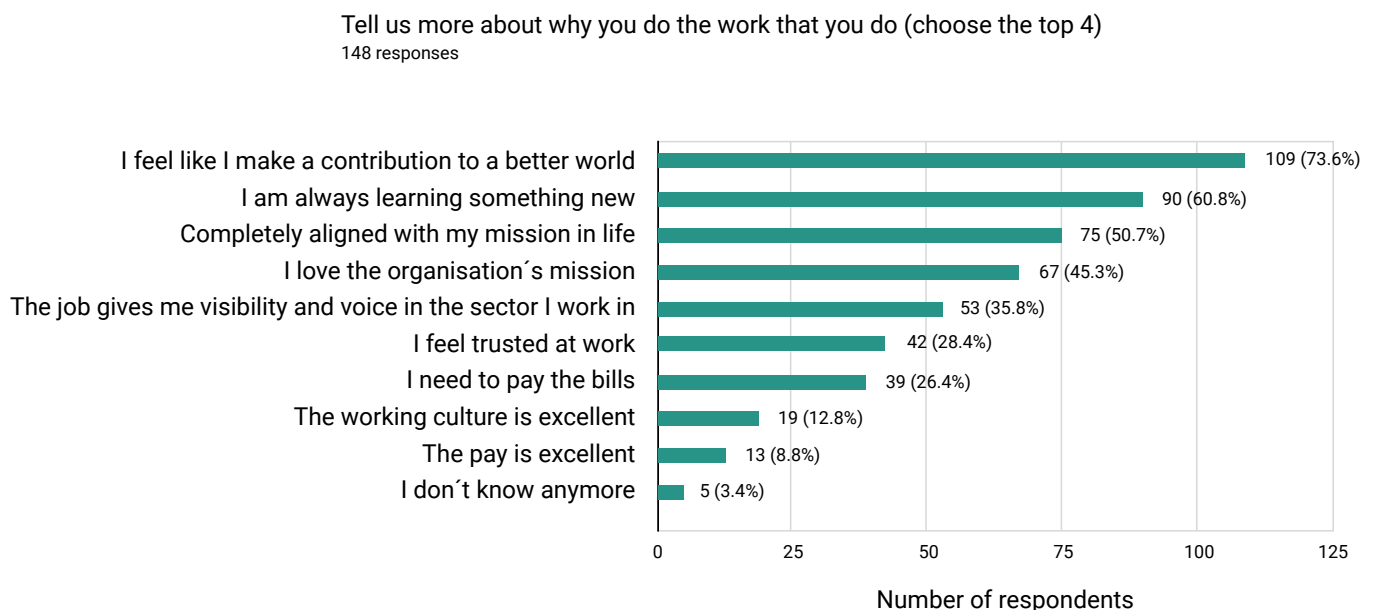
their work represents to them. For most of them, their job takes a very central place in their lives.

When asked about their motivations, the highest-scoring responses were aligned with values; the need to contribute to change; and a thirst for learning, followed by the mission of their organisation and the people they work with. Material conditions, such as flexible hours and remunerations/need to make a living, fall well behind.

The other side of the coin is that women leaders are often pushing themselves to the limit. This is partly due to the nature of their job: contributing to systemic change is a daunting task. It also derives from a very high degree of emotional involvement in their job and tends to have a profile of overachiever, a very common trait in female leaders.

Despite all these challenges, women leaders are displaying enormous resilience. Only 20% say they often feel like quitting their job.

Figure 2.





*"I want to be their leader. Inspirational. The person who can help them grow."*

*"Women have the power to show that there is another way of doing things."*

*"We are overachievers. We believe we can make a difference."*

*"I am exhausted. I wish I had a clone. But there is no part of me that would like to quit this job."*

*"How can I care less? I'm a perfectionist. AND I want work-life balance. So how do I care less in order to say NO? How can I focus on achievement and wellbeing?"*

*"There's no room for celebration of achievements; there's so much more to do. We don't deserve to celebrate when there's so much not done yet."*

### 4.1.2 Workload and work-life balance

Most women leaders struggle with their workload and the multiple demands on their time. Only a minority manage to get through their to-do lists (see Figure 3).

Because of the heavy work pressure, only 25% of the respondents say that they are calm and relaxed at work most of the time. 50% of them feel depleted after a workday, and 63% work overtime to finish work. 50% did not take sick leave although they needed it, and 45% cannot completely switch off during holidays.

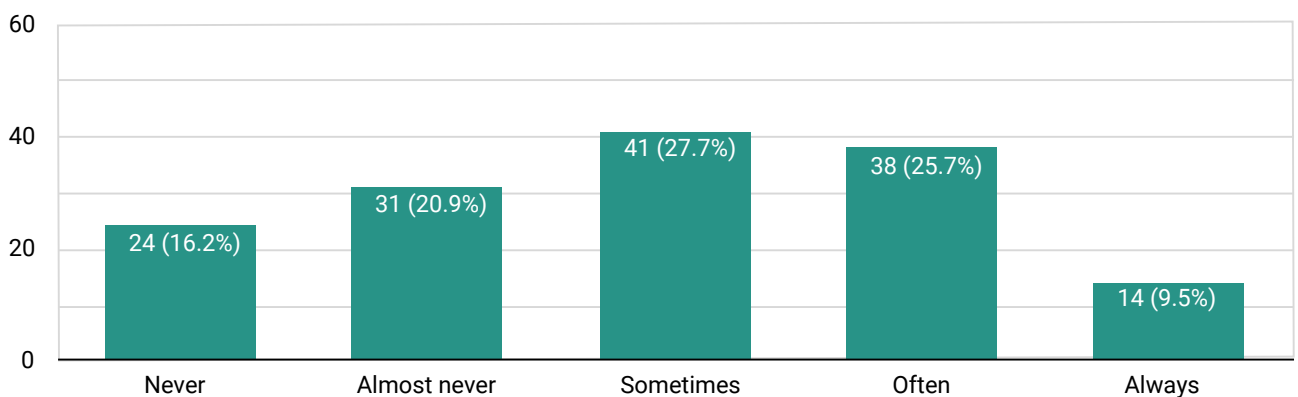
Most women with children feel they are made to choose between their professional and personal lives, and they are unanimous in saying that household chores are what tip them over the edge, especially when their life partner does not or cannot step up to share the burden of care. In fact, more than 50% say they are carrying most of the work in their household.

This impossible equation leads to feelings of guilt, either in terms of the quality of their work or in relation to their other roles. Women might also prove to be their own worst enemies when it comes to setting boundaries. In fact, many of them do not feel confident in setting boundaries and saying no to more tasks, or feel guilty about getting paid help, for example, externalising the work, because it reinforces exploitative labour structures.

Figure 3.

I manage to get through my to-do list on a weekly basis

148 responses



On a scale 1-5 where 1 is never and 5 is always

*“I’m overwhelmed with people and tasks.”*

*“My job is demanding (lot of responsibility for people, budgets, projects, political responsibility etc.). The fact that I am bearing 70-80% of the care/household/relationship work (and 90% of the mental burden) is exhausting me more than my job.”*

*“I can’t focus on bigger writing tasks. I can’t concentrate. Many times it is between cooking and replying to an important email. Or between washing the clothes and going to an evening meeting. Cleaning the household all Saturday, cooking half of Sunday, taking the family out on a trip Sunday afternoon and not having any time OFF... just for myself. Thus going to work exhausted on Monday. It is like going from work to work...”*

*“I feel guilty for doing the work I do as I cannot make any time for my partner.”*

In her recent research on time and toxic productivity, Leila Billing explored the **racial and gendered politics of time**.<sup>17</sup> She describes how racial power dynamics also have an impact on how women of colour experience time, often missing out on flexible working arrangements in NGOs. In exploring the role

of **disability** and time, she urges NGOs to look to disability rights activists, who have, for many years, written about “crip time” – which she describes as “a way of living, working and being that is all about slowing down, taking care of ourselves and others, and subverting capitalist notions of productivity”.

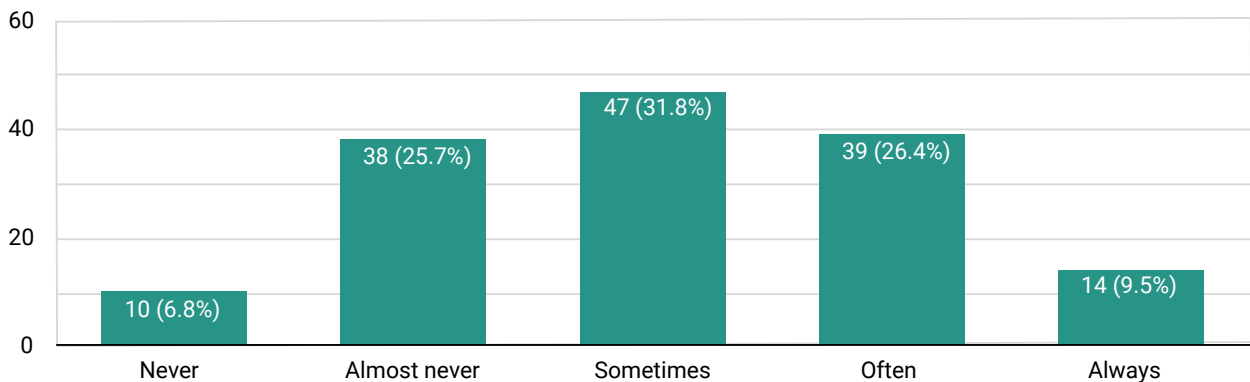
### 4.1.3 Health and wellbeing

Around 70% of respondents say they feel happy and healthy at the moment. However, when asked if their work stands in the way of self-care, 70% of them confirmed this to be the case. Around 50% of them exhibit signs of pre-burnout, in the form of insomnia or losing their train of thought. This is a major cause for concern. In the absence of change, there might be a growing trend of serious health issues, extended sick leave and disenfranchisement. This came across very clearly in the individual interviews we carried out, with most of the respondents reporting on the near-constant pressure and stress they are experiencing; many juggle home and work responsibilities.

Amongst sources of stress for women, the most prevalent are the toxic work culture, marked by constant conflict, in their workplace; the burden of

Figure 4.

I am confident in saying “no” to projects when they fall outside the scope of my role or mandate  
148 responses



On a scale 1-5 where 1 is never and 5 is always

care; and the constant financial insecurity that NGOs face, especially given that leaders are expected to be those “bringing the bacon”. Another factor also mentioned is the fact that women do not feel their time is spent on achieving an impact, but rather on keeping organisations afloat and complying with all sorts of requirements.

One positive finding is that most women feel that they are appreciated and valued at work. They also report that their work environment contributes positively to strike the right balance between their professional and their personal lives.

In this context, it is interesting to note the impact of COVID-19. Quite a few women reported that their mental health suffered, that they were close to burn out. For some, these impacts are long-lasting and continuing. Post-COVID-19, many women leaders say they appreciate the added flexibility and ability to work from home. Close to 60% work one or two days from home, while the rest of the respondents are teleworking even more regularly. Yet, they are deeply aware that remote work might reinforce gender dynamics in the household and make them more invisible at work. They shared fears that teleworking contributed to loneliness and that a sedentary life was negative for their health. Furthermore, 55% think

this is making their job of leading an organisation much more complicated than before.

Many also report that their pre-pandemic energy levels have never returned to full energy. The silver lining seems to be regarding travel, which is now less frequent, as well as commuting, although the time that is gained seems to be spent on household chores or working even longer hours rather than on self-care.

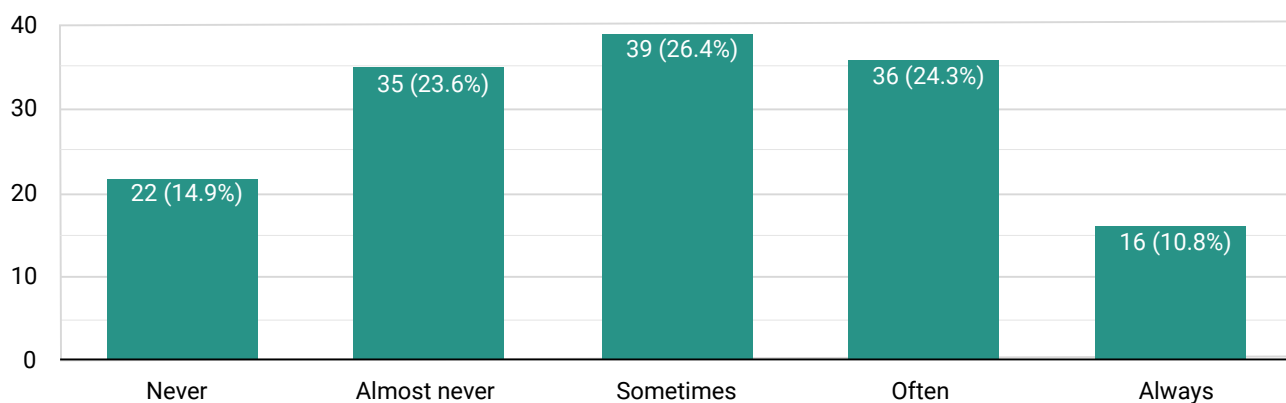
While feeling valued, women feel they are not given the tools and space to perform at their very best. The majority of women surveyed say they have unmet needs in terms of support (training, coach, mentor) and only 50% of them have had a performance review in the last 12 months, suggesting the need for an improvement of practices in the sector.

Many of the women we spoke to said that the opportunity to complete this survey was the first time that they felt that their wellbeing and leadership were being taken seriously.

**Figure 5.**

I look for my words or lose my train of thought during the week

148 responses



On a scale 1-5 where 1 is never and 5 is always

*“I am often in severe pain at work, but I do not feel that I am in a safe space to talk about this or communicate about this, nor do I feel able to take time off when I need it.”*

*“Once per month I suffer from hormone-related migraines (2-3 days where no painkillers alleviate pain), in addition to one pre-menstrual day. I cannot permit myself to take time off, so I end up working through the pain.”*

One issue that came up very strongly as being highly problematic was the lack of support or recognition for the impact of specific health issues, including menopause, assisted reproduction, maternal and pregnancy-related health issues, endometriosis, and menstrual bleeding and related conditions. Respondents overwhelmingly used the open question space to address this issue, with a huge number of responses detailing challenging and intimate information about pain, discomfort and mental wellbeing. Most – though not all – women feel uncomfortable mentioning in the workplace, let alone taking time off, when they are impacted, including when experiencing severe pain. Menopause is still very much of a taboo subject in workplaces, with hardly any workplaces having policies for supporting women in transition through the menopause. We were not able to do full justice in this report to the material and stories shared in the survey, though it definitely merits further study and action.

*“Having IVF for three years had a huge impact on my moods, ability to work and focus at work – also emotionally as others around me got pregnant. With male leadership, I didn’t feel supported.”*

*“I’m currently going through pre-menopause, I can feel the impact, especially on my mental well-being, I’m also having physical symptoms, especially insomnia linked to night sweats, I have not really talked about to my colleagues or in the workplace.”*

## 4.2 Care for self, others and society

In terms of maternity and parental leave, most women would have liked to take longer leave but couldn’t because of work pressure (and the difficulty in finding replacements for leadership positions) or because of financial issues. Some even said that they were contacted during their maternity leave in a way that was unwelcome and intrusive. When coming back from maternity leave, women explain how hard it was to adjust back to working life while taking care of one or more infants. Some reported that it took them a very long time until they felt as productive as before.

Many cited the lack of support for more shared childcare with the second parent through better paid paternity or parental leave provisions as a structural and political issue that needs to be addressed through legislation and practice. The failing and/or unaffordable childcare systems are also mentioned by women as a major source of additional stress, leading to a forced reduction in work time with negative consequences on career paths. Others who wanted a position as a “job share” were told by their manager that this was not possible, leading them to a situation where they felt they could not take care of the children in the way they would have wanted.

In the interviews, some respondents also talked about the fact that they are working in countries that are not where they were born or grew up. This means they are less able to count on support from family members for childcare. It also means that their ability to support elderly or sick parents and family members is impacted.

A major source of stress for women who want to be caring leaders comes from being unable to respond to the aspirations of greater wellbeing for their staff. Yet, there are dissenting voices pointing to the unrealistic nature of expectations that are set about the role that workplaces can have in supporting the wellbeing of individuals. They also emphasise that there might be a trade-off between focusing on the mission and delivering effectively and responding to ever-increasing demands for better working conditions. As a result, many women

leaders say that they are overprotective of their employees and end up taking more than their fair share of responsibilities and tasks, which might build resentment on their part and dependencies on the part of their employees in the long run.

As a result, some women reported that they decided to leave leadership roles in CSOs to become freelancers.

#### 4.2.1 Power and responsibility

70% of women leaders covered in this survey say they feel empowered by their work in their daily life, and 45% say there is an excellent sharing of power in the organisation. For the majority of them, there is transparency in decision-making and a high level of trust in the organisation.

Yet these headlines hide marked differences between organisations and different perceptions. For instance, younger women point to the concentration of power amongst a few staff members or the lack of transparency in managerial decisions.

*“I am at the ‘top’... but do not feel the others want more responsibility. I’m finding it challenging getting them to step up and share.”*

*“Sometimes I have power that I didn’t wish for but can’t get the kind of power that I am looking for.”*

*“By power I understand responsibilities. As the Director, I feel that I am the most responsible and that I am the one who ends up finalising all the tasks in order to protect others.”*

*“As ‘everyone’ in the team is responsible eventually nobody feels responsible. In such situations I end up taking a leadership role and doing it myself which can be stressful.”*

Some women struggle to implement their vision of power sharing, as management teams might not be willing to step up and take responsibility. Most women leaders say they are trying to share power more equally in their organisation, using feminist

practice or TEAL organising principles. There are differing views in terms of how to distribute power, on what merit and to what effect. Many CSOs and social entrepreneurs are inspired by the excellent work of former associate partner with consulting firm McKinsey & Company, Frédéric Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations*.<sup>18</sup> The book and ensuing movement grows from the assertion that our organisational models are outdated and broken. It advocates a new type of organisation – called TEAL organisations – based on three key ideas: self-management; wholeness; and evolutionary purpose. The organising practices include the integration of sociocratic models and practices as a means to democratise decision-making and build healthier and more adaptable working cultures. However, there is often a lack of investment in translating the ideals into practice in CSOs and, most importantly, there is a gap between the inspiring ideals of reinventing organisations and the reality of implicit or hidden power dynamics at play within organisations.

What also comes across strongly is how women feel uncomfortable with holding power and struggle to find ways to exercise power while staying true to their feminist values of power sharing and inclusion. Some also struggle with the notion of power itself and prefer to refer to responsibility. It appears as if there is an underlying assumption or hidden belief that something like an “ideal way of holding and exercising power” exists, even if we cannot see that in practice, rather than an understanding of power as a situational and fluid practice, which requires constant re-examination, exploration and re-calibration.

Collective decision-making also brings its own challenges, with some respondents feeling that it blurs lines of responsibility, that it is unrealistic, as someone needs to decide when there is a disagreement. As a result, some conclude that the culture of consensus building and consultation can be incredibly time consuming and gets in the way of effective and timely decision-making. This places a rather polarising view of either having inclusive collective power sharing in a flat structure or having top-down coercive power in the hierarchical structure, rather than examining the benefits of both

vertical and horizontal power and decision-making for the specific context and organisation.

#### 4.2.2 Gender equality diversity inclusion (GEDI)

Close to 70% of women respondents feel very confident that all people have an equal opportunity to succeed in their respective organisations, regardless of their gender. The majority also thinks that their organisation has adequate anti-discrimination policies in place.

Despite these overall positive findings, several women we interviewed said that their organisation was still very much male dominated and exercising outdated patriarchal leadership structures and styles. Senior positions and boards are still dominated by men. Other women also emphasise that expectations of performance for women are not the same: they are expected to do all the preparatory work, while the men in equal positions are allowed to “show up to collect the trophy”. Women felt that they were more often recruited into leadership positions when the organisation was in difficulty: the so-called “glass cliff” phenomenon. Gender dynamics might also be more subtle. For instance, one woman leader says that women who are not managers are sometimes interrupted during meetings or prevented from speaking by their male counterparts.

*“We have two women CEOs, practice feminist co-leadership, a large global leadership team with a flat structure and now a power shifting approach in all that we do.”*

*“My organisation is pretty good on gender dynamics – there has been a lot of growth in recent years. Bigger challenges are others forms of privilege and discrimination, which are not sufficiently addressed.”*

All the women leaders we interviewed were highly committed to tackling gender inequality and other forms of discrimination in their organisation, pointing to many initiatives that go well beyond what is required legally in their country of operation. In

fact, the NGO sector has been moving much faster than society in moving towards gender equality.

Nevertheless, they are conscious that a complete change in culture will still take time and further effort. Some respondents also warned of unrealistic expectations of women leaders, who cannot be expected to compensate for structural gender-based injustice and all the other ills of patriarchy, while also delivering impossible goals for the organisation.

In areas of structural discrimination beyond gender, many respondents said that much progress still needed to be made, suggesting the need for an intersectional approach. While many organisations have policies in place, others still don't or have incomplete policies. In many places, practices are not aligned with policies, suggesting the need for greater efforts in implementation and enforcement. According to some of the respondents, women leaders in the sector also need to improve their own attitudes towards discrimination beyond gender:

*“In terms of racial injustice, white women leaders act the same as their male counterparts”.*

An issue highlighted by some of the respondents is the increasing risk of discrimination of white males in a highly feminised sector, and the difficulty in attracting highly skilled male professionals due to the lack of attractiveness of salaries and gender-based norms about suitable sectors for men. Some women also pointed to the need for greater leadership from male leaders and board members:

*“Men need to be allies and call out bad behaviour when they see it”.*

---

# **5. PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION**

---

# 5. PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

*“Our big mistake as women leaders in NGOs is the failure to acknowledge that the challenges we are experiencing are not personal, they are systemic.”*

Through the survey and focus interviews, the following priority areas and actors are emerging:

1. radically reimagining power and leadership cultures;
2. centring care and shifting societal norms;
3. addressing structural financial insecurity within the sector; and
4. investing in gender equality, diversity, and inclusion.

In this section, we elaborate more on each of these key findings that underpin our recommendations in Section 6.

## 5.1 Centring care and shifting societal norms

Most respondents saw the protection and expansion of existing **care policies** as a priority, as CSO employers cannot take it upon themselves to compensate for the lack of effective care policies in wider society. This refers to the disproportionate burden of unpaid care that falls to women. It is also reflected in the unnoticed and undervalued care work that women leaders do in the workplace.

- **Foster new societal and educational norms:** Social norms around motherhood and fatherhood, as well as the inability of society to recognise the burden of care, are still a major

hurdle. Schools are also failing to support the emergence of caring societies by including collaboration, the understanding of planetary boundaries and resilience in curricula.

- **Provide adequate safety nets** to take into account poorly portable retirement benefits (for women who are migrating), lower salaries, shorter careers, the impact of divorces and the unequal sharing of older relatives' care.
- **Offer international mobility support:** There are a number of serious concerns emerging from the reality that many women leaders in the sector work in a country that is not their country of origin, or move regularly to different countries. For example, there is a real lack of support, including family support for childcare, the difficulty of travelling to care for sick or dying parents, and the non-portability of benefits.
- **Guarantee effective and better tailored public services** to address the specific challenges women face, for instance, the provision of pre-school care and after-school clubs and gynaecological health.
- **Normalise care-friendly work patterns for all workers** through working time reduction (e.g. four-day work week), extended paid care leave schemes and other flexible arrangements ensuring equity is maintained.
- **Encourage the equal-earner equal-care approach** through societal and organisational policies and practices, which actively support men in their parental responsibilities.
- **Promote mental health in the workplace**, with a greater focus on prevention policies actively



targeting the collective –not just the individual– dimension of mental health.

## 5.2 Radically reimagining power and leadership cultures

Toxic work cultures at organisational and sector levels, coupled with boards' failure to adequately address conflicts and their underlying causes constitute a common source of stress for many respondents. The legacy of outdated structures and ways of working largely accounts for this reality. Bringing about reforms fit for the modern; post-COVID-19; post-#MeToo, -#BLM era thus require the following changes in leadership models:

- **Replace outdated patriarchal models with feminist leadership approaches:** *“Women leaders should not support models of leadership in which bosses and managers are working themselves into the ground.”* For women leaders specifically, this means refraining from being “always on call” and feeling overly responsible for seeing through everything, including administrative tasks. Because of imposter syndrome, many women leaders say they are overinvested in their careers, fail to set boundaries and are aware that they can also be contributing to perpetuating a culture of overwork, in which the right to self-care, to disconnect and to social/family life are effectively undermined. Moving away from patriarchal models also means making the invisible work of “support staff”, emotional labour and administrative work more visible and better valued.
- **Guarantee fair and gender-neutral remuneration schemes:** All too often, leaders in the NGO sector are highly skilled professionals, whilst their salaries still reflect a time in which working for NGOs was an act of charity. The resulting inadequate compensation levels for NGO leaders, especially women, perpetuate the long-outdated male breadwinner model, where one partner works in a higher paid job (EU institutions, delegations, for profits) and one in an NGO (where women are overrepresented). Lower levels of remuneration also make it particularly difficult for single parents (most often women). Beyond the situation of leaders, the sector needs to offer permanent contracts, provide living wages and ensure fair entry-level opportunities.
- **Prioritise people-centred decisions and compassionate management styles:** A more humane – rather than legalised and procedural – approach to HR management requires investing in people and their health. The creation of alternative spaces and ways of functioning, as well as self-development opportunities, would benefit not only the team but also the organisation itself. Other enabling tools include dedicated budgets for care, including therapy and coaching sessions for everyone. Systems that intentionally address the lack of physical interaction and loneliness, anxiety and lack of trust amongst staff due to teleworking are also a priority.
- Ensure that there are regular processes of **setting realistic and clear objectives that allow time and space for reflection and learning.** It is more important than ever that regular space is given for reviewing work and wellbeing and linking it to pathways for learning and professional development.
- **Value the importance of office care work:** This research directly reflects earlier findings, showing that women workers invest more time to support employee wellbeing and foster inclusion.<sup>19</sup> Whilst this type of work occupies a critical place in the functioning of the organisation, it also contributes to spreading women thin and goes mostly unrewarded.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore important to allocate resources for individuals to engage in this care work, acknowledging its importance. This could include incorporating care functions into role profiles and job appraisal schemes, allocating time, training and so forth.
- **Nurture compassionate, life-course career paths:** Reinventing management culture also means acknowledging that people may have varying energy levels as they face different

phases in life (e.g. new parents or older women). Menopause is, for instance, still a huge taboo in the workplace; according to respondents, very few people even mention the topic in the office, and managers and staff react with embarrassment when prompted. There is also limited acceptance of the realities related to caring for older relatives, which still affects women disproportionately, especially those whose family live far away.

- **Counter the rise of aggressive behaviour and intolerance in the workplace:** In light of the ever-increasing degree of polarisation in society, modern leadership must go hand in hand with raising awareness on the risks related to the use of social media platforms and to ensure responsible communication tools to avoid online and offline **aggression and misogyny**.
- **Resist the temptation of short-termist doism:** Many organisations respond to the sense of the urgency to act with unrealistic objectives and a flurry of answers, which are often neither strategic nor impactful. All too often, doing is rewarded over thinking. Systemic change is often referred to as a mantra rather than an approach backed by actionable knowledge, resources and processes. Rather than focusing solely on short-term projects and funding, time must be carved out to implement blue-sky thinking sessions and envisioning the organisation's core mission in the long term. This is very challenging, as most funders only finance projects rather than strategic planning. As a result, many organisations are left without flexible funding sources, as the time available is already fully allocated to projects. While a doism approach might derive from a feeling that blue-sky thinking and imagination are naïve luxuries that can be ill afforded in times of hardship, the opposite is actually true. Overworked leaders constantly under pressure to deliver an ever-increasing set of demands are finding it harder than ever to step back and take perspective on the context we are living through.

### 5.3 Addressing the structural financial insecurity within the sector

Women in Europe still face considerable pay, income and pension gaps. Women are more likely to be poor, unemployed or work part time. Even within civil society, women are often paid less or receive lower budgets for their work. Respondents came up with a very large number of recommendations, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the problem:

- Provide **operating grants** to organisations: operating grants or core funding should cover a greater proportion of wages, bills and rent, as well as less directive funding that allows organisations to define their own solutions and processes.
- Provide and create space for a longer-term view with **multi-year investments**, trusting organisations on the ground to drive systemic change.
- Fund external projects as well as organisational development initiatives that prioritise **gender equality and inclusion**.
- **Reduce barriers to entry for women** who want to create their own organisation and/or use innovative approaches and change recruitment narratives so women dare apply for a leadership job.
- Create an **environment of trust**, whereby motivated individuals are given freedom and flexibility to deliver impact.
- Enhance **flexibility during project implementation**, allowing for adjustments and improvements based on real-time learnings, as well as an extension of project lifespans, enabling organisations to replicate successful projects.
- Dedicate **specific project calls** for organisational development, including training, conflict resolution, mediation monitoring, and evaluation

coaches for leadership (including young and upcoming leaders) and for the protection of mental health.

- **Adapt reporting methods** by having calls with donors for storytelling and videos/Q&A, adopting a conversation style, reducing written reporting requirements, and providing funding for adequate finance management tools and training.
- Address **power dynamics involved in sub-granting**, which tends to push risks and costs onto subgrantees, while subgrantors capture a disproportionate proportion of the funding.

#### 5.4 Investing in gender equality, diversity and inclusion

Many of the respondents spoke of the importance for their organisations, teams and themselves to build more inclusive and diverse workplaces. This encompasses addressing gender gaps in pay, leadership and voice, as well as strengthening policies to address sexual harassment. It also includes building organisations and cultures that are more diverse and inclusive of underrepresented groups and people with special needs.

Priorities include:

- Redressing the **historical gender pay gap**, which remains wide in many organisations, starting with investments in gender-pay gap assessments. Given that CSOs need to be the leaders of structural and systemic change in the fight for equal rights, funders should be supporting CSOs to model exemplarity here.
- Offering **more advanced training** during onboarding processes, for instance, on intersectional feminism, raising awareness on recognising and countering power-domination techniques, role plays, allyship, and unconscious biases in recruitment.
- **Addressing the underrepresentation** of people of different socioeconomic backgrounds and

different race, religious or ethnic backgrounds; migrants are still a minority in the sector, especially in management functions. Organisations must walk the talk when it comes to building and promoting inclusive workplaces. This includes changing recruitment processes to attract and employ diverse candidates in the sector. It also means understanding and recognising bias and actively dismantling practices that are discriminatory or exclusionary.

- Some of the challenges/conflicts that organisations in civil society address (e.g. current narratives on asylum seekers or refugees, racism, poverty, and violence against women and girls) can have a triggering or much stronger impact on some individuals, particularly people from “underrepresented communities” because of the ways they connect with people’s lived experiences. This is not often seen, and people are expected to continue to perform in the workplace and even take the lead on these changes internally, which can expose them to extremely challenging situations.
- **Addressing the non-inclusive culture of communications**, so women and minorities whose voices have been repressed feel invited to contribute fully, especially in meetings. Language remains a base of discrimination, as mastery of the English language is often confused with high competence in the sector, which excludes many interesting profiles.
- **Acting to build organisations and workplaces that are inclusive of people with disabilities, including neurodivergency**: Most respondents noted that there was no disability access in NGO practices and physical spaces, such as offices. Offices that have wheelchair access (at least in Brussels) are insufficient in number and tend to be more expensive. Moving is also extremely expensive and difficult to fund. For example, conversations on reasonable accommodation are rarely held in advance and that provision is scarce (particularly when it comes to disabilities that are not visible at first glance, e.g. sight or hearing disabilities).

- **Acknowledging ageism and intergenerational differences:** Women leaders sometimes struggle with generational differences in work expectations and commitment, particularly among younger people. Some older respondents wonder how to share wisdom without killing youthful energy and the need for youth and older people to collaborate and learn from each other. Younger respondents pointed to the need to be given space and a voice by older women leaders as well as a need for mentorship.
- **Building and supporting greater inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people:** While no respondent pointed to discriminatory practices in terms of recruitment, policies within NGOs are still based on heteronormative and nuclear family structures. Many ignore that relationships with close friends often replace families or children in their life. Some respondents also pointed to a growing intolerance against LGBTQIA+ people in their staff in countries that have regressive debates or norms in this area.

---

# **6. KEY ACTORS OF CHANGE**

---

## 6. KEY ACTORS OF CHANGE

Respondents identified the following key actors of change (Figure 6), acknowledging that these actors differed in their levels of power, responsibility and willingness to act. Some respondents expressed doubts as to the effectiveness of top-down initiatives, as policymakers and other duty bearers are seen as paying lip service to these issues because they are fully part of the power structures that are seen at the root of challenges (patriarchy, individualism, capitalism) and favour instead bottom-up initiatives, which start from leaders and their teams upward. Others disagreed and said that a combination was necessary, as single teams or organisations might find themselves unable to operate in a different way, when the rest of the sector and the legal, political, societal and economic forces that shape it create powerful countercurrents, sapping the energy for change. Such an adverse environment might also mean that attempts to create a positive counterculture might not survive a change in leadership.

### Unleashing the power within

Feminist leadership places an emphasis on connecting the power within us. It requires a high degree of self-awareness and a commitment to self-care, although this is centred in a feminist understanding that the personal is political and that action is needed at the organisational, cultural and societal levels. Many respondents acknowledged the power of women making change in themselves and collectively. There is great awareness of the power of self and the role that the internalisation of unhealthy societal norms plays in how women feel about their performance. At the same time, making individuals responsible for resolving the personal impacts that systemic challenges are creating places another enormous burden on the shoulders of women leaders. It also downplays the role of collectives as drivers of change. Finally, focusing on individuals might lead to absolving employers

and funders of their duty of care. Beyond legal and ethical considerations, employers and funders should be concerned about the loss of effectiveness linked with the challenges identified in Section 4.1 and the increasing difficulties in the recruitment of leaders.

---

# **7. IT IS HIGH TIME TO VALUE THE INVISIBLE WORK OF INVISIBLE WOMEN IN AN INVISIBLE SECTOR**

---

# 7. IT IS HIGH TIME TO VALUE THE INVISIBLE WORK OF INVISIBLE WOMEN IN AN INVISIBLE SECTOR

For the past decade, CSOs have recognised and sought to address the lack of women in leadership positions. This is not just about having more women operating within a system, but also about transforming the nature of the systems of decision-making to ensure they are more inclusive, diverse and effective. Nor is this about promoting women at the expense of “better qualified” men, but about reconsidering what leadership skills and attributes, and what institutions and structures, are needed for transformative leadership in the 21st century. It is also about promoting a caring, diverse and intersectional leadership that tackles privilege and barriers based on sex, age, race, ability, and sexual orientation and identity. While much progress has been made in the past decade, this is now at risk, in an increasingly hostile environment for women.

The case for improving the gender balance and diversity of our civil society decision-making spaces is clear. At a time when civil society space is closing down everywhere, and our legitimacy as civil society is challenged on all fronts, it is essential for us to walk the talk in terms of the rhetoric about power, rights, gender, social and environmental transformation. The lack of women able to develop their leadership roles has a negative impact on the whole of civil society, as we are missing the full potential of the diverse skills, experiences and talent available. As a sector, we are therefore failing to bring new perspectives about the type of transformational leadership needed to tackle complex and rapidly changing contexts for civil society. A significant knock-on effect of this is that we fail to integrate the transformative values of a women’s rights perspective into our work.

A key theme that emerged during this research was the need to foster further intergenerational knowledge sharing and solidarity between women and to ensure future women leaders would not need to face the same difficulties as their predecessors.

## **Strengthening the social economy and protecting civil society space**

The EU itself recognises the central importance of CSOs and social economy. According to the European Commission, there are 2.8 million social economy entities in Europe that employ 13.6 million people, representing 6.4% of the workforce. By contrast, the share of the agricultural sector in Europe’s economy represented only 4.2% of the workforce in 2020.<sup>21</sup>

According to the European Commission, there are high proportions of female workers in the social economy. For instance, in Belgium, females comprise 70% of the workforce in the social economy, while in France they comprise 67%. “Occupations and jobs in these sectors are often not paid very well and women generally have less access to managerial positions which usually command higher salaries.” In some countries, part-time work is also more common in the social economy.<sup>22</sup>

In 2021, the European Commission adopted a strategy for the EU’s social economy, which was followed by Council recommendations in 2023, to create the right conditions for the social economy to thrive, acknowledging that the sector is currently undervalued and too often invisible.

While the gender benefits of a thriving social economy are acknowledged by the European Commission (in terms of both employment



opportunities and care services that are rendered), there are still no proposals in the current action that address the specific challenges faced by women in the sector, who are once again taken for granted by accepting to work in a sector with lower paid, more insecure jobs and sometimes under more difficult working conditions. Considering gender dimensions in the national implementation of the action plan will therefore be essential to maximise the benefits for women of contributing to this important sector of the economy.

Many respondents alluded to the fact that the space for dissent was shrinking everywhere in the world, including in some countries of the EU. According to Civicus' latest study on civil society in Europe, the majority of EU countries are no longer deemed open, but instead are classified as having a narrowed or obstructed space for civil society, due to restrictive laws and/or intimidation, harassment and detainment of protesters.<sup>23</sup> This is adding another layer of complexity and stress for organisations that are already fragile due to their permanent financial insecurity, which bears heavily on the shoulders of leaders in the sector. The 2020 democracy action plan of the European Commission needs to be broadened to ensure the protection of civil society space. Complementary measures would include longer-term funding and eased access, with preference given to CSOs that have higher standards in terms of gender-equality, care, inclusion and diversity.

### **Positive measures to address gender inequality in the EU**

Within the scope of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2024, a number of important initiatives have been progressing to address the inequalities and discrimination face by women in the workplace at the EU level: the entering into force of the EU Directive on Women on Boards; the Pay Transparency Directive; the approval of the Work-Life Balance Package; and the 2022 Care Strategy. This has resulted from enhanced political commitment to gender equality and equality between women and men at the EU level, including through a strategy, commissioner and presidency focus and a suite of legislation and

initiatives, as well as the sustained efforts of national and European-wide institutions and civil society to advance and promote gender equality.

Many of the women in leadership in CSOs that we interviewed have participated in public and professional mobilisation in support of women's rights and gender equality, and women's organisations, in particular, have played a pivotal role in raising awareness, recommending actions and in providing direct support to women and girls.

Many of the challenges faced by diverse women leaders in civil society result from deeply entrenched gender inequality, stereotypes and wider inequity in society. Women working in CSOs are not excluded from these wider currents, such as persistent gaps in pay, income, pensions and care, or violence against women.

### **Gender equality in Europe: Standing still or going backwards?**

At the same time, the EIGE 2023 gender equality index score for the EU has barely shifted and, for the first time in a decade, gender inequalities in health status and access to health services have grown, in part due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup> We have also seen a backlash against women's rights and gender equality in the EU, with the reassertion of traditional roles based on gender stereotypes, which undermine women's equal participation in public life and in the formal labour market. The prevalence of sexism continues to suppress women and girls and hinder equal opportunities and empowerment in every domain. Some of the most fundamental and hardest won women's and girls' rights are under attack, especially rights and access to abortion and contraception. These attacks on women's rights are exacerbated for women and girls experiencing intersecting discrimination, such as older women, women living in poverty, women with disabilities or racialised minority women. Furthermore, for many of the positive measures at the EU level, women working in civil society and NGOs fall outside of the scope of these measures, due to the relatively small size of the organisations as employers. Here are a few examples, including recommendations for

action to ensure the protection of diverse women employees of CSOs:

### Addressing the care gap

Some of the positive measures recently introduced at the EU level include the Work-Life Balance Directive, which included paternity leave, carers' leave and flexible working. The recent work to approve a European Care Strategy includes a Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality, long-term care and a Council Recommendation on early childhood and care: the Barcelona Targets for 2030.

### Tackling the gender pay and pension gaps

The recently approved Pay Transparency Directive aims to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work, or work of equal value between men and women, through enhanced monitoring of the pay gap. CSOs are mainly too small to be covered by this legislation; however, one of the participants in our focus groups said: "Even if the EU pay transparency directive doesn't cover us, civil society organisations should do better at being transparent about pay including in job adverts!"

### Eliminating violence against women, including at work

We have also seen significant action in the area of combatting violence against women and girls and gender-based violence. Such as the EU Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which is a significant step in creating the first EU-wide framework for combatting violence against women and girls. The proposed EU Directive on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence includes enhanced focus on combatting sexual harassment at work and cyber violence.

### Promoting women in leadership

The adoption of the directive on improving the gender balance among the directors of listed companies sets targets for listed companies in the EU to accelerate progress towards gender balance on their boards, with the underrepresented sex making up at least 40% of non-executive board members or 33% of all board members by 2026.

### Deepening and strengthening the gender dimension of the EU

In addition to the ongoing work outlined above, there is a need to deepen and strengthen the institutional mechanisms, funding and mainstreaming of gender throughout the EU. In particular, the next five years will see ongoing work the EU level in the digital and green transitions, which must pay particular attention to mainstreaming gender to ensure that the economic, digital and green transitions are an opportunity to advance gender equality and not further embed gender inequality and penalise women and girls in all their diversity.

---

# 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

---

# 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights shared by respondents, this section sets out ten policy recommendations targeting the main key actors of change, including boards and sectoral organisations; philanthropic organisations and institutional funders; policymakers; and the next generation of women leaders.

## 8.1 Boards and sectoral organisations

The boards of CSOs are seen as a key actor of change by most women leaders, at both an organisational and sectoral level. Some respondents note that there is still a major gap between women executive directors and top management teams and boards, which are predominantly comprised of men from the global north/dominant culture. Others also note that having a board with equal representation of men and women might not suffice as “men are much louder”. Opinions regarding boards are divergent: some women leaders see them as too remote from the reality of organisations, while others say that their boards are the most helpful in helping them set boundaries and care for their own health.

- **Foster alternative modes of leadership based on shared management approaches:** As a woman leader said: “Being in a position of power makes my challenges invisible, people assume I’m fine because I’m the boss”. While some suggested making space for mentorship, coaching and the opportunity to have peer-to-peer learning experiences, others warn that proposing external coaching is effectively a cop-out, which is bound to fail, when challenges are arising from the unacceptable behaviour of board members or staff. Boards also need to be open to co-directorship models, which are compatible with a family life and addresses the loneliness issue.
- **Close the decisional-staff gap by ensuring greater diversity of opinion in boards:** There is also a major generational gap between the way younger staff approach the balance between rights and duties and how boards, often composed of older people, conceive them. This needs to be acknowledged so concrete solutions can be found. Boards must think of succession and build the next generation of leaders within the sector, with a focus on opportunities for greater socioeconomic, racial and cultural diversity in the sector.
- **Ensure fair and transparent compensation packages:** Women leaders often accept lower compensation packages than they would normally deserve and do not request salary raises because they feel grateful for the leadership opportunity “offered” to them. **This is especially the case of younger leaders.** Pay transparency must be adopted, including in recruitment advertisements. When they are expected to work longer hours or travel, they should be able to be compensated for additional costs of childcare and having time off to prepare travels and when coming back, given how disruptive travels are in families with young children. This is especially important in countries in which childcare or after school care is deficient, such as Belgium, and for women leaders with children that lack family support, such as women working in a different country from their wider families or mothers and parents from the LGBTQI+ community.
- **Invest in systems and renewing policies:** Women leaders waste a lot of time because of badly designed systems (IT, accountancy, HR) and outdated policies that are at odds with societal changes. Boards must identify expertise and resources to support needed change, so it is not

yet another expectation falling on the shoulders of the CEO.

- **Confront organisation-wide conflictual cultures:** Respondents emphasise how draining and time-intensive the management of permanent internal conflict is, especially in membership organisations. This is an especially difficult area for women leaders, who have been brought up in societies that expect them to be amiable in all circumstances. As a result, they are often blamed for being too weak or, if they adopt a more assertive approach to conflict resolution, bossy and difficult.
- **Develop gender equality, diversity, inclusion and non-discrimination strategies as a matter of organisational – not individual – responsibility:** This area came back as a particular challenge for women leaders, in which a lot of progress still needs to be made. Too often, women leaders are expected to take leadership in this space simply because they are women. This is adding to already crippling workloads: boards could play a more important role in designing standards; seeing through their implementation; and finding resources for training. Specific support is especially needed for women coming from minority groups, who cannot be expected to change the culture of entire organisations on their own. Boards cannot substitute real strategies with a single hire, albeit at a senior level. It needs to be accompanied by structured processes to raise awareness and take action to promote cultural diversity, uproot racism and discrimination, and bring changes to the dominant leadership culture. A respondent highlighted that “unspoken cultural rules” can make it harder for people of different backgrounds to fit in and contribute. It sometimes leads to bias, in terms of performance assessment, or to abuse.
- **Ensure boards’ expectations remain compatible with caring leadership approaches:** Women leaders express frustration at being caught in the middle of contrary injunctions between boards, funders and staff. Too often, boards expect leaders to have the full support from staff, with

low turnover and high job satisfaction levels, while providing no solutions for bridging the gap between the (sometimes unrealistic) desires of staff for more holidays and better pay and the constraints of the organisation’s responsibilities. Similarly, women leaders are caught between a discourse that encourages them to take time off, while doing nothing to reduce their effective workload.

- **Act at a sectoral level:** Many issues facing CSOs need to be resolved at a sectoral rather than an organisational level. Within this context, it is remarkable that trade unions or staff associations were not mentioned by any of the respondents, except for one comment about the need for “de-unionisation”. In this respondent’s experience, women leaders often find themselves sandwiched between the growing aspirations of the staff, promoted by unions, and the reality of a system that effectively treats core costs (including staff costs and organisational development) as global public goods and in which the salaries of NGO leaders and staff are a deeply politicised issue.
- **Offer sectoral platforms for best-practice sharing.** Within that void, organisations must find ways to collaborate with each other to share best practices, pool resources and create a systemic change agenda for the sector that could be shared with funders, trade unions, policymakers and organisations seeking to represent the sector (for instance, CONCORD for INGOs in Europe).
- **Equalise power through the four-day working week.** The need to share best practices and challenges around the four-day week was identified by respondents as a key area for the sector to think through.

## 8.2 Philanthropic organisations and institutional funders

Funders are seen as one of the most influential forces shaping the realities of NGOs. While many women stress how well they are accompanied by their funders, others highlight that funders are the ones creating the permanent financial insecurity they are in. For instance, women leaders are disappointed by what they perceive to be a lack of responsiveness towards constructive feedback that has been provided for years already and wish for donors to take their feedback more seriously. Donors could enable more systemic change and contribute to greater wellbeing amongst women leaders by focusing on the following areas of action:

- **Be realistic about the power and limitations of the sector:** “We cannot fix everything ourselves, we can merely support change”, said one respondent. To avoid “mission creep”, it is key to identify systemic barriers to change and to avoid displacing the responsibilities of duty bearers and more powerful actors in societal challenges.
- **Connect groups with common interest to innovate:** Donors can also have an important convening role in helping the sector rethink its role given the changing nature of today’s challenges.
- **Build sectoral capacity on systemic change:** Donors must build bridges between practitioners and academia on systemic change strategies, including by sharing their own models and findings across their grantees (e.g. funding and publishing meta-evaluations).
- **Having a long-term view based on intersectionality:** Instead of focusing on specific thematic issues and short-term impact, respondents wish for donors to adopt an intersectional view and fund bigger picture projects.
- **Secure greater stability in donors’ priorities:** Respondents warned that “donors always want

new things rather than support us in great things that we already do”.

- **Reward GEDI plans in the allocation of funding:** CSOs with higher standards in terms of GEDI should get preferential treatment when allocating funding. This should be made clear in calls for funding.
- **Support collaborative –rather than competitive– modes of operating:** There is a wide perception that donors are still contributing to competition within and across organisations and that there is little funding available for collaboration. For women leaders specifically, supporting collaboration with other women in other organisations or through women, formal and informal networks are essential in creating enabling ecosystems amongst CSOs (cf. textbox on p. 18 “**The importance of women’s networks**”).
- **Recognise the specificity of smaller organisations:** When needed, this may require them to **facilitate mergers** to create viable entities. Another way to support transformation of the ecosystem would be to support **alternative and/or complementary funding models** that align with feminist values.
- **Address the negative side effects of the power imbalance:** Power needs to be addressed more transparently and effectively than it has been so far. Board and staff members are sometimes tempted to use the power of the purse to manipulate the agenda, instead of supporting NGOs in their own strategies.
- **Promoting social accountability:** NGOs are also overly focused on their accountability relationship to donors, rather than their accountability to beneficiaries and society at large. Philanthropic organisations and institutional donors should also build their own social accountability strategies and mechanisms.
- **Increase funding for women’s and feminist organisations:** especially provide core and

unrestricted or trust based funding for women's and feminist organisations who are often trapped in a starvation cycle.

### 8.3 Policymakers

Local and national governments, as well as international organisations, rely on civil society actors for service provision at a large scale, but also to support democracy, solidarity, cohesion and building support for systemic change.

- **Step-up efforts to reduce the gender gaps in care:** To promote the equal sharing of unpaid care work, regardless of gender, and significant public investment in the care economy, a close-up monitoring of existing care policy frameworks will be essential (e.g. impact assessments of the Work-Life Balance Directive and of the EU Care Strategy's targets on childcare and long-term care).
- **Normalise ad hoc care support for workers:** Introduce specific measures to resource or make it easier for employers and event organisers to provide support for childcare, including funding for travelling with young children and paid childcare at events.
- **Eliminate the gender pay and pension gaps:** This can be done, on one hand, through the swift transposition at the member state level of the 2023 EU directive on pay transparency, and on the other hand, through its monitoring at the EU level, namely, when it comes to the implementation of the directive's enhanced enforcement mechanisms. More concrete measures are needed to redress the gender pension gaps in the context of pension reform in the EU. Specific consideration should be made to women working in social enterprises, civil society and smaller employers.
- **Ensure that the existing policy frameworks on gender-based violence consider the specific context of women working in CSOs:** Besides supporting the adoption of the EU Directive on Combating Violence against Women and

Domestic Violence and the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, policymakers need to ensure that the resulting measures and funding initiatives at national and EU levels address the specific forms of gendered violence in CSOs whilst offering adequate support to survivors working or volunteering in the sector.

- **Cultivate diversity at all decision-making levels in CSOs:** Whereas the adoption of the 2022 EU directive on improving the gender balance among the directors of listed companies is to be celebrated as a major tool to accelerate progress towards gender balance, this legislation does not apply to CSOs. Therefore, it could serve as an inspiration for measures to address underrepresentation of women on civil society boards and management.

### 8.4 Deepening and strengthening the gender dimension of the EU

- **Ensure that gender mainstreaming and budgeting tools are used effectively** at all levels of governance (local, national and EU): To ensure political will and capacity to implement those principles throughout the political, legislative and budgetary processes will require specific attention being paid to gender equality in the next mid-term revisions of the multiannual financial framework.
- **Ensure gender-specific financing:** Dedicated funds to address gender inequality, to support women's organisations and to support work to enhance gender equality in all CSOs need to be developed.
- **Finance gender expertise and tools:** There is still a lack of investment in women's rights and gender equality, including in the context of building skills for gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, as well as dedicated resources for institutions and organisations promoting women's rights and gender equality.

---

# 9. CONCLUSIONS

---



## 9. CONCLUSIONS

At a time when their missions are becoming increasingly complex, NGOs need to be able to attract and retain diverse and talented leaders, especially women. More than ever, the sector needs their visions, skills, passion and know-how to make the shifts needed, but they are being exhausted by the misogyny, unreasonable expectations and lack of support within their organisations and in wider society.

This is not just about having more women operating within a system, but also about transforming the nature of the systems of decision-making to ensure they are more inclusive, diverse and effective. Nor is this about promoting women at the expense of 'better qualified' men, but about reconsidering what leadership skills and attributes, and what institutions and structures, are needed for transformative leadership in the 21st century. It is also about promoting a diverse and intersectional leadership that tackles privilege based on sex, age, race, ability, and sexual orientation and identity. The case for improving the gender balance and diversity of our civil society decision-making spaces is clear. At a time when civil society space is closing down everywhere, and our legitimacy as a civil society is being challenged on all fronts, it is essential for us to walk the talk in terms of the rhetoric about power, rights, gender, and social and environmental transformation.

During this difficult journey of change and given difficult battles ahead, celebrating successes, as leaders, as organisations and as a sector, will be essential to restore and build hope, which is needed to unleash energy, creativity and change.

Funders and policymakers must also start showing through concrete actions that they care for carers, by creating an enabling environment in terms of funding and societal norms for women leaders to thrive and help spark systemic change within society in Europe.

## 9.1 Ten recommendations for the next generation of women leaders

To close with words of hope and wisdom, we asked the 25 interviewees for their best advice for other women leaders and especially for younger and emerging women leaders. Here are their ten recommendations:

**1. Be yourself and value yourself for who you are and what you bring!**

*“Don’t try to blend in! Don’t be afraid of being yourself and valuing what you bring to the table. You have many skills and so much to add: don’t be shy.”*

**2. Have confidence in your own leadership style and don’t waste energy trying to conform to traditional patriarchal leadership models.**

*“Women can do anything: they should go for it because women bring much needed new winds and styles of leadership.”*

**3. You are not a troublemaker: you are a changemaker!** Continue to change your organisations from the inside and invest in an explicit organisational culture.

*“CSOs are failing to be really radical in reimagining their working cultures, practices and structures and this is holding us back from effective systems change work. This work to shift working cultures matters deeply. Build a support network within your organisation and find trusted colleagues to share challenges and find solutions.”*

**4. You are not alone!** Find allies: join; create; or build women’s networks both inside and outside your organisation.

*“My recommendation to next-generation women leaders would be to find time to support each other, avoid getting lonely because you are too busy and struggling.”*

*“Don’t stay in your bubble: make sure you build and maintain networks across sectors! The Brussels CSO women’s network has grown from a very small group of women, but we have really created an intergenerational community of women in feminist leadership practices working across sectors. This community has changed organisations and working culture in Brussels NGOs.”*

**5. Don’t compete amongst women!** Don’t be afraid to redistribute responsibility more evenly. If you are in a leadership role, you need to ensure others are also getting interesting opportunities, and you need to be able to step back from delivering to provide strategic overview thinking and guidance.

*“Give opportunities to other women and underrepresented groups and support them to succeed. Celebrate their successes and support them through challenges. As a leader your role is to guide and support not always to be involved with operational delivery.”*

**6. Build opportunities for intergenerational solidarity among women leaders to work together and co-create with mutual openness and respect.**

*“How can I share my experience and wisdom without killing youthful energy and creativity? We really need intentional and collaborative spaces to learn from one another across generations.”*

**7. Get more strategic and systemic to do the more visionary and visible work!** Ensure that you take and protect time to step back from delivering to engage with others, listen and see the bigger picture.

*“We need to better acknowledge and embrace the complexity of our work and the added challenges and opportunities that represents... and be ready for change and emergence.”*

**8. Celebrate success!** Intentionally make time for yourself and your teams to celebrate success, even as we know the massive challenges we are facing.

*“Keep fighting. There is hope. Things have been changing. It is essential to invest in hope and building positive energy to sustain us in the face of huge and sometimes overwhelming challenges.”*

**9. See self-care as an integral part of your leadership:** This can be achieved by setting clear boundaries early on and not compromising your personal health and wellbeing.

*“Please be kind to yourself: It is [an] intensely competitive environment and high achieving, so we need to look after ourselves and take time to disconnect [from] work and reconnect with ourselves and loved ones.”*

**10. Invest in your own capacity and training,** including on systemic change, leadership and intersectional feminism. It takes time and resources to establish and provide safe and non-judgemental spaces for reflective and caring responses; for openly discussing our own biases, privileges and internalised misogyny; we are constantly learning and need to be caring towards ourselves and have people who care for us and hold space for us when we struggle.

*“We need a feminist leadership academy for Brussels – for Europe – including the next generation: for support and training for leaders and organisations.”*

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: "Fairshare Monitor 2022". FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders.
- 2 "Fight Inequality Alliance: Alliance survey and member research 2022". Fight Inequality Alliance. May 2022, p. 13.
- 3 "Research & projects". Millennial HR website.
- 4 Source: "Gender equality index". EIGE website.
- 5 Fraser, T. and J. Glass (2020) "Bridging the fields of feminist and systems practice: Building ecosystems for gender equality". The Systems Sanctuary, September.
- 6 "Research & projects". Millennial HR website.
- 7 Source: "Feminist leadership". crea website.
- 8 "Meet Srilatha Batliwala". The Feminist Leadership Project, April 30 2020.
- 9 "ActionAid's ten principles of feminist leadership". ActionAid website.
- 10 Top Ten Basics of Feminist Leadership in ActionAid, Approved by the AAI Board December 2018
- 11 Toolkits and resources: "Feminist leadership". FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders website.
- 12 Wakefield, S (2017) "Transformative and feminist leadership for women's rights". Oxfam America Research Backgrounder series, 23 January.
- 13 "Fearless cities". Fearless cities website; A. Regelman and V. Bartolomé (2020) "Feminise politics now!" Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 6 March.
- 14 "Our community". JASS Just Power website.
- 15 Fisher, B. and Tronto J.C. (1990) "Toward a feminist theory of care", in E. Abel and M. Nelson (ed) *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), pp. 35-62; N.48 Folbre (2006) "Measuring care: Gender, empowerment and the care economy". *Journal of Human Development*, 2(7): 183-199.
- 16 Lorde, A (2017) *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (Miniola, NY: IXIA Press).
- 17 Billing, L (2023) "Time, toxic productivity and urgency cultures in non-profits: Part 1". Medium, 18 June.
- 18 Laloux, F. (2014) *Reinventing Organizations* (Nelson Parker).
- 19 "Women in the workplace 2022". McKinsey, 18 October.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 "Farmers and the agricultural labour force - statistics". Eurostat website, November 2022.
- 22 European Commission (2021) "Commission staff working document". SWD(2021) 373, 9 December.
- 23 "Ratings overview: Europe and Central Asia". Findings 2021 website.
- 24 "Gender equality index". EIGE website.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Step Into Our Power:** Series of Feminist Leadership ReTreats regularly hosted by Joanna Maycock and Angela Philp. Tailor-made in person and online workshops on the practice of feminist leadership for systems change are also organised.

**Inclusion Revolution:** Training workshops on transforming meeting culture by recognising and countering behaviours that exclude. Organised regularly by Emily Riley and Joanna Maycock.

**JASS** is a feminist movement support organisation anchored in the Global South. It has incredible resources on feminist leadership and power, including great case studies and stories of change.

**CREA** is a feminist international human rights organisation based in the Global South and led by women from the Global South. CREA's work draws upon the inherent value of a rights-based approach to sexuality and gender equality. They have led the thinking and practice of feminist leadership and their website contains many useful resources and case studies.

**European Women's Lobby:** An unbeatable resource for everything on EU policy, legislation and campaigns on women's rights and gender equality. The European Women's Lobby brings together the women's movement in Europe to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women's human rights and equality between women and men.

**We Are Feminist Leaders** supports individuals and organisations to embed feminist leadership principles into the way they lead and work. They run regular online training programmes, as well as offering tailored support to individuals and organisations.

**Systems Sanctuary** work with leaders who are working on social or environmental challenges and are trying to create the conditions for it to have a deeper systemic impact. Specifically, they train leaders internationally on systems-change practice and ecosystem development. Their website includes very useful resources on feminist systems change. They organise training and cohorts of leaders in systems change.

**Fair Share of Women Leaders** is an NGO supporting feminist leadership in INGOs. Their website has useful materials on what feminist leadership is and how to put it into practice. There are also great videos of feminist leaders discussing what it means to them.

**Feminise Politics Now!** is a handy resource guidebook for bringing feminist thinking and practice into local politics inspired by the new municipalism movement and Fearless Cities. It is especially useful as it exists in French, German and Spanish.

If you work in leadership in civil society in Brussels, you might want to join the Brussels CSO women's leaders' network. Contact Joanna to find out more: [joanna@joannamaycock.eu](mailto:joanna@joannamaycock.eu).

---

# **AUTHORS, ABOUT FEPS & PARTNERS**

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### CÉLINE CHARVERIAT

Céline Charveriat is a civil society leader with 25 years' experience in the field of sustainability and systemic change. She started her career as a researcher at the Peterson Institute and the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington D.C., worked for 15 years at Oxfam International as an advocate and campaigner, and then was executive director of the Institute of European Environmental Policy (IEEP) until 2022. She is currently vice chair of the European Commission's high-level expert group Economic and Social Impacts of Innovation and Research (ESIR) and a curatorial member of JRC's Art Sciences project Naturarchy. She is also a professor at Sciences-Po Paris and on the advisory board of Climate Catalyst. She is also a coach and mentor, supporting professional women in leadership positions in her field.



### JOANNA MAYCOCK

Joanna Maycock is an award-winning feminist organiser and campaigner, who has worked in leadership roles in civil society for decades. While leading the European Women's Lobby, Joanna worked to implement a strategic vision for the women's movement in Europe, to strengthen its joint work to impact EU legislation to end violence against women, tackle women's poverty and unequal pay, and advance parity in decision-making. Today, Joanna works with civil organisations to support the practice of intersectional feminist leadership for systemic change. She brings feminist practices into facilitating events, coalitions, and organisational change processes. She also runs training workshops and retreats on feminist leadership.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### ELOÏSE BODIN

Eloïse Bodin is a sustainability consultant, who has been working in the field of policy making for five years. She has been working as a policy researcher on a wide range of topics, such as the impacts of climate change on mental health, social justice challenges and building care-centred societies. Eloïse is also an eco-feminist activist and radio-artist, producing work related to environmental justice, feminism and the place of art in systemic change.



### ANGELA PHILP

Angela Philp has helped high-achieving women embrace and grow their feminist leadership since 2009, supporting them in developing leadership resilience, optimism, and power from the inside out. Advocate of Creative Resilience, Angela spent ten years participating in 90-600 km adventure racing events and now continues her practice with long-distance ultra-marathon mountain racing and endurance sea swims. Angela started her career designing grass-roots education programs for women and girls for UNESCO, and now provides leadership support for organisations and women leaders through one-to-one coaching, appreciative inquiry workshops and feminist leadership retreats.

## ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

FEPS works in close partnership with its 68 members and other partners, including renowned universities, scholars, policymakers and activists, forging connections among stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.

**FEPS**  
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



Avenue des Arts 46, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium +32 2 234 69 00  
info@feeps-europe.eu  
www.feeps-europe.eu  
@FEPS\_Europe

## ABOUT THE FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG (FES) EU OFFICE BRUSSELS

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit German foundation funded by the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, and headquartered in Bonn and Berlin. It was founded in 1925 and is named after Germany's first democratically elected President, Friedrich Ebert. FES is committed to the advancement of both socio-political and economic development in the spirit of social democracy, through civic education, research, and international cooperation. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is the oldest political foundation in Germany.

The EU Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung was opened in 1973. It participates in the European integration process, backs and accompanies the interests of the Federal Republic of Germany in Europe and contributes to shaping the external relations of the European Union.

**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**  
EU Office Brussels

EU Office  
Rue du Taciturne 38, 1000 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://brussels.fes.de/>  
@FES\_Europa



## ABOUT THE GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION (GEF)

The Green European Foundation (GEF) is the green political foundation at the EU level and is funded by the European Parliament. Its mission is to contribute to the development of a European public sphere and to foster greater involvement by citizens in European politics, ultimately forging a stronger, more participative democracy. GEF supports debates on European policies and politics, develops new research and political ideas, as well as provides training opportunities for young European citizens on green and European issues. GEF is an organisation but also a network of partners and member foundations, creating a vast web of relationships between different parts of civil society, academia and other stakeholders to advance European and green political debate and education.



Mundo Madou, Avenue des Arts 7-8, 1210 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://gef.eu/>  
@GEF\_Europe

## ABOUT THE HEINRICH-BÖLL-STIFTUNG EUROPEAN UNION

The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung is a German political foundation affiliated with the German Green Party (Alliance 90/The Greens). Its primary task is political education and advocacy in Germany and abroad. Our main tenets are ecology and sustainability, democracy and human rights, non-violence and justice. In our work, we place particular emphasis on gender democracy, equal rights for minorities, and the political and social participation of migrants. The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union represents the foundation vis-à-vis European and international institutions, associations, NGOs and media based in Brussels. The office is a main point of contact for individuals, groups and organisations from around the world interested in EU politics and policies. The future of the European project and the role of the EU in the world are at the centre of our activities and efforts.



Rue du Luxembourg 47-51, 1050 Brussels (Belgium)  
<https://eu.boell.org>  
@boell\_eu

Europe's civil society plays a vital role in addressing societal divides, driving a just transition and supporting democracy. Over the past decade, women have become the majority of those working in this sector, increasingly taking on senior leadership roles. This study, the first of its kind, presents original research based on the voices of 148 women civil society leaders who participated in our study. It assesses the progress made and identifies barriers and opportunities for women leaders in Europe to practice much needed transformational feminist leadership to bring about progressive systems change.

Key findings indicate a concerning burnout rate among these pioneering women leaders, who despite their talent and commitment, face challenges in bringing about large-scale systemic change. Our study paints a picture of women leaders continuing to bear the brunt of care work at home, in society, and at work, often firefighting to keep organizations afloat and managing significant workplace transformations with little support.

This crisis not only jeopardizes women but also hampers the missions of civil society organizations. Recommendations include sector wide investment in reimagining power and leadership cultures, establishing an academy to support to practice of feminist leadership, fostering caring working cultures, addressing widespread financial insecurity driven by donor starvation cycles, and investing in women's organisations and gender equality. This policy study outlines detailed actions for boards, organizations, donors, society, and women themselves to tackle these challenges.

**POLICY STUDY PUBLISHED IN JANUARY 2024 BY:**



*Copyright © 2024 by FEPS, FES, GEF AND HBS*