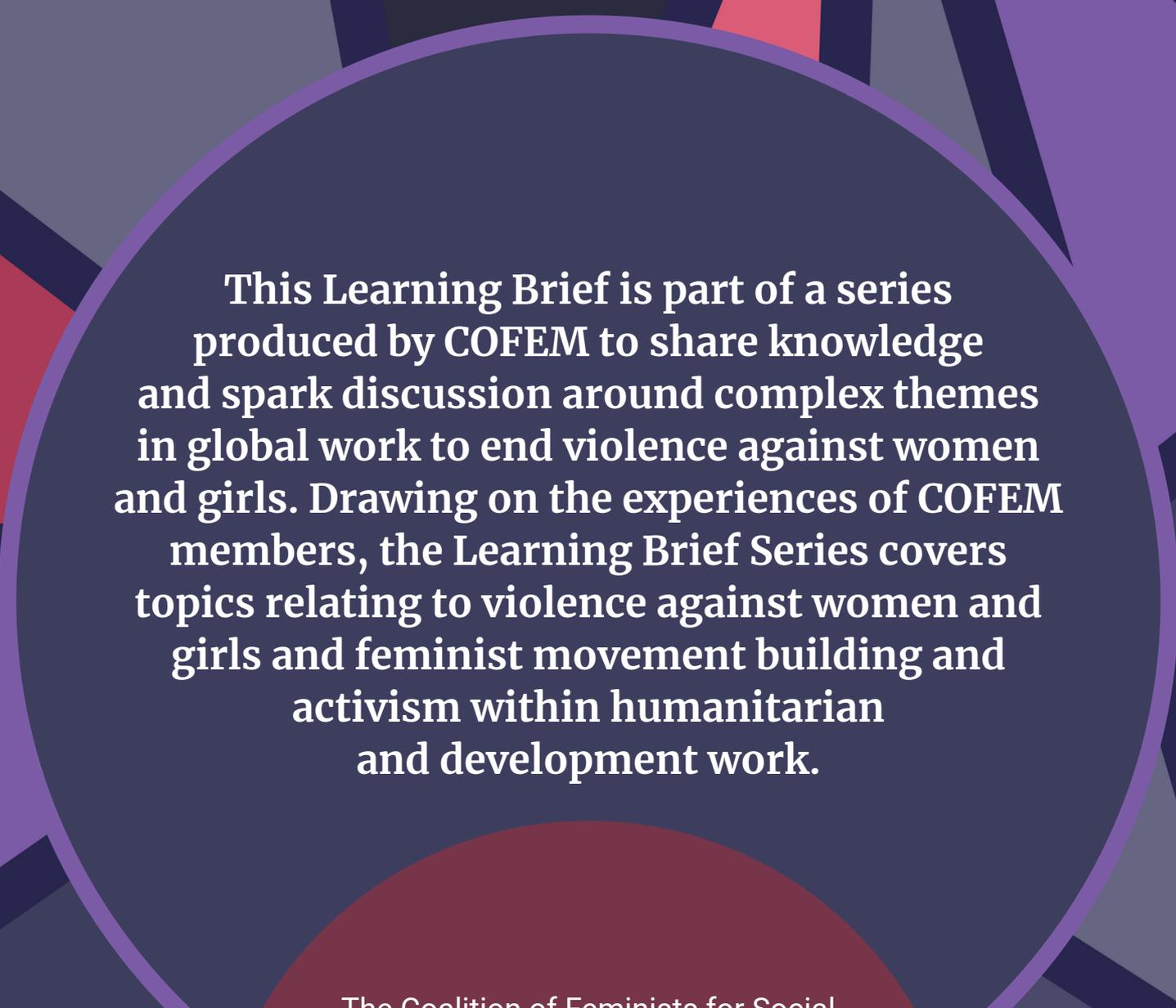




*Feminist
Leadership
Learning Brief*



This Learning Brief is part of a series produced by COFEM to share knowledge and spark discussion around complex themes in global work to end violence against women and girls. Drawing on the experiences of COFEM members, the Learning Brief Series covers topics relating to violence against women and girls and feminist movement building and activism within humanitarian and development work.



The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is an advocacy collective of activists, practitioners, thought leaders, researchers and academics working globally to end violence against women and girls. COFEM seeks to centre feminist-informed theory and practice on oppression and discrimination in efforts to address violence against women and girls. We aim to promote gender equity, human rights, dignity, and safety through collective action.



Why feminist leadership?

In January 2020, COFEM created the Internal Communications and Diversity Working Group to strengthen our internal governance and membership structure; support our aims to embody and practice feminist principles within COFEM, including those relating to diversity, inclusion and solidarity; and ensure that COFEM is accessible, welcoming and safe to all women.

To further these aims, the Working Group designed Learning Circles to create community and space for COFEM members to learn and share resources on challenging issues.

In November 2020, this Working Group hosted its first Learning Circle. This Learning Circle focused on feminist leadership, a key element of which is the ability to learn from others and evolve from this learning. This topic was identified as a catalyst for members to discuss how, as a feminist collective, COFEM engages its members and members engage with one another. In this first Learning Circle, we recognised clearly that – despite common rhetoric on inclusion and privilege – much transformative work remains to be done, both within COFEM as a network and ourselves as individuals working in the humanitarian and development fields.

For feminist practice to be truly inclusive – i.e. ‘feminist’ – we must rethink the spaces and structures we inhabit and how we share power. It is even more critical to adopt increasingly effective, creative and collaborative models of leadership because our primary understanding and models of leadership come from traditional patriarchal forms of authority. Applying feminist leadership principles allows us to do this.



What is feminist leadership?

Feminist leadership is a transformative leadership approach that recognises that women and girls have had to find different ways of becoming leaders precisely because we are at the margins of systems of economic, social and political power.

For those who live by feminist principles, traditional leadership models grounded in masculine and patriarchal authority can be oppressive and even toxic. These models commonly do not prioritise transparency or accountability whereas feminist leadership values integrity and mutual learning.

Feminist leadership provides concrete strategies to better understand, appreciate and respond to multiple, intersecting power structures and inequalities and how these affect all of us within our organisations and networks. As Chipu Bangira, the Feminist and Transformational Leadership Manager at Akina Mama wa Afrika, explained, 'It's not just about taking charge, but about leading with a soul.' Feminist leadership urges us to not only consider inclusion and diversity in our working relationships but also to recognise that how we show up in spaces is determined by our lived experiences. Therefore, a feminist approach to leadership is inherently intersectional and aims to create spaces in which all people can exercise their agency and realise their potential.

Feminist leadership draws on a feminist understanding of power and agency. As Leila Billing, COFEM member and co-founder of We Are Feminist Leaders, says, 'Many of us internalise patriarchal and oppressive thought/ideology that tells us we have no power, that our voices do not matter. We can challenge this through personal work to build 'power within,' and building 'power with' by engaging in collective action with others. It recognises that power comes in many forms – access to knowledge, support systems, and ability to tap into powerful sites of emotion like empathy are all incredibly important forms of power for a feminist leader.'

How can we practice feminist leadership?

Anyone can be a feminist leader.

Feminist leadership differs from traditional forms of leadership because it focuses on how we use our respective power and privilege to lead collaboratively rather than exerting 'power over.' For example, consider how we hold leaders accountable, centre self-care and address issues that many would prefer to ignore or dismiss, such as violence against women and girls, racism, etc. Feminist leadership implores us to use our power and privilege for social and structural change. For instance, we can centre Black, brown, indigenous, LGBTQ+ women and girls, who are often ignored, by understanding when to:



speak up



**step back to
allow others
to speak**



**stand in
solidarity with
those who speak.**

By analysing power-sharing and inclusive approaches to leadership, we can define for ourselves the qualities and behaviours we see as fundamental to feminist leadership. Feminist leadership can therefore guide us in a personal reflection, change and development process, while giving us approaches we can use to transform traditional forms of leadership.

To actively practice feminist leadership, we must always reflect on the following key tenets:



Accountability: Do you prioritise honesty and integrity in your working relationships? Do you take responsibility when things don't go to plan? Are you open to being accountable to others regardless of their position, and take responsibility when necessary to learn, grow and change?



Collaboration: Do you support collective action and encourage your colleagues to build alliances? Do you promote working relationships that are safe and value all participants? Do you seek and provide support to other feminist leaders and colleagues?



Diversity of thought and representation: Does your team prioritise equitable relationships and foster diverse people and forms of knowledge and experiences? Does your team have diverse representation across gender, age, ethnicity and other forms of identity? Are you ensuring that diverse voices are heard and respected?



Empathy: Do you model thoughtfulness and patience, listen to your colleagues and allow them to grow? Do you create positive spaces for your team to unlearn negative organisational cultures? Are you considerate of your team members' circumstances, including any responsibilities that may influence their professional work?



Self and community care: Do you emphasise the self and collective care of your team and those with whom you work as a priority? Do you recognise that care practices are essential to sustaining energy, well-being, and solidarity and creating structures in which your team can care for themselves and others? Do you plan or budget for self-care for your team?



Balance power: Do you consider the power dynamics at play among your team? If you are in a position of power, do you cede space and promote the work and achievements of others? How do you ensure inclusive decision-making that takes diverse views into account?



Transparency: Do you provide clarity to your colleagues around expectations, and share information openly with them? Do you build trust and mutual learning into your feedback and review processes? How do you receive, learn from, and respond to feedback?



Self-Reflection: How feminist leaders show up, heal and treat others.

Being a feminist leader requires committing to self-reflection about who you are, how you show up, what you bring to the spaces you enter, and how you hold yourself accountable for your leadership practice and how it affects others. We all bring our lived experiences, including traumas, into our workspaces. These wounds are often the result of intersecting forms of oppression – racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, among others. A key aspect of feminist leadership is holding space for our own and others' healing journeys, so that the wounds we carry are less likely to manifest in harmful ways. A feminist leader shows vulnerability, asks questions, is humble, and open-minded. Although traditional management models set expectations that leaders define solutions, feminist leadership is about sharing power and building self-reflection and collaborative decision-making into all processes.

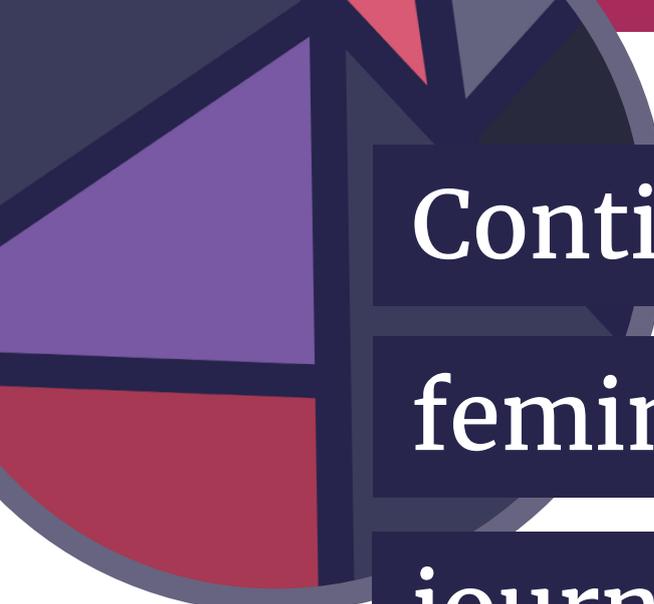


What challenges do we face in implementing feminist leadership and how do we overcome them?

Patriarchal and colonial structures create significant challenges in practicing everyday feminism. Therefore, as feminist leaders, we must advocate for change across the spaces and networks in which we participate wherever and however we can. This sometimes generates small wins, but also helps normalise and embed feminist values within a team and create a narrative that working toward equality is everyone's responsibility. Small wins can address hierarchies by distributing power within our spheres of influence and create a narrative, culture, and set of behaviours around our team. As a part of our learning, we recognise that sometimes there may be little room for a feminist leader to manoeuvre in a stifling organisational culture.

'However, even the most patriarchal organisation will not have a monolithic culture – there will be sites of resistance, you just need to look for them. So start to build alliances however and wherever you can. As feminist leaders we need to be ready and prepared to take advantage of windows of opportunity to move forward new agendas and work around decolonisation and intersectionality, as well as anti-racism. Sometimes, I have accepted that the most I can do for my team is to ensure the 'least worst outcome.' That may not feel enough, and you may at times feel complicit in much that is wrong, but I have often asked myself – is it better to leave this work to the non-feminists? What would be the outcome if I left this to people who don't apply any of the same values as me? Sometimes, the 'least worst outcome' can be a win and can help to cushion your team from the very worst by creating cultures of mutual care.'

– Leila Billing



Continuing our feminist leadership journey

COFEM is on a journey of reflection and growth to consider how we implement feminist leadership principles, practices and skills every day.

As a global network run by a small team of consultants, we encourage our members to lead and participate in our activities as much as possible – whether by sharing expertise in working groups, co-writing blogs or statements, facilitating events with colleagues and communities, and developing guidelines for how we collaborate, work together and act as feminist leaders within and outside of the network. Our strategic plan is guided by the priorities of our members. It is important to note that we have and may likely continue to not always ‘get it right’ and alienate Black, brown and Indigenous feminists in networks such as ours. In an effort to remain accountable, honest and transparent, COFEM is creating open spaces for ‘learning and unlearning’ and for members to ‘call in and call out’ as a critical piece of embodying intersectional feminism.



Resource List

We actively encourage all members and allies to read and share the following resources.

Articles

[Global Fund for Women](#)

Leila Billing's Blog:

[What does feminist leadership look like in a pandemic?](#)

[Feminist Leadership: What's Privilege Got to do With it?](#)

Trainings/Programmes

[We are Feminist Leaders](#)

[Popworks Africa](#)

[We Rise Toolkit](#)

[Women's Resource Centre](#)

Organisational Learning

[ActionAid](#)

[Association of Women in Development \(AWID\)](#)

[Black Feminist Future](#)

[Black Women Disrupt](#)

[CREA](#)

[Fair Share of Women Leaders](#)

[Feminist Ethics and Women Leaders: From Difference to Intercorporeality](#)

[Oxfam](#)

[Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul by Hope and Rudo Chigudu](#)



This Learning Brief was written by COFEM members
Lauren Messina (COFEM Coordinator)
and Priya Dhanani (The Asia Foundation).

Acknowledgments

Editing by Inbal Sansani and Sophie Read Hamilton,
and design by Teju Jhaveri. Special thanks to Leila Billing for her thoughtful review
and for sharing her time and experience along with Chipu Bangira. Thank you to the
COFEM Coordinating Committee and Secretariat members, particularly Leah Goldmann,
Sophie Namy, Tyler Crone, and Zainab 'Zee' Sulaiman, for their insightful contributions.

Suggested Citation: Coalition of Feminists for Social Change,
COFEM Learning Brief Series: Feminist Leadership, 2021.