Who are the leaders of tomorrow? Addressing gender equality and inclusion in leadership

Purpose of this brief

Drawing on findings from evaluations commissioned by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), this brief explores how to address gender equality and inclusion in supporting research for development (R4D) leaders. It highlights the importance of addressing gender equality and inclusion at individual, organizational and systems levels.

Who this is for

This content will be of interest to those who are designing and providing R4D support and are interested in incorporating gender equality and inclusion considerations into R4D projects and programs.

About the evaluations

This brief shares findings from two major IDRC evaluations:

- The Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations examined the strategies and results of incorporating organizational development into research programs. Using a subset of 52 IDRC grantee organizations, the evaluation looked at how investing in organizations and networks can help them become more sustainable, effective and influential.

- The Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Emerging Research Leaders assessed leadership strengthening in IDRC-funded award programs and research projects with the aim of understanding how best to support graduate students and early career researchers. The methodology included a survey of 934 alumni of IDRC-supported experiences as well as a qualitative review of example projects (interviews and focus groups). The findings referenced in this brief primarily represent the opinions of IDRC alumni and focus on perspectives from the Global South.

IDRC's recent evaluations on the topic of building R4D leaders highlighted the importance and complementarities of supporting leadership at multiple levels — among individuals and organizations, and the broader system that these operate within. Tackling gender equality and inclusion (GEI) considerations with equitable and inclusive approaches to supporting leadership was an example of a key area that needs to be addressed across these three levels.

We aim in this brief to highlight ways funders can work across these three levels to address GEI in efforts to build leaders. What are we learning? What is shifting in the broader contextual environment? And how do funders know they're making a difference when it comes to building strong, equitable and inclusive organizations? We explore GEI at the individual and organizational levels while considering the broader context, striving to understand what it means to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations to lead.

Individual level: equitably supporting diverse leaders who value and pursue GEI

At this level, we consider who benefits from leadership support opportunities as well as what leadership qualities are valued and strengthened. Assessing who is supported and how to engage underrepresented groups in leadership strengthening is part of fostering an equitable and inclusive approach. This requires an understanding of who has traditionally participated in the field, which groups are underrepresented and the challenges marginalized groups may face. Capacity-strengthening efforts can then help ensure that R4D leaders have and value the skills they need to address gender equality and inclusion in their own work.

Funders have a key role to play in ensuring that gender and inclusion considerations form part of selection criteria, team composition, project design, implementation and engagement. They should also recognize that partners are best situated to set their own research priorities and approaches for building gender capacity based on their knowledge of the local landscape. At this level, questions might include the following: Has a thorough gender analysis been undertaken/planned at all stages of the project life cycle? Are gender specialists members of the team and, if not, should they be? Who is doing the research? Who is being interviewed? Who presents at meetings? Who gets to be in the room?

Funders can do this by:

- ensuring that programming considers explicit strategies to support a diversity of emerging leaders, including targets for engaging researchers from marginalized backgrounds

- recognizing that high-quality research must be inclusive and equitable, taking into consideration the varied experiences of women and girls, men and boys, and people of different identities

- embarking on a joint learning journey through regular conversations aimed at capacity strengthening on both sides — one example being developing and using a GEI conversation guide to

facilitate regular discussions of challenges, capacity needs and learning between staff and grantees

- supporting training and workshops focused on gender analysis for staff and grantees

- building GEI considerations and expectations into calls for proposals

Organizational level: building strong, equitable and inclusive organizations

A key finding from the building leading organizations evaluation is that it is important to work with organizations to clarify and construct the appropriate framing and integration of gender equality as a factor of their being — or becoming — leading organizations.

At this level, funders might ask questions such as: Is a gender strategy in place? Are GEI considerations built into human resource management? How are women and other marginalized individuals represented in management? Are gender specialists in place to guide this work? Again, partners should determine their own approaches, and a flexible approach to capacity strengthening allows organizations to build the strengths they need to address GEI in appropriate and relevant ways.

These considerations are also important to complement individual capacity and leadership support, ensuring that emerging R4D leaders have supportive institutional environments in which they can pursue gender equality and inclusion along their career trajectories.

Supporting GEI at the organizational level could, for example, involve:

- working with organizations to clarify and construct the appropriate framing and integration of gender as a factor of their being/becoming leading organizations

- supporting development of a gender strategy or making high-level commitments to GEI

- exploring and addressing how women and other marginalized individuals are represented on the

boards of governors and in senior management of organizations supported

- developing greater gender-sensitive intentionality around human resource management — an area with significant potential for greater investment

- supporting an organization to engage gender specialists

Systems level: tackling the root causes of inequality

Effectively and sustainably fostering equitable and inclusive leadership at the individual and organizational levels also requires attention to broader challenges in the enabling environment. Many external factors influence how individuals and organizations are able to demonstrate and leverage leadership capabilities, including societal and cultural norms, connections with local communities and the existence of unrest and/or conflict.

A focus on gender-transformative research, which aims to understand and address systemic inequalities in the environments where leaders operate, can therefore provide an important complement to support for individual and organizational leaders. This focus involves thinking about the systems, structures and power relations that come into play when designing projects and programs. Exploring how gender equality, organizational change and the "rules of the game" interact — and the role of power dynamics within systems and communities — is key to tackling the root causes of inequality and contributing to an enabling environment for diverse leaders committed to GEI.

With the aim of understanding and helping to address how the landscape may enable or constrain GEI efforts, funders can:

- make efforts to actively learn from individual and organizational leaders in the Global South about the context-specific challenges they face in addressing GEI, and how best to support them

- leverage and strengthen the capacities of individual and organizational leaders on GEI in the Global South by supporting them to conduct gender-transformative research, and tailor their strategies and processes to their specific contexts

- support research that considers and addresses the formal rules and policies in the operating environment, as well as the informal social and cultural norms at play

- encourage researchers to consider connections with local communities — particularly those who are typically marginalized — as well as contextual challenges such as conflict or unrest and how this can be reflected in the approach to research

Key takeaways

- Grantees are best situated to set their own research priorities and approaches for strengthening capacity to address GEI based on their knowledge of the local landscape.

- Programming can incorporate explicit strategies to support a diversity of emerging research leaders and ensure these leaders in turn value and pursue GEI in their own work.

- A flexible approach to capacity strengthening will allow organizations to build the strengths they need to address GEI.

- Fostering GEI requires a complementary focus on the enabling environment in which individual and organizational leaders operate, and the systemic inequalities that need to be addressed for them to thrive.

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