bond

WILD
ACTION RESEARCH

Exploring women's leadership in 5 INGOs

A feminist learning journey

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Introduction

In early 2019, a group of female chief executives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), frustrated with the slow progress the sector was making to align its external focus on gender equality with internal representation and culture, wanted to take action.

So few women in the INGO sector are in key leadership roles: in 2019, 70% of INGO staff were women, but only 30-35% were chief executive officers (CEOs) and there were very few female chairs. We wanted to identify and build on the things that encourage women to become INGO chief executives and identify and unblock barriers.

Restless Development, Plan UK, HelpAge International, BRAC International and ActionAid UK identified women directors within their organisations to lead their involvement. Penny Lawrence, former deputy chief executive of Oxfam, acted as convenor. Action research support came from Sarah Fraser and Carolyn Norgate at Mayvin, Gender research expertise from Tina Wallace and network and diversity and inclusion support from Lena Bheeroo, engagement and equity manager at Bond.

In March 2019, we organised a workshop as part of the Bond conference to explore wider interest. More than 90 attendees generated our first data set and launched the idea of an action research network – Women INGO Leaders in Development (WILD) network – to identify evidence of what works to encourage more women CEOs.

Bond and Fair Share campaign gained insights through quantitative surveys. Wild aimed to explore qualitative insights.

The focus of the work changed and developed during the turbulent months that followed, in response to significant external changes in the context imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis of race expressed through the Black Lives Matter movement and significant aid cuts. Internally the principles and approaches used by the group to underpin the work, those of feminist leadership and action research, significantly influenced the thinking of the group.

Together we have gathered data, tried out solutions, shared ideas and issues of concern over the last 18 months; how we were weathering the challenges at home, within our organisations, and with our global partners all emerged as critical. The questions asked changed over time and the focus widened especially on the marginalisation of women or colour and the unequal relationships between the HQs and staff and partners globally.

This report was written by Penny Lawrence and Tina Wallace.

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A lot was learned about emergent and responsive ways of working, using a more applied action research approach (see appendix) and about the power of working as a group openly sharing success and failure, fears as well as positive ideas. Over time trust was built and it became safe and supportive space for us to discuss difficult issues including the loss of colleagues through redundancies and Covid-19, anxieties about the future, and the issues of racism as they were unfolding during debates in their organisations. New ideas and energies were shared and there was positive learning and exchange which carried over into the work within their organisations. Cross organisational learning was a rich experience.

There was a shift from the main focus being on individual women and their leadership trajectories to an approach more rooted in analysing and addressing issues of power, voice and control within their organisations, in line with the feminist principles being followed by the group (see the list of principles below). For some the focus became how to work inclusively with all women and better tackle the issues of race, racism and gender inequalities in their organisation; for others the role of patriarchy and its persistence in the face of good, equitable policies on paper was the key challenge. For another the issue of youth engagement was also central. New thinking about power relationships, the opportunities and barriers facing the diversity of women and girls, and exploring different ways of working led to new initiatives in some agencies. These actions are on-going.

A reflection meeting in January 2021 showed how far participants had come on our learning journey. The need for flexibility of thinking, challenging past ways of working, and experimenting with new approaches. Each of us had a personal journey as well as a shared journey around the challenges facing women and women of colour in relation to leadership, exploring where opportunities, large and small, for positive and transformation change might lie.

One of the main achievements of the group was that it provided a space for reflection and experimentation in a very hectic and pressured time, allowed questioning and diversity of ideas. Both personal and professional issues were openly shared, which gave members real support as they faced some very difficult questions and issues in their lives, work and organisations.

Two years after our WILD journey began, this report shares our key learning and insights, including case studies of five NGOs that have taken steps to change. The latest Fair Share monitor and Bond data indicate some progress. But still fewer than half of the CEOs in the international development sector are women, and there are even fewer female chairs.

Feminist principles (supplied by ActionAid from their work with Srilatha Batliwala)

1. **Self-aware: 'put your ego in the passenger seat'**
2. **Self–care before caring for others**
3. **Dismantle bias: check your own privilege**
4. **Enable belonging: create ways for everyone to be heard and take part**
5. **Share power: enable everyone to lead**
6. **Responsible and transparent use of power**
7. **Accountable collaboration: keep the commitments you make**
8. **Respectful feedback as an opportunity to grow**
9. **Courage: take risks, 'make failure your fuel'**
10. **Zero tolerance of any abuse of power or acts of discrimination**
11. **Confidentiality of meetings**

How the shifting context changed our research

The initial questions that kick-started the WILD action research within the INGOs were

What are the enablers and barriers for women:

1. On a journey from volunteer to CEO?
2. For women to be heard and to progress?
3. To support women into leadership positions to lead as their authentic selves?
4. For women from under-represented groups to progress into senior leadership roles?

The key questions WILD action researchers are asking now

1. Where is power located in the INGO?
2. Where are decisions made and who is involved; whose voice is heard?
3. Do women and people of colour feel welcome and that they 'belong' – can they be themselves at work?
4. What does diversity and inclusion really involve?
5. What is a work-life balance when care work is still largely poorly understood?
6. How to really work with an intersectional lens?

Key findings and insights
1. The power of the group

"I could be myself and learnt so much more from sharing together"

- The WILD group provided a safe space for reflection, energy and shared learning in a challenging time. It encouraged questions and diverse ideas, both personal and professional. It gave members support as they faced some very difficult questions, times and issues in their work and organisations.
- Caring for one another as equals created a powerful group dynamic. All of WILD's core members are leaders, operating to a collective set of shared feminist principles. We welcomed and valued the different offers and capabilities of participants, and by doing so we built trust and a productive way of working, for us and for our organisations.
- Learning together from this process fed into new ideas and generated some different ways of working that will influence members and their organisations now and in the future as they continue to test, learn and adapt new ideas.
- Working collaboratively and sharing learning across INGOs on such challenging issues is worthwhile and still relatively unusual.
- The safety and containment the group provided supported members to work in a different, iterative, less linear way.

Key issues that WILD discussed:

- Feminist approaches to women's leadership
- Race and racism
- The urgent need to bring more women of colour into the research
- The importance of power and structural barriers for women, beyond a focus on individual women
- The reality of patriarchy
- The importance of care work in leadership

Key findings and insights

2. Methodologies that worked

Every organisation started with a staff survey. After that there was divergence, as innovative ways of working and learning emerged.

Some examples:

- **Facilitators from the global south in Help Age International were trained and supported to interview their peers on issues of exclusion and power** building capacity as well as creating new knowledge.
- **BRAC International (BRACI)** invested heavily in key informant interviews with a range of staff from selected countries where it works. The data collected from this process was rich, diverse and detailed and conveyed a lot of new important information that the senior management team are using to make changes a different levels in BRACI.
- **Restless Development** experimented with new approaches to governance and created a new model of co-leadership, shared by two young women and run under feminist principles.
- **ActionAid UK** felt that feedback from the BLM and race discussions internally meant it had to change its approach entirely and rethink the best ways to work on these issues, **putting people of colour in the organisation in control of the agenda.**
- **Plan UK** found that asking questions on gender and race inequalities in staff and volunteer surveys enabled issues of race and racism to be discussed at senior manager and board level for the first time.

Initial reflections on methodologies used

Action research is an agile and flexible learning approach. As our thinking shifted over time and the context changed so significantly, we held our intention tightly but kept our plan and questions loose and flexible. Although changing questions reduced the opportunities for action cycles, it enabled participants' research to remain relevant to shifting circumstances.

Feminist principles helped us see who you listen to and how you listen changes the information you will receive. They supported us to explore where power lies and how to welcome those with less power.

Deeper listening gives you deeper insight. While the quantitative staff surveys gave useful data on standard inclusion/marginalisation variables, such as age, gender, sexuality and race, open conversations and discussions held in the global south and facilitated locally in different languages raised different concerns and deeper insights. For example:

- Using English as the dominant language is excluding.
- The structures of power and where decisions are made influences who is heard and who is not.
- Discrimination and marginalisation increases with distance from an organisations' headquarters.
- Attitudes of senior male leaders hit a 'fragility' barrier and patriarchy remains a problem in many offices. It is largely not challenged even when policies committed to gender equality exist.

Appreciative and creative approaches to what could be done to collect data and listen to a diversity of voices has enriched the research findings and enabled real-time learning. Data collected from different contexts shifted experiences and changed perspectives. For example, Restless Development broadened its governance to include youth leaders.

Key findings and insights

3. Opportunities and changes that have emerged

"This work has to shift the dial on racism; it cannot be business as usual"
– ActionAid UK

Learning from initial actions taken as a result of WILD's research includes:

- **Openly raising** the lack of women leaders and the low representation of women of colour has shifted awareness in organisations.
- **Intersectionality** and the different experiences of women of colour are on the agenda for many organisations.
- **Conversations with leadership and trustees** on power and inclusion, power and privilege – and in one organisation about male perspectives of female leadership.
- There is an increased awareness of **multiple perspectives** and a focus on how to learn from and manage these.
- **Organisational culture matters.** The action research opened discussions about what changes would enable a more diverse pool of people to feel more comfortable and do well in the organisations. Rigid hierarchies, 'hero missions' and macho cultures don't align with the sector's ambitions of equality and inclusion. Experimenting with flatter hierarchies, and ways of working where there are open discussions on who holds power, open hearts, a willingness to take risks and 360-degree accountability, is more inclusive and demonstrates the change we seek.
- **Accountability matters.** Those organisations which received high survey responses were also the ones that demonstrated accountability. If you're asked for your view and nothing changes why bother filling in the survey?

Enabling more women to be CEOs goes beyond recruitment and numbers. Some staff surveys revealed that although male and female senior leaders seem to have similar aspirations they have very different expectations. **Wider issues at play that block progress include exclusive leadership models and practices** that decrease belonging and inclusion, a lack of appreciation of **the power of diversity and different perspectives for better decision making, the lack of 'seeing' the absence of women and people of colour at the table, men's perceptions of women's abilities, and men's behaviour towards women.**

The work led to change as the action research progressed. For example:

- At Restless Development, budget cuts led to a deliberate refocusing of which jobs were priorities and where they should be located, driven by the intention of making major changes. As a result, the organisation has seen an increase in women in senior posts, a rise in posts located outside the UK, and a major rise in people of colour in leadership roles.
- At HelpAge International an internal restructure following budget cuts enabled a 'global' team to be created, replacing the London and regional hubs. Operating remotely, new posts were open to staff anywhere in the world.

There is greater awareness about the scale of the changes needed to ensure women, especially women of colour, can access jobs and promotion, and feel able to be themselves and perform well in INGOs.

Talent pipelines, leadership courses, peer coaching and sponsorship can support aspiring women leaders but are not enough on their own.

Feminist principles, power analysis, and issues of participation and trust have opened up discussions on what changes would enable a more diverse pool of people to feel comfortable in organisations and do well in them.

Seeking to shift long-term patterns of power dynamics and core organisational/societal paradigms requires an approach to change that differs from the one the sector generally uses. A traditional, linear approach to change, one that is problem-focused and assumes that following steps A-Z will achieve the required outcome, would have been ineffective to bring about these changes. In this work, as the boundaries of the scope blurred, and the messiness of the world showed up in more ways than we could have imagined, we noticed that:

- Deeper enquiry was needed (interviews not just surveys)
- There was a need to keep a tight hold of our overall intention but make our plans loose and flexible
- Its better to deploy appreciative and creative approaches to what could be done rather than sticking to what we committed to do.
- It's important to take risks and try things, even if they are uncomfortable or difficult

The context demanded we think about and approach change in this way. But organisations are not often set up to think about change in this way. The research methodology – the iterative, cyclical nature of action research – and the safety and containment of the group provided the support to work in this way.

We started by assuming more women in CEO leadership positions was:

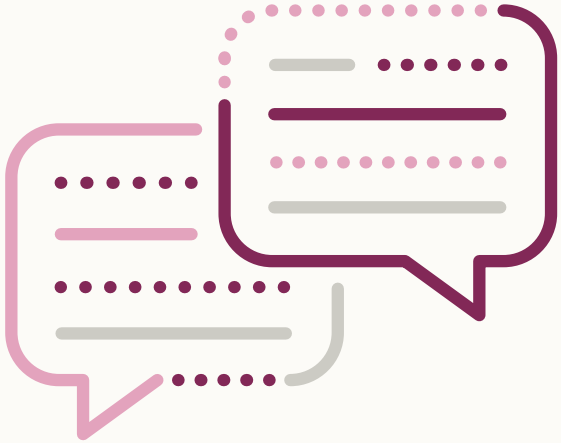
1. A people problem to fix, demanding a diagnosis, and initiatives that could give results
2. About representation of women ('If I don't see women like me in the CEO role, I don't believe I'm welcome')
3. By evidencing what enabled and blocked women CEOs we could help 'solve the problem'
4. A diversity issue
5. Organisational policies and practices

But what we found is:

1. More about messy, complex, long-term organisational culture, design and systems change, which requires tenacity, open hearts, continuous enquiry and learning.
2. About power, patriarchy, fragility and wider intersectionality.
3. Organisations need to change more than women leaders. More uncomfortable systematic patterns of patriarchy and power dynamics need to change.
4. An inclusion and equality issue
5. How it feels to work in an organisation matters more than anything else

Key findings and insights

4. Personal insights



These activities have generated a great deal of personal learning for all of us. We've all moved as we've deepened our understanding of the complexity of the issues.

These comments capture a flavour of this journey:

"It's contested, challenging and personal. It is risky, we've made mistakes along the way and we've learnt so much."

"I need to notice and listen more to other perspectives. I've learnt how much my English language and London location gives me power in the eyes of my global colleagues."

"I'm more confident in the type of leader I want to be and the positive impact this can have for women leaders."

"In some ways, WILD took on new relevance to me in Covid-19."

"I cannot assume to know what makes people feel included or diminishes their sense of belonging."

"As a white woman I am not the best person to undertake the work regarding challenges and blockers as I will automatically view things through my own white lens. This is important. I'm able to work with the results, yet people opening up to me, and for me to truly understand what they are saying, took someone else."

"Being in this group was a source of strength and solidarity."

"Small things matter – kindness, support, connection."

"As convenors and facilitators of a network, we have had to learn to lead differently."

(See reflections from the convenors for more personal insights.)

Key findings and insights
5. Organisational insights

Restless Development

How different ways of looking at leadership enhance women's participation

Restless development took many initiatives during this period, including listening exercises, new training for volunteers and introducing new policies. They also captured their learning from a co-leadership pilot.

"The co-leadership model was a success as an inclusive leadership tool and in encouraging more women to see a path to being CEO."

When planning for CEO Perry Maddox to take parental leave from February to June 2020, Restelss Development set out to do something different with the cover role. Instead of replacing the CEO with an acting CEO, the organisation tried a co-leadership model, i.e. two roles to co-lead the agency in partnership. The aim was to continue to advance its understanding and application of inclusive leadership approaches. Two young leaders from within Restless Development, Primrose Manyalo and Harriet Mason, were asked to join the interview panel and be part of the decision-making process. Gemma Graham took on the role of interim deputy CEO and Kate Muhwezi as interim COO.

Following the success of the interim CEO co-leadership model, Primrose and Harriet have now gone on to capture the learnings, the emotions and the aspirations behind co-leads, Gemma and Kate, in order to understand what it really meant to be a British women leading a global agency through a time of crisis - whilst dealing with all the personal demands that the pandemic put on them. This was captured as a case study podcast for the WILD research and directly explores the topic of why there are currently significantly fewer women leaders of UK INGOs.

The co-leadership model has already been replicated in Restless Development's Uganda Hub for an interim hub director role and will continue to inform future structure / role decisions.

The culture of dynamic accountability helped the organisation. Budget cuts as a result of Covid-19 forced the organisation to restructure, but it took the opportunity to enable more young leaders from Africa and Asia based Hubs to join the senior leadership team.

Plan UK

Learning from a UK-based survey

Plan UK has a long history of women CEOs and women make up 60% of senior leaders. The organisation has representation, but its survey highlighted that this doesn't automatically lead to inclusion. The survey highlighted the difference in experiences of those from BAME backgrounds and those who identify a LGBTQI.

Analysis of the feedback about enablers and barriers reinforced the importance of culture –being able to challenge the norm, autonomy, the impact of rigid hierarchy and the lack of emphasis on values in the organisation. It also highlighted the key role that support from managers and leaders play in supporting career development.

This feedback has been reinforced in the results of recent employee surveys. This research and the impact of Black Lives Matter has confirmed the need to take an intersectional approach to gender inclusion to address fundamental issues of power, privilege and bias.

Plan UK is now developing one Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan which will bring together all the DEI work rather than tackling this in silos.

"Above all this research has reinforced that the change we are seeking will only be brought about by systemic cultural change – this is not an initiative. We need action but this needs to be underpinned by dialogue and reflection to change mind sets and behaviour." – Plan UK

HelpAge International

Hearing the voices of those previously unheard

HelpAge International broadened irs research in August 2020 in response to BLM, Covid-19 and staff survey results to address wider issues of diversity, inclusion and belonging.

Their focus groups surfaced new themes: power enhanced by location (London) and relationships to senior/key people, English as a first language and long tenure; sense of belonging enhanced or reduced by team relationships; remote working has decreased a sense of belonging for some but created greater flexibility; desire for voice in decision-making; need to attract a more diverse pool of people and retain diverse talent through inclusive practice; and the need to create pathways to leadership for diverse groups.

The organisation had to make time and facilitate safe spaces, peer-led where possible, to hear all voices globally – always a challenge due to workloads. It needed to collect broader diversity data beyond age and gender.

Internal restructure as a result of budget cuts from Covid-19 resulted in the creation of a 'global' team in place of the London and regional hubs. The move to homeworking meant that vacancies were accessible to staff in any of the regional hubs.

HelpAge International has the opportunity of a new global team to work more collaboratively now that regional barriers have been removed. A new "head of transformation" role has been created to enable the organisation to embrace new ways of working, including making a way for diverse leadership.

Find out more about the focus group resources and facilitation training materials.

BRAC International (BRACI)

Patriarchal attitudes continue to exclude women from leadership opportunities

Extensive key informant interviews provided rich and diverse data on, for example, what prevents women progressing as well as enabling factors. Many of the issues raised apply to many INGOs globally. These data remind us of the massive barriers still facing so many women around the world, such as:

- While gender is emphasised in policies, implementation is variable. The resources and processes needed to turn policies into practice are limited, initiatives often sporadic. BRACI policies are not adapted and country-contextualized in all the country offices.
- Patriarchal attitudes to women result in discrimination against women in certain jobs, at senior levels. Male supremacy is prevalent across many offices, leading many staff to see men as the natural leaders.
- Men see women as less capable in many cases and/or perceive women's care responsibilities as making them less able to do senior jobs.
- Women often have less access to training for a variety of reasons: no systemic leadership plans for women and, for example, lack of mentoring, limited budgets, travel barriers, security and safety issues.
- Cultural norms and beliefs often make it hard for women to access senior positions. Some places are more restrictive than others.

Enabling factors included: flexible working in many country offices, breaks for lactating mothers, and transport for women in some offices. Examples also emerged of finding extra funding for supporting women through mentoring and skills building, ways of building women's confidence and new recruitment processes to encourage women into leadership.

There is a commitment now to have a clear gender indicator with a supporting budget.

For more, read BRACI's executive summary.

ActionAid UK

Addressing racism requires major rethinking about how INGOs work

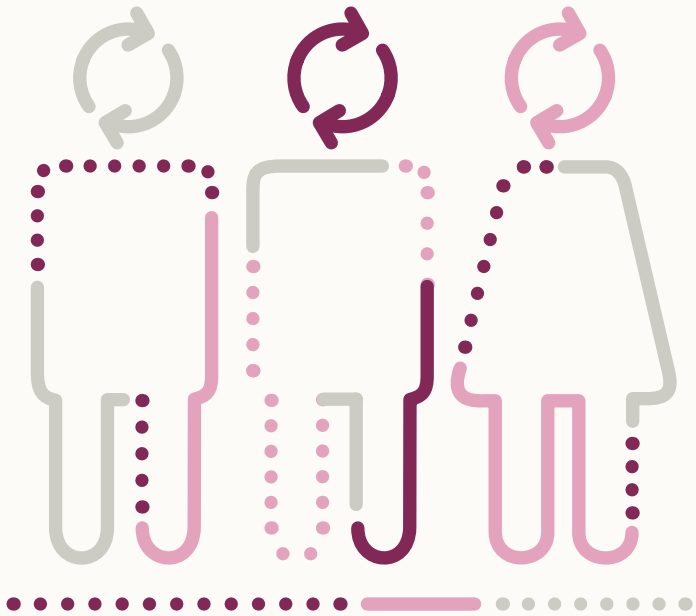
ActionAid UK recognised from the start of WILD that they had an issue in the organisation around the numbers of senior women of colour, openly LGBTQ+, or those with disabilities within the senior levels of the organisation. They were focused on women's leadership but wanted to go beyond gender to understand the barriers and challenges for different groups to access senior posts and to ensure they could pull together a meaningful action plan that would actually bring real change. There was a recognition that in spite of many equality policies and commitments things were not really changing in favour of those marginalised by existing processes and ways of working.

This led to a journey exploring the issues that needed to be addressed and a decision to work differently on the research needed to explore the structures and procedures that exclude women and BIPOC, especially women on colour.

"It is essential to go beyond statements, policies and guidelines to find ways that will really enable different ways of relating, thinking and structuring the organisation and the work. Some people will need to stand back and allow others, working differently, to explore new ways of being and working together. Some will need to let go of their control, challenge the existing systems and look – with others- at which fundamental beliefs and approaches are promoting gender and race equalities and where power imbalances create barriers for BIPOC and women in the current system. A lot of work is needed to change the systems now in place." – Action Aid UK

Action Aid UK has contracted an organisation to undertake the race audit and race training. The audit will look at the barriers and how to overcome/ eliminate them to people of colour progressing into very senior roles.

For more detail on how ActionAid UK is addressing racism, read this in-depth interview.



Questions for NGOs

1. What does this report provoke for you?
2. What's similar and what's different to the experience of your organisation?
3. How do you and your organisation seek to understand people's experience of your organisation?
4. How do you know where there are gaps between policies and strategic intent and colleagues' experiences of everyday discrimination or lack of inclusion?
5. What is your own and your organisation's risk appetite for radical change generally, and at moments of opportunity?
6. In how you responded to the myriad of changes that 2020 brought (e.g. Covid, funding cuts, increasing awareness of racial and gender inequalities) what and who's perspectives did you privilege?
7. When you are seeking to make change, what is your own support network?

Appendix
Our approach and methodology

In early 2019, a group of female chief executives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), frustrated with the slow progress the sector was making to align its external focus on gender equality with internal culture, began to organise. So few women in the INGO sector are in key leadership roles; in 2019, 70% of INGO staff members were women, but only 30-35% were chief executive officers (CEOs) and there were very few female Chairs. Our group wanted to identify and build on the things that encourage women to become INGO chief executives and identify and unblock barriers in their own organisations.

We began by identifying dynamic women directors within our organisations. Penny Lawrence, chair of Refugee Action and Fair Share for Women Leaders and former deputy chief executive of Oxfam, offered to convene the group. Action research support came from Sarah Fraser, director of organisational development specialists Mayvin, Carolyn Norgate, principal consultant at Mayvin, and Lena Bheeroo, engagement and equity manager at Bond.

In March 2019, we organised a workshop as part of the Bond conference to explore wider interest. More than 90 people attended. We then crowdsourced our first data set and launched the idea of an action research network – Women as INGO Leaders in Development (WILD) – to identify evidence of what works to encourage more women CEOs. All levels of interest and expertise were welcome.

Bond led the design of the quantitative survey data collection, aligning with the Europe-wide monitor Fair Share campaign. Bond subsequently widened its data collection to include people of colour. Learning was also taken from the Hampton-Alexander Review, an initiative to increase the representation

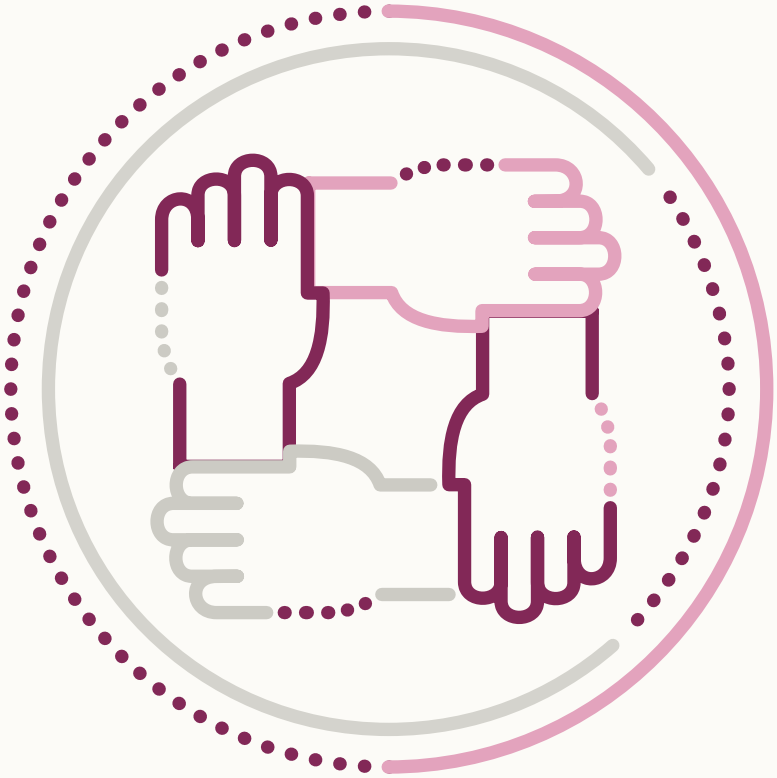
of women in senior leadership positions of FTSE 350 companies, which was shared with civil service leaders.

WILD focused on supporting qualitative action research in five core INGOs[1] through a 'pro bono' network, drawing in academics and those with expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and gender. The group worked to feminist research principles.

In November 2019 we shared our progress in an open, cross-sector workshop and at the Women in Development conference in March 2020. We also published a number of blogs on our work.

In March 2020 – Covid-19 hit. This slowed our action research, and our links to wider networks narrowed as learning events became difficult to hold. The eruption of the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign then widened many of our core groups' remits (see our changing context section below).

In April 2021, two years after WILD began, this summary report shares our learnings and insights so far. The latest Fair Share monitor and Bond data indicate some progress. But still fewer than half of the CEOs in the international development sector are women, and there are even fewer female Chairs .



1 Restless Development, Plan UK, HelpAge International, BRAC International and ActionAid UK.

Appendix
Our approach

Action research differs from traditional research methodologies in that it is undertaken by those who are affected by the issue being examined. It aims to create knowledge and awareness throughout the research cycle, rather than seeking an objective, singular finding. It seeks to create change at an individual and collective scale, rather than producing an abstracted, generalisable concept of change.

Action research is:

Practical: it is intended to produce 'actionable knowledge'[2]

Participative: it is conducted as research with people not on people

Progressive: it tries to make things better in the present while contributing to a more just, equitable and sustainable future.

Why we chose action research

It is a reflective, action-oriented approach that enabled us to test, learn and adapt in real-time to address what was most relevant to our network of senior women leaders. This helped us to 'be the change we seek' in our sector.

It enabled us to explore more deeply the issues behind what is enabling and what is blocking more women from being CEOs.

We could integrate and adapt it to fit in with our different organisational priorities and shifting contexts.

We could learn from it on three levels: personal, organisational, and sectorial.

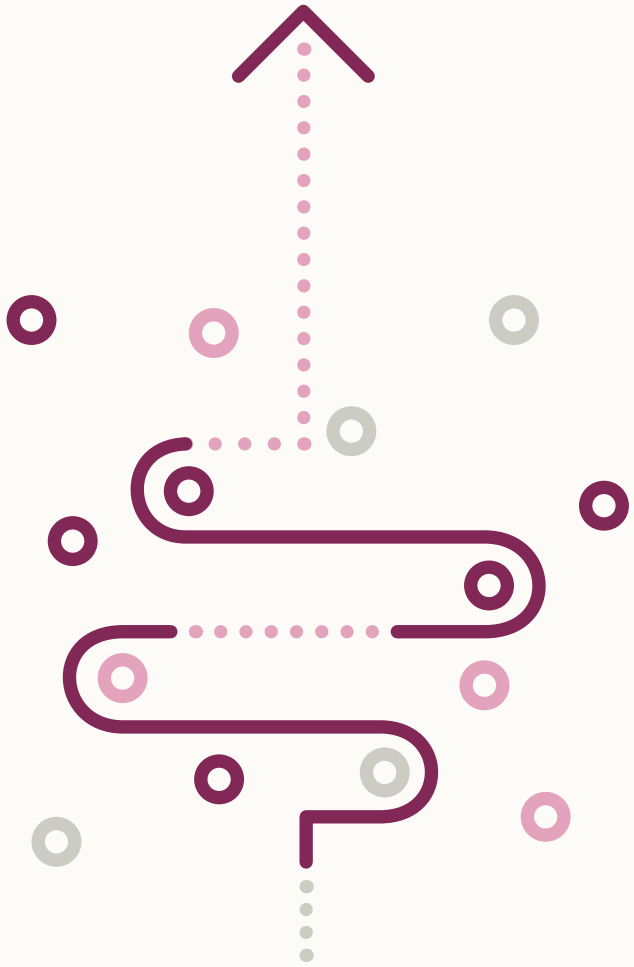
2 See David Coghlan (2011) 'Action Research: Exploring Perspectives on a Philosophy of Practical Knowing', Academy of Management Annals, 5 (1), doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2011.571520.

Appendix
Our changing context

Building on decades of struggle and learning on gender within the sector, this action research has been undertaken during a turbulent two years.

In summary:

- We started focussing on women leaders but realised that change would require deeper organisation shifts, e.g. addressing power imbalances and feminist leadership.
- Covid hit us and our organisations hard from early 2020 onwards. But it has also allowed innovation.
- BLM, and related debates on decolonising aid, broadened our action research on inclusion and intersectionality.
- Significant cuts to aid budgets and shifts in priorities, including DFID folding into the FCDO, challenged and offered opportunities for change.



Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We connect and champion a diverse network of over 400 civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice.

Visit our website for the latest news and views from the sector, useful resources, funding opportunities, jobs and training.

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