



PAPER 14

Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Settings in Central America¹

1 Introduction

During the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit last year, the global humanitarian community was abuzz around Local Humanitarian Leadership (LHL). Concrete commitments were made and reflected in the Grand Bargain² as well as in the Charter for Change³, proposing initial steps at the global level for a shift in power, knowledge and resources towards local humanitarian actors. There has never been a more appropriate time to look at women's leadership in the humanitarian sector, particularly at the local level, as women's leadership is also about transforming power structures and systems.

The LHL agenda signifies that international agencies are seeking to change their relationship with local actors, from project implementers or contractors, to a more balanced and participatory partnership. This also means that there is a huge emphasis on opening up spaces to local actors, capacity building and leadership development. International agencies and local actors should be thinking about what this will mean for women's leadership in the humanitarian sector. "Women's participation in decision-making is not only a fundamental human right but there is a strong empirical evidence base that women's leadership contributes to better emergency preparedness and risk reduction; more efficient and effective humanitarian response; and inclusive and sustainable peace building and conflict resolution in communities"⁴. If we are seeking to strengthen LHL we cannot do so without recognizing the crucial contribution of women leaders in humanitarian work and asking ourselves what enhancing humanitarian leadership skills means for women leaders at all levels from community leaders to Local Non-Governmental Organizations (LNGOs), all the way to national authorities? What are the shared challenges that are particularly relevant to women practitioners who drive Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and emergency preparedness and response activities and what types of capacity strengthening activities that form part of traditional leadership trainings are most useful to them?

Imagine you are a humanitarian leader from Nicaragua with decades of experience in the humanitarian sector and you have authority to conduct field assessments, but the male dominated military who is supervising the affected area, tells you that you need permission from your male manager. In the middle of an emergency, you have to obtain an affidavit from a lawyer stating your authority to access the area, but then the military tells you that because you are a woman, you may get harassed in the community and you will be too weak to defend yourself, so you need a military escort. In this case, the response team lost 3 days in fulfilling the requirements, time during which the affected families did not receive assistance. How would you feel about getting the job done when you are perceived as weak and your authority and competency are being challenged? As told to Oxfam by a woman leader from Nicaragua – This is one of the many experiences we heard from Central America.

Oxfam developed a humanitarian leadership program that was delivered twice in Central America: in 2015 with the Centro de Coordinación para la Prevención de Desastres Naturales en Centroamérica (CEPREDENAC – the regional intergovernmental agency on DRR) and in 2016 with the Concertación Regional De Gestión de Riesgos (CRGR – the regional network of NGOs on DRR)⁵. From the 2016 training, we interviewed nine women leaders from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, from civil society organizations members of the CRGR, feminists, academics, and humanitarian managers who have successfully led emergency response teams. Through interviews with these nine highly experienced leaders, we identified the daily challenges they face in the course of their work, and how humanitarian trainings could better cater to their leadership development needs. By highlighting the perspectives of these few women leaders in Central America, we wish to develop guidance on how women’s leadership can be made more visible in humanitarian workshops and training materials, and how to make the challenges women leaders face in the humanitarian sector better understood. Despite the small number of interviews and the qualitative nature of this report, the findings may also offer insights for learning in other areas of the globe, such as Asia.

2 Body

2.1 Challenges Faced by Women in Leadership in Humanitarian Settings in Central America

In the Central America context, we interviewed women who have been leading in the humanitarian arena for decades. Some of these women are strong figures in their communities who have been involved in leading human rights protection groups in the turmoil of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, often risking their lives and dedicating themselves to their communities’ rights and needs, paving their own way to successful careers in social change. They are experts in their areas of practice, be it Water Sanitation and Hygiene, food security, DRR, preparedness, disaster management or civil protection, have extensive knowledge of humanitarian standards and operational structures, and are committed to building the resilience of their communities. It should be made clear that on top of their important and challenging work, these women leaders have had to also battle unequal gender norms that consistently undercut their valuable knowledge and expertise, and diminish the perception of their leadership.

a. Patriarchal Culture

Across Central America, there is a strong machismo and patriarchal culture which is characterized by high levels of violence against women. The back and forth from dictatorship to civil war in the last thirty years of the twentieth century and the on-going violence today related to drug trafficking and gangs have contributed to the creation of a society where violence is commonplace. Sebastian Molano, Oxfam’s Advisor on Gender in Programs, himself a native of Colombia and familiar with the dynamics in Latin America, says that “Due to the societal and cultural challenges that these countries [in Central America] have experienced, masculinity and manhood are expressed directly in the ability that men have to control decision-making scenarios, leadership roles, and financial resources. This situation acquires a different dimension when taking into consideration the high levels of violence that are accepted and experienced, from limited mobility for women outside the household to feminicides. However, this does not mean that Central American culture is more susceptible to use violence, but it indicates that the use of violence has been normalized and is openly used as a valid mean”. As an example, in 2013, the National Information System of Violence against Women in Guatemala (Sistema Nacional de Información de Violencia Contra las Mujeres - SNIVCM in Spanish)⁶ registered that 3 out of 5 women in Guatemala had experienced violence. The violence also extends to those who are defending the rights of women. We heard from several women that across the board, feminism is considered a bad word. In fact, feminists are faced with extremely high levels of violence, leading researcher Julia Zulver to coin the term high-risk feminism to qualify the context in which women’s rights defenders operate in El Salvador for example⁷.

The machismo culture and expressions of masculinity as described by Molano above permeate the work environment, both within the private sector and government agencies, and while the work environment seemed a bit more progressive within Local or National Non-Governmental Organizations (LNNGOs) and Community

Based Organizations (CBOs), women found some of these challenges to hold true there as well, even within the humanitarian sector and civil protection.

Women are perceived as too weak to handle the roughness of the humanitarian work, needing the help of men. One woman leader from Nicaragua conveyed to us that had been told by the military that in order for her to be authorized access to a particular community to conduct a humanitarian assessment she would need military escort because she was a woman and would be too weak to defend herself against the harassment she may face in that community. The perception that the place of women should be at home extends to their work in humanitarian emergencies where they are often assigned activities that compare to their traditional roles such as kitchen or shelter management. They also tend to be referred to more secretarial jobs and only a few have access to decision making roles. Women are not considered as having good analytical and decision making skills, as they are believed to think with the heart. Even in professional humanitarian settings in Central America, we heard that women are objectivized and it is common for men to demonstrate inappropriate and lewd behavior, as well as to make derogatory comments. One woman from Guatemala reported that “women are seen as sexual objects, men make comments with double meaning, derogatory comments, and they look at you searching for an opportunity for something else”. This is particularly harmful in the course of humanitarian interventions where humanitarian workers should have been educated on the higher risk of sexual based violence that women face during crises.

Such a social and institutional culture deeply affects women’s working relationships with men as well as other women. We heard that many women have internalized the machismo mentality themselves and will adopt some of the attitudes men have towards women. Some of the women interviewed reported how tension grows between women with more traditional views who have often embraced the machismo culture and do not question the status quo and those who are more progressive, trying to change things and disrupt social norms. Molano explains “In some spaces, women have adopted behaviors and attitudes that are primarily embodied by men as a strategy to gain access to decision- making scenarios or leadership positions. In many cases, these behaviors replicate sexist practices that are part of the prevalent machismo culture, mainly displayed by men but also identified in women. This a clear sample of how cultural norms shape the way in which leadership is exercised.”

“Women are seen as sexual objects, men make comments with double meaning, derogatory comments, and they look at you searching for an opportunity for something else” – As told to Oxfam by a woman leader from Guatemala

b. The use of Power

When it comes to gender issues and women’s leadership in particular, we noted through our interviews that power dynamics come to play a big role in the way men and women interact. The group of women from Central America reported that women are constantly held to higher competency standards than men and constantly have to prove themselves to their families, their colleagues, their peers and their communities. They need to show evidence of their competence, skills, experience, and knowledge of technical areas and prove that they can lead effectively. Women are not easily accepted as decision makers and their authority might be undermined even when they are in formal decision making roles.

This is true for men but also for some women who do not challenge the patriarchal culture; they often decide not to listen or implement the decisions of women leaders.

The cultural context that women humanitarian leaders in Central America find themselves in is imbued by unequal gender norms that have a serious impact on the ability of these leaders to conduct humanitarian operations. These barriers born of gender inequality have life-or-death consequences for the affected populations where decisions and actions need to be completed swiftly. According to one interviewee from Nicaragua, contrived bureaucratic barriers blocked her for 3 full days from obtaining access for her team to a

community in need. The authorities told her she needed permission from her manager, a man, to obtain access to the affected area, and preferably an affidavit from a lawyer stating her authority to access the area and that because she is a woman she would need military escort as she may get harassed in the community and will not be able to defend herself. This experience underscores how patriarchal notions of leadership, ability and power can put people's lives at risk, on the gendered assumption that as a woman one is unable to effectively lead.

Some women who were interviewed reported that male managers don't like to include women in trainings or that once they are able to access the trainings male participants make them feel unwanted or inadequate. One woman from Guatemala said "we were told by the facilitator that we were going to slow down the training, because we were women". It is this toxic environment that isolates and prevents women humanitarian leaders from building on their knowledge and gaining important skills that would help them better protect communities in their charge.

Interestingly, some of the women interviewed said that they find it even more challenging to lead teams that are mostly composed of other women. They reported that women sometimes play power games and politics among themselves, undermining each other, leading to rivalry between women and lack of trust. This was believed to be a symptom of the internalized patriarchal and machismo culture mentioned above.

Some of our interviewees told us that there are gender equality laws but they are not consistently implemented. This was deemed to be a translation of the power attributed to men in decision making roles who can decide not to implement the laws. And there are no consequences to this lack of implementation due to the imbalanced power relations. But if women try to challenge the status quo, some reported that awareness raising efforts and efforts to change institutions could back fire and lead to attacks against women on behalf of public authorities.

This is why tackling the notions of power and who holds power is important when looking at women's leadership, and particularly within the humanitarian sector which is heavily led by men at the global level. Ayla Black writes "In the humanitarian sector women still have limited access to positions of leadership. The humanitarian workforce worldwide consists largely of women, up to 75 per cent in fact, but as of February 2017, only 8 of the 30 UN Humanitarian Coordinators worldwide are women (just 26.5 per cent)."⁸ Working with men directly is important in order to tackle the power structures and break down the patriarchal culture.

"Our team members need to understand that if women are in leadership roles it is because they have the experience" – As told to Oxfam by a woman leader from Nicaragua

2.2 Characteristics of Women's Leadership in Central America

The trainings that were led in Central America set forth 5 key competencies for leadership that were based on the Inter-Agency Standing committee (IASC) Emergency Team Leadership Program (ETPL), "CODED":

- **Communication**, negotiation and persuasion
- **Organization**, structure and management of the team
- **Direction setting**, analysis, prioritization, performance and results
- **Emotional intelligence**, trust building and team work environment
- **Decision-making**, judgement and leadership style

The women leaders we spoke to were highly skilled in all leadership competencies. Yet the challenges with being a leader in the humanitarian system has another level of difficulty for women, where notions of machismo espoused by men and some women in this space create unnecessary obstacles for women leaders to do their work and deepen their leadership skills. In fact, women humanitarian leaders have cleverly and strategically adapted aspects of these competencies to navigate this gendered terrain. To be a leader and a woman in this cultural context, according to the leaders we spoke with, required emphasizing aspects of leadership

competencies, particularly revolving around building trust and strong relationships, that allow them to confront prejudice, social pressure, stigmatization in the work place, and lack of trust and also allow them to lay the grounds for gender transformative change.

a. Building Trust and Strong Relationships

Building strong relationships and cohesive teams is key to effective leadership and will facilitate the implementation of the 5 competencies. And for more practical purposes, strong teams will allow for more coordinated and effective crisis response. Furthermore, for our interviewees in Central America, it was recognized as a core competency to overcoming some of the gender biases they are faced with in their daily work. And while it might be a challenging task even in the most collegial working environments, for women in Central America, it presents further challenges requiring tremendous patience and a long term commitment to forging relationships.

Over time and with more trust men and women who may also be resistant to women leaders tend to accept to work with women leaders and to implement their decisions. Women in leadership positions are expert trust builders, taking extra care with their relationships and working at them slowly. They are always conscious about how others perceive their leadership behaviors and styles. This is especially true where women leaders have had to work with sexist colleagues or employees. Some women said that in cases like these they tended to prioritize working in close proximity with the problematic person, building a common understanding together and over time, gaining trust.

With male colleagues, building a healthy working relationship and building trust would sometimes have to start by “a hold your ground approach”. This might sound contradictory to effective leadership but in such a patriarchal culture, it would seem logical that women would need to show their force of character and strength in order to be taken seriously. Some women reported that after being firm and confronting the men who posed them problems, they were then able to gain their respect and start building a relationship with them.

“One of my team members had previously had problems with another woman leader so when he started undermining me and my authority, I decided to give him a very detailed work plan that we could work on together regularly so as to develop the relationship and gain his trust” – As told to Oxfam by a woman leader from Nicaragua

b. Core strengths of women to navigate the gendered terrain

The women we interviewed in Central America highlighted that in this machismo environment, they actually found that they were able (and had) to become quite skillful in several leadership responsibilities. Because they had to deal with greater hassles due to misperceptions about their gender, women held themselves to a higher standard. Some of the women interviewed felt that this has allowed women to develop great skill in being able to show the business purpose for their decisions and actions to their colleagues and peers.

It was felt that due to traditional perceptions of women’s roles as caretakers and their own need to juggle their work and home responsibilities (which men often do not), women leaders were regarded as more empathetic and flexible, and managing their multiple responsibilities better than men. They also tend to prioritize more practical and basic needs than men would in responding to humanitarian needs. One woman from Guatemala explained that in a livelihoods response, women tended to focus immediately on food needs while men tended to prioritize activities that would generate profit such as cash for work activities for example. It should also be noted that cash for work activities are targeted to men, while women’s contribution (like providing food after a disaster) goes without financial compensation.

One interviewee from Nicaragua said that because women have had to develop excellent relationship building skills in this machismo environment, they have had to become better at establishing harmonious teams and will work harder for things to go smoothly.

2.3 How can humanitarian leadership trainings contribute more to the emergence and acceptance of effective women leaders?

Interviewing women leaders in Central America taught us that we need to rethink the way we strengthen leadership skills if we are to support the emergence and acceptance of strong local women leaders in the humanitarian sector, particularly at the national and local levels. A comprehensive approach that clearly links gender and leadership and that involves both women and men is needed. As in all humanitarian work, gender needs to be mainstreamed and included in all capacity building initiatives and leaders within the humanitarian sector need to highlight its transformative capacity and understand the value of promoting women's leadership. It is also clear from these interviews that effective and timely humanitarian response can be impeded by sexist notions of gender. In order to avoid these obstructions, it is vital that people, particularly men, involved in the humanitarian system are better educated on gender sensitivity so that women leaders are able to proceed with their important and much needed work.

We found that overall, while the women we interviewed had extensive leadership experience, they expressed the need for additional training in communication, negotiation and influencing; emotional intelligence scored second in their preferences for reinforcement. Feedback from the humanitarian leadership workshops highlighted the usefulness of tools and frameworks, and demanded more real life case scenarios to learn from other women leaders. One interesting piece of feedback was the suggestion to build a coaching plan for accompaniment of their work where they could work with a coach on real- life scenarios.

In Oxfam's work in Central America, we believe that by working with LNNGOs, CBOs or with a country's Disaster Management Agencies (DMAs), we are building on their capacities, contributing to a more effective humanitarian architecture - and strengthening leadership, particularly women's leadership, can be addressed simultaneously. Additionally, working on Local Humanitarian Leadership offers an opportunity to shift who is participating in decision making and to open up spaces to local actors so they can lead humanitarian response and preparedness in their country. This open prospects for women leaders from local humanitarian spaces to take the forefront on leading response and preparedness.

A lot of what is needed is working with men, breaking down the patriarchal culture, bridging dialogue between men and women, sensitizing both men and women about gender equality and the potential of leveraging all strengths in a team. We noted that where women sometimes internalized the machismo and patriarchal culture, and where men did not support change, this was due to a lack of awareness of gender issues and dynamics. We also noted that women felt that things would only change through a long term effort to educate both men and women. This means that as International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) or as academic institutions who act as conveners and facilitators of leadership and other capacity building trainings, we must do more to raise awareness by mainstreaming gender as mentioned above, by creating sessions that allow participants to work through their gender biases, or by offering separate workshops that will allow participants to build awareness of gender issues and dynamics. This also means that long term investments are needed to catalyze behavior change in gender dynamics; investments on behalf of any actor with credibility on the subject at country level be it a member of the international community or a local actor.

We also heard that participation in trainings could be challenging for women. They are either told that they might slow down the pace or they are simply not invited to the training. As organizers, we have a role to play in ensuring that trainings are always gender balanced with equal participation of both men and women, by working to overcome barriers that women face that impact their participation.

"We were told by the facilitator that we were going to slow down the training, because we were women." – Guatemala

"I was in a management role and I was not invited to take trainings that men were assigned to" – As told to Oxfam by a woman leaders from El Salvador

3 Summary and Conclusion

The Local Humanitarian Leadership agenda offers a lot of opportunity for transforming power dynamics particularly at national and local levels. We should learn from women humanitarian leaders who have to adapt to unequal power dynamics every day. If we are looking to strengthen local humanitarian leaders, we cannot do so without acknowledging the transformative capacity of women and including a huge portion of the actors who lead humanitarian action at country and local levels be it individual women leaders or women's organizations. By ignoring them, we are perpetuating inequality in the system, and we are missing the opportunity to learn how to influence a system in which traditional power relations are the norm.

As many humanitarians from the "North" have put it, we should not be seeking to create mirror images of ourselves in the "South"; an effort should always be made to avoid the mistakes we have made in our "Northern" work environments which have led to some of the current movements for equal pay for example. "Northern" companies are now fighting hard to combat age old sexism in the workplace and gender stereotypes and to create more opportunities for women's leadership. Our colleagues of the South who are positioning themselves increasingly as leaders of their humanitarian response and preparedness work can avoid this by being proactive.

This will be a long-term process of change on multiple levels, and we should invest over a long term in order to work to achieve greater acceptance of women humanitarian leaders. It will require us to listen to both men and women leaders who are experts in their own contexts, and to adapt our capacity building and advocacy efforts around this agenda in order to meet women's gender-specific needs. And it is about engaging with the personal. In order to get gender mainstreamed through humanitarian response and preparedness we need to get the actors responsible talking about their personal conceptions of gender. This goes beyond the technical and goes into the heart of gender relations, which can be messy, but important.

Finally, humanitarian leadership is not only about leading effective emergency response teams; women leaders are teaching us about the transformative power of leadership. The women we interviewed are exhibiting skills honed by navigating in an unfriendly environment to women leaders, which will lead to the eventual transformation of gender norms. It is an approach that includes self-awareness, consciousness about the use of power, and the need to influence others, building alliances between women and men to change traditional ways of organizing and delivering humanitarian actions. The approach women take to transform gender relations and power dynamics in their own contexts is the type of approach we need when considering how to change overall power dynamics in the humanitarian system, and women should be accepted as leaders in both of these arenas.

Efforts to change the present humanitarian architecture, and increase the effectiveness of the humanitarian industry should be accomplished simultaneously with increasing women's leadership in the humanitarian sector.

References

¹ Paper presented at the Asia Pacific Humanitarian Leadership Conference, April 26-28, 2017

² Grand Bargain: <http://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861> "The Grand Bargain is an agreement between more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers, which aims to get more means into the hands of people in need. [...] The Grand Bargain commits donors and aid organizations to providing 25 per cent of global humanitarian funding to local and national responders by 2020, along with more un-earmarked money, and increased multi-year funding to ensure greater predictability and continuity in humanitarian response, among other commitments."

³ Charter for Change: <https://charter4change.org/> "An initiative, led by both National and International NGOs, to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response."

⁴ ActionAid, On the frontline: catalysing women's leadership in humanitarian action (PDF) http://www.actionaid.org/sites/files/actionaid/on_the_frontline_catalysing_womens_leadership_in_humanitarian_action.pdf

⁵ 12 women and 14 men were trained to deliver the humanitarian leadership workshop to their local organization's members.

⁶ Sistema Nacional de Información de Violencia Contra las Mujeres (SNIVCM). This system is composed by thirteen public institutions; it registers complaints made by men and women. This is the result of the implementation of the Decree 22-2008 against feminicides and violence against women.

⁷ Julia Zulver, High-risk feminism in El Salvador: women's mobilisation in violent times, Oxfam Policy and Practice, 2016, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/high-risk-feminism-in-el-salvador-womens-mobilisation-in-violent-times-617005>

⁸ Ayla Black, the gendered Leadership Gap and the Humanitarian Sector, March 28, 2017: <http://devpolicy.org/gendered-leadership-gap-humanitarian-sector-20160328/>

Annex 1:

“CODED” competencies for emergency team leadership

The following five core competencies are associated with effective emergency team leadership. They are based on findings noted in the IASC ETLP assessment, results of interviews with experienced humanitarian response personnel, input received from ETLP participants and common themes found in the leadership literature. These traits and qualities are in addition to the need for an emergency team leader to have previous experience in emergency operations, knowledge of their agencies policies and procedures, political insight, cultural sensitivity and familiarity with the other actors on the ground.

Communication, negotiation, persuasion: The team leader...

- Communicates purpose, objectives, desired outcomes and expectations effectively.
- Negotiates effectively within the team and with external stakeholders.
- Shows her/his commitment to a certain course of action and is able to convince others accordingly.
- Responds appropriately (and effectively) to conflict; facilitates constructive dialogue.
- Draws ideas out from team members and links them to larger plans or initiatives.

Organization, structure, management of the team: The team leader...

- Provides appropriate level of organisation, planning and role clarification to team members without getting lost in the details.
- Is flexible and able to adapt to the changing environment.
- Fosters a work climate for open communication, constructive feedback and peer learning (e.g., does this by setting the example) that contributes to team learning/adaptation.
- Integrates individual expertise and team member capacities into an overall response.
- Is fair and projects fairness in her/his dealings with different team members.

Direction setting, analysis, prioritizing, performance, results: The team leader...

- Provides appropriate vision, direction and structure for the team's efforts.
- Accurately analyses emergency environment and team capacities and translates this analysis into an operational and team strategy.

- Is able to keep the team focused on achieving “common purpose”, vision or goal.
- Under her/his leadership, moves the project forward and the team achieves expected positive results.

Emotional intelligence, builds trust and team work climate: The team leader...

- Maintains appropriate level of optimism in spite of difficult challenges or set-backs.
- Is competent and remains calm in stress inducing and/or ambiguous situations.
- Has “Presence”: is present to the moment and authentic in their expression.
- Has “Strength of Character”, integrity, courage.
- Trusts her/his team members and team members trust her/him.
- Is sensitive to the different needs and abilities of different team members.
- Expresses appropriate level of gratitude and gives credit where credit is due.
- Builds relationships; interacts well and comfortably with other team members.
- Has a sense of humour.

Decision-making, judgment and leadership style: The team leader...

- Seeks input when appropriate and yet is able to make decisions quickly and unilaterally, when necessary.
- Handles the decision-making process in a fair, transparent and effective way.
- Takes responsibility for decision-making and is accountable for his/her decisions.
- Creates an environment where team members feel committed to the decisions taken.
- Effectively adjusts his/her leadership style to fit the leadership needs of the situation.

Acknowledgements

Lara Seigneur is Humanitarian Strategy Advisor with Oxfam. Jose Chacon is Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction Manager with Oxfam.

The authors would like to thank Tara Gingerich, Senior Humanitarian Researcher, Namalie Jayasinghe, Gender and Women’s Rights Researcher and Sebastian Molano, Advisor on Gender in Programs, all with Oxfam, for their expert advice and contributions on the paper.

They would also like to thank the following reviewers who offered helpful feedback that improved the draft final report: Nahuel Arenas, Director of Humanitarian Programs and Policy, Michelle Strucke, Local Humanitarian Leadership Manager and Mercedes Garcia, El Salvador Humanitarian Coordinator, all with Oxfam, as well as Yvette Etienne, Haiti Country Director with Action Aid.