

# **BREAKING THE GLASS PYRAMID: TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP AND INCREASING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN CIVIL SOCIETY**

–JOANNA MAYCOCK, SECRETARY GENERAL,  
EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY

## **PUTTING WOMEN AT THE HEART OF DECISION-MAKING**

At the time of writing, the EU Heads of State Summit has just concluded in Brussels. Of the 34 participants discussing the critical issues of the day, from 'Brexit' to migration and from austerity to security, just four were women. Over the past 18 months, Brussels has seen a never ending succession of summits, where ashen-faced, middle aged white men in grey suits negotiate through the night, consistently failing to tackle the deep systemic challenges the world is facing.

This raises some serious questions about the state of leadership and democracy. It is also a reflection of the way in which citizens feel increasingly alienated from traditional decision-making institutions. In Europe, the statistics on women in power are dismal: just 27 per cent of members of national parliaments are women; more than 80 per cent of government ministers are men; and more than 80 per cent of seats on corporate boards are held by men. If we look at the judiciary, police, the media and universities the picture is similarly alarming.

At the European Women's Lobby, we unite women's organisations from across Europe fighting for a feminist Europe in which gender equality is a prerequisite to achieving the well-being of all people and the planet.<sup>1</sup> As part of our campaigning platform, we call for women to be at the heart of decision-making in politics, government, business, institutions, and in civil society.<sup>2</sup> This is not just about having more women operating within a system, but also about transforming the nature of the systems of decision-making to ensure they are more inclusive, diverse and effective. Nor is this about promoting women at the expense of 'better qualified' men, but about reconsidering what leadership skills and attributes, and what institutions and structures, are needed for transformative leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is also about promoting a diverse and intersectional leadership that tackles privilege based on sex, age, race, ability and sexual orientation and identity.

<sup>1</sup> 'Mission, vision and values', European Women's Lobby, 14 July 2015, <http://bit.ly/1R5LNIs>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Women in decision-making', European Women's Lobby, <http://bit.ly/1rROVF7>.

# IT IS EASY FOR US TO CRITICISE EVERYBODY ELSE, BUT IS THE PICTURE ANY BETTER WHEN WE LOOK TO CIVIL SOCIETY?

When CIVICUS published a special edition of its newsletter exploring the role and space for women in civil society, 'Breaking the Glass Pyramid', on International Women's Day in March 2013, I read it with interest and was saddened but not surprised by the message.<sup>3</sup> The articles and testimony described the failure of our own sphere, civil society, to address gender inequality in our leadership. They went on to demonstrate how that translated directly into our failure to integrate the transformative power of women's rights into our work. The articles told a story of an organised civil society in which as many as 75 per cent of all the staff are women, but women make up less than 30 per cent of the leaders of the largest civil society organisations (CSOs).

As a senior manager at ActionAid International at the time, I had seen the efforts that my organisation had invested in trying to increase the recruitment, retention and advancement of women at all levels. This was an essential part of a wider commitment to improve the representation, diversity and inclusiveness of leadership at all levels in the organisation. Over the period from 2007, when ActionAid's first Feminist Leadership Forum met in Johannesburg, South Africa, up to 2015, ActionAid increased the number of women Country Directors from 35 per cent to 46 per cent.

ActionAid did this through a wide range of measures, including targets, the creation of women-only spaces, leadership programmes for women and specific measures to improve work-life balance. For me, as for many women working in the organisation, ActionAid's feminist leadership development programme proved a life changing experience both personally and professionally. As well as the opportunities it gave me to challenge myself professionally, it connected me with a wide network of amazing and inspiring women throughout the ActionAid world. I also experienced over the years how these efforts directly linked to increased attention being paid to women's rights across the range of ActionAid's programmes and campaigns work. It is hard to find an ActionAid staff or board member today who does not refer to or understand women's rights as a core value and operating principle of the work.

However, these changes did not happen overnight, nor without considerable resistance. The minute the organisation relaxed its vigilance, things would slip backwards. I also saw how difficult it was to make those changes, within a deeply rooted patriarchal society that continues to discriminate and hold women back in our families, our societies and our workplaces. The relative success was only achieved through consistent pressure and leadership commitment, evidence based policy-making and monitoring. And there is always more to be done, especially in addressing hidden power and privilege in the organisation, and ensuring that the response addresses multiple and intersecting layers of inequality.

I have also seen, from my networks of women in civil society in Europe, how difficult it still is for women to flourish, even in our allegedly progressive organisations: macho cultures prevail, with long hours working making it difficult for women and

3 'Women in civil society: breaking the glass pyramid', CIVICUS, March 2013, <http://bit.ly/1qq9eGB>.

men to manage work-life balance; women face everyday sexism and sexual harassment in the work place; and unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion systems continue to make it twice as hard for women than men to advance into leadership positions. We continue to see that in better resourced international CSOs there are very few women in positions of power and leadership.

In May 2014, I took up my current position as Secretary-General of the European Women’s Lobby. Having understood the importance of women’s networks for mutual support and empowerment, I was surprised to discover that there is no global network for women leaders in civil society. Therefore, at the 2014 CIVICUS World Assembly in Johannesburg I co-convened a conversation with participants from all continents coming together to explore the negative impact of this lack of women’s leadership and to begin sketching out some strategies to turn this around.

## WHAT IS THE CASE FOR CHANGE IN CSOS?

*It is essential for us to walk the talk in terms of the rhetoric about power, rights, gender and social and environmental transformation.*

The case for improving the gender balance and diversity of our civil society decision-making spaces is clear. At a time when civil society space is closing down everywhere, and our legitimacy as civil society is challenged on all fronts, it is essential for us to walk the talk in terms of the rhetoric about power, rights, gender and social and environmental transformation.

The lack of women able to develop their leadership roles has a negative impact on the whole of civil society, as we are missing the full potential of the diverse skills, experiences and talent available. As a sector, we are therefore failing to bring new perspectives about the type of transformational leadership needed to tackle complex and rapidly changing contexts for civil society. A significant knock-on effect of this is that we fail to integrate the transformative values of a women’s rights perspective into our work.

“My success is your success; your success is my success,” is how CIVICUS Chair Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda described her vision for feminist leadership. She also pointed out the need to build and strengthen the pipeline of women in leadership, creating space and opportunity for a new generation of leaders. We must be intentional about conscious actions to develop new and diverse leaders for civil society.

Ama Marston’s 2013 article, ‘Women in leadership: ‘It’s not going to work the way we’re doing it’, explores how women leaders of development CSOs feel about the lack of gender equality at the top.<sup>4</sup> She also points out the significant issues “...faced by local women working in Africa where colleagues are undermined because of their sex but also their race. In some instances, they have been treated as less competent and have been micro-managed by international and local colleagues as a result.” When I talked to Ama recently, she explained that she is currently working on a new book on the importance of resilience for women leaders: “Resilient women’s leadership is essential for the health of our sector, as it extends the opportunities for space, voice, renewal and resources.” Like me, Ama was surprised that the private sector seems to have much better grasped the case for supporting more gender diversity in leadership, even if they face many of the same, if not more, challenges in realising the change they claim to want.

4 “Women in leadership: ‘It’s not going to work the way we’re doing it’”, The Guardian, 1 August 2013, <http://bit.ly/1gChJSy>.

If we truly wish to innovate and disrupt society for the better, we must be prepared to disrupt the power within our own organisations. We need to ensure that we align the mandate and principles of civil society with its practice. We rightly talk a lot about shifting power dynamics, and this approach to changing leadership has the real potential to invert power structures and rethink power and participation within our organisations. As feminists we seek to disrupt the notion of power as being finite - i.e. either yours or mine - to see power instead as an endless resource that can be shared by focusing on building the 'power within' (self-awareness); the 'power with' (ability to build dialogue and effective coalitions); and the 'power to' build new ways of doing things.<sup>5</sup> Social movements need to learn from women's experience, including to open up power and voice to the stakeholders and communities we work with as civil society, ensuring that a full range of voices is included.

The power dynamics between women and men need to be discussed as one of the core systems endangering our future; patriarchy and male domination should be identified, named and addressed in our work towards system change, in our values, missions and activities, and within our own movements.

Getting serious about transformational and systemic change means recognising and valuing women's central and existing role in transformative changes in their homes, their workplaces and societies. Our failure to address inequalities in our CSO leadership effectively has translated directly into our failure to integrate the transformative power of women's rights into our work. Whether we are talking about climate change, tax justice, trade or the redistribution of natural resources, all have gendered dimensions that need to be understood, integrated and addressed.

From the humanitarian sector, Ylva Stromberg, Head of international Disaster Management of the Swedish Red Cross described to me how important feminist leadership is in delivering better more sustainable results in their humanitarian work: "Feminist leadership is about inclusion and making sure you listen to what people need, not what you are capable of giving. If we exercise feminist leadership in humanitarian response it will become more qualitative. In an emergency it is more important to make sure you have done a thorough inclusive assessment of the situation and people's capacity before you start to act."

Women have been at the forefront of every social movement, and yet women's roles have been systematically written out of history, from the campaigns for the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movements, and from anti-nuclear campaigns to the trade union movement. Rucha Chitnis' recent article highlighted stories of 'How Women-Led Movements Are Redefining Power, From California to Nepal': "In the face of corporate domination, economic injustice, and climate change, movements led by women offer a revolutionary path. They have redefined leadership and development models, connected the dots between issues and oppression, prioritized collective power and movement-building, and critically examined how issues of gender, race, caste, class, sexuality, and ability disproportionately exclude and marginalize."<sup>6</sup>

5 'MCH3 power: concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace', JASS, 2006, <http://bit.ly/1OU6XOu>.

6 'How Women-Led Movements Are Redefining Power, From California to Nepal', Yes! Magazine, 8 March 2016, <http://bit.ly/1nvBfv7>.

## SO HOW DOES THIS LOOK IN ORGANISATIONS IN PRACTICE?

Here are just some of the ways in which this lack of diversity in leadership manifests itself in the culture and practice of CSOs, that we explored in the women's leadership meeting at the CIVICUS World Assembly in 2014:

**Impacts of patriarchy and sexism:** A system of patriarchy has existed for over 10,000 years. It is remarkable in its dominance in all societies and all parts of the world. It is an essential building block of all the world's major religions, and of all our economic systems. In comparison, capitalism is a 'Johnny-come-lately' at just 300 years old.

Deeply entrenched systems of patriarchy permeate every aspect of our personal, public and professional lives. Gender stereotypes persist in all cultures and organisations. One of the most obvious impacts is that the burden of balancing work with family, social and home life responsibilities most often falls predominantly on women. Another example is the persistence of subtle and not so subtle sexism, undermining, and inappropriate behaviour, including sexual harassment, that often goes under reported, including in CSOs.

*Women themselves often don't want to be seen as powerful and 'authoritarian', imagining this is the only way to lead.*

In 'The Beautiful Trouble Handbook', Harsha Walia describes the ways in which sexism manifests itself in our social movements:<sup>7</sup>

"Women face an uphill battle to prove their intelligence and commitment as political activists... Women discussing sexism are often characterized as 'divisive' or 'over-reactive' and women's concerns are belittled unless validated by other men. This highlights disrespect for women's voices in discussing their own oppression.

"Feminism is not seen as central to revolutionary or collective struggle; instead it is relegated to a special interest issue. This results in the trivialisation of women's issues, particularly violence against women and reproductive justice."

We have seen an overall loss of focus about women's rights as a central and very political means of bringing transformation. We need to put women's rights back at the centre of our struggles, and we have to engage the right people and resources to make this possible, rather than treating women's rights as an add-on, once we have faced down climate change or won the class struggle.

**Image of leadership:** The perception of leadership and how a leader behaves is still very masculine in definition. Women themselves often don't want to be seen as powerful and 'authoritarian', imagining this is the only way to lead. This is sadly limiting our ability to redefine a collective leadership vision.

<sup>7</sup> 'Challenge patriarchy as you organize', Beautiful Trouble, <http://bit.ly/1LpWOEg>.

**Resistance:** Sadly, women often speak to me about how difficult it is to face off against the male dominated networks within and between CSOs. Many men, and some women, in CSOs perpetuate the system and hold on to power, but it is difficult to challenge them on this as they don't acknowledge it.

## WHAT CONCRETELY CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

*Broadly speaking the emphasis needs to shift from trying to 'fix the women' so that they can succeed in defunct organisational systems towards providing more space, resources and action to change the leadership culture.*

The following are steps for action that can be taken by all of us in positions of influence within civil society. Broadly speaking the emphasis needs to shift from trying to 'fix the women' so that they can succeed in defunct organisational systems towards providing more space, resources and action to change the leadership culture.

**Check your privilege:** Create opportunities to reflect on power and privilege within your own organisation. Try to understand the often hidden power dynamics that limit and define whose voices are heard or ignored. You can explore gender and other factors such as race, sexual identity, class and ability in this reflection. Understand and tackle hidden power and privilege. An excellent handbook for political organisers on tackling 'Power and Privilege' was produced in 2015 by the New Economics Organising Network.<sup>8</sup>

**Make the issue visible:** Gather and publish data on the numbers of women in leadership positions. Explore the pay differentials between women and men to fully appreciate the scale of the challenge.

**Set targets and quotas:** Nobody loves quotas, but having targets forces organisations to measure and discuss progress. It makes intentions clear to staff and stakeholders. Any quotas or targets need to be backed up with properly resourced policies for recruitment, retention and advancement of women.

**Networking:** Building networks of women in civil society, within and between organisations, provides opportunities for women to exchange and learn from one another.

**Leadership development:** CSOs should develop properly resourced leadership development programmes for women leaders that include mentoring and sponsorship. In practical terms, one of the most effective strategies to build women's confidence and visibility is to create meaningful opportunities for younger women to take on challenging projects and support them to succeed.

I asked Joanna KERR, Executive Director of Greenpeace Canada, and CIVICUS board member, for examples of how this can make a difference: "In developing our Three Year Strategic Plan at Greenpeace, I decided to encourage two young staff who were always speaking up with great ideas, to go and build a key piece of it, our mobilization strategy, with the only parameters to be as innovative and creative as possible. What they delivered is remarkable both in terms of vision, and how to operationalize it, including how it will allow Greenpeace to be relevant to diverse constituents including indigenous groups. I have heard from peers it has been considered the best in all of Greenpeace!"

<sup>8</sup> 'Power and Privilege: A handbook for political organisers', Audrey Lorde, New Economy Organisers Network, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Xi4z6D>.

**Self-care and mutual support:** Women should take more time for themselves and wage a war on workaholism. We should delegate, let go of perfectionism, take time to eat lunch out of the office with a friend or mentor, switch off our phone and email, and take care about the impact on more junior staff when we are contacting others out of normal working hours.

**Take the pledge** to refuse to be part of male-only panels.<sup>9</sup> Ensure that women participate in international spaces. Give up your space for a woman, and boycott all panels where there is no woman speaking. Make sure that whenever you organise a conference or assembly that half of the speakers on all panels are women, and reflect a real diversity of perspectives and voices.

**Speak out:** CSOs should have zero tolerance on sexual harassment and sexism, with transparent policies that are implemented fully.

**Finally, CSO boards need to confront this issue as a political and strategic challenge:** There are still not enough women in decision-making positions on CSO boards. All too often, if CSOs tackle gender inequality and discrimination at all, it is usually reactive, when there is a problem. Even when good policies are in place, they are not implemented or properly resourced. Well-balanced, empowered boards can make all the difference in demanding information and allocating appropriate resources.

---

9 'The Pledge – I will not be part of male-only panels', <http://bit.ly/1aUYDMt>.