

## CHAPTER TWO

# Women on the Move

## *Can We Achieve Gender Equality by 2030?*

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### Introduction

When the 193 United Nations member states signed on to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, they established gender equality as both a stand-alone goal and a central tenet to achieving an inclusive and sustainable development agenda by 2030. Most policymakers would agree that aspiring to gender equality is not controversial as an *ideal*.<sup>1</sup> The prospect of actually arriving at that ideal within fifteen years, however, requires profound, coherent and concurrent change in politics, economics, and society. From this perspective, the adoption of SDG 5 was radically hopeful.

Consider the story of Salamatou, a Nigerien woman forced at age thirteen to marry a sixty-year-old man. She had four children by age twenty and could not read or write. Salamatou's life changed when she joined a savings group that provided solidarity with other women and resources to start her own business. She left her husband, educated her younger children, and helped to create more than 175 savings groups for three thousand people. Yet for every woman like Salamatou, there are many more who face lack of economic opportunity, discrimination, and violence without any support. Will the global community fulfill its commitments to ensure these women and girls are not left behind but instead can realize their own potential?

1. Gender equality is a globally accepted norm insofar as it is enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action.

A quarter of the way to 2030, the UN's assessment is that "while some forms of discrimination against women and girls are diminishing, gender inequality continues to hold women back and deprives them of basic rights and opportunities."<sup>2</sup> A recent survey of gender equality advocates shows that most of them believe progress on gender equality is stagnating, and a 2018 Brookings Institution poll revealed that only 29 percent of policymakers ranked gender equality (SDG 5) as one of the top six sustainable development goals.<sup>3</sup> The OECD cautions: "Donors are failing to implement effectively a twin-track approach and should increase support for dedicated programs with gender equality and women's empowerment as a principal objective to respond to commitments in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development."<sup>4</sup> And the World Economic Forum forecasts it will take the world 108 more years to achieve gender parity.<sup>5</sup>

Worse yet, instead of prioritizing gender equality, social and political forces in many parts of the world are actively conspiring to hold women and girls back. A 2017 research report commissioned by Mama Cash and Urgent Action Fund<sup>6</sup> concluded that efforts by the state to constrain civil space are increasing—and disproportionately affecting feminist groups. Progressive activists are not alone in registering their alarm at the prospect of rights rolled back; a group of more than thirty women leaders and former heads of state published an open letter in *The Guardian* in February 2019, warning, "As women increasingly occupy meaningful spaces in local, national, and international political structures, and in socioeconomic, scientific, and sustainable development debates, and as we engage through civil society in many campaigns, we see now, close to a quarter of a century after Beijing, more movements gaining traction that seek to halt the gains made and erode the rights won by women."<sup>7</sup>

While this view is dim, there have been some bright spots for gender equality. The #MeToo movement has shed more light on sexual violence—one of the most devastating and highly stigmatized forms of gender inequality. Several major policy changes at global and national levels are poised to create a fairer environment for women and girls. And the business case for investing in women has never been stronger, supported by global, regional, and sector-specific evidence showing the economic gains from increased female employment and more

2. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 5 (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/SDG5>).

3. Equal Measures 2030 (2018), 2, and Custer (2018).

4. OECD (2018a).

5. World Economic Forum (2017).

6. Bishop (2017).

7. Kate Lyons, "Rise of the 'Strongman': Dozens of Female World Leaders Warn Women's Rights Being Eroded," *Guardian*, February 28, 2019.

diverse workforces.<sup>8</sup> These advances counter pessimistic narratives that gender inequality is too intractable a problem to be solved, or an issue too few people care about. But why have we not made more progress—especially for the most vulnerable women and girls? And what can be done to make good on the 2030 commitment to leave no one behind?

Using examples from CARE’s own work and drawing on our experience in the development and humanitarian sectors, we argue that policymakers and implementers have tended to misinterpret the problem of gender inequality, and as a result have been applying solutions that fall short of what is needed. Bias and lack of data have inhibited our focus on those most in need, and we have not yet realized the opportunity to come together as an effective and diverse coalition for gender equality. Ultimately, what is needed is a dramatic shift in our collective sense of accountability that would enable us to bring the right stakeholders together to tackle the roots of inequality and focus on the right people. This will require transforming traditional power dynamics and amplifying the voices and the solutions of the most marginalized; it requires a feminist approach to international development.

## **Why Are We Not Solving the Root Problem?**

We are nowhere near “critical mass” in terms of the necessary political energy or investments to achieve SDG 5 or the gender dimensions of other goals by 2030. But the challenge is not only that we need *more*—more funding for evidence-based interventions, more voices engaged in innovative problem-solving, more power devolved to women’s rights organizations and women themselves. Sustainably addressing gender disparities requires adaptable solutions that are fit for the complexity of the problem. In too many places, resources are underutilized and the root causes of gender inequality are obscured as policymakers and implementers are lured by silver-bullet solutions that are not capable (on their own) of delivering transformational and sustainable change. When we allow this to happen, we get off track, solving for relevant but less systemic problems.

Development practitioners often focus on approaches to expand the agency of individual women and girls. Examples include building women’s and girls’ skills and self-confidence through trainings on literacy, entrepreneurship, negotiation, and legal rights; and resource transfers targeted to female beneficiaries, such as cash, school uniforms, or mobile phones. These kinds of interventions support profound and necessary improvements in women’s and girls’ lives. In many cases, the outcomes they deliver—healthier, better educated, or more

8. OECD (2018b), World Economic Forum (2017).

productive women and girls—can have ripple effects that affect communities and institutions. However, individual capacity improvements do not necessarily lead directly and inevitably to increases in gender equality. Moreover, there are examples of unintended consequences from such approaches. This is not to say that women in poverty should not have more assets, or that the prospect of backlash should deter efforts to empower women and girls. Rather, these examples underscore the need to promote gender equality and concurrently mitigate risk by engaging with the complexity of social ecosystems, which include changes in individuals. At CARE, we know this from our own experience.

More than ten years ago, the findings from CARE's Strategic Impact Inquiry on Gender Equality showed that across more than four hundred of the organization's programs, 60 percent of women-focused projects were targeting women's own capabilities. The study determined that these individual-level approaches generated impacts that were useful but short-term, limited in scale, and ultimately reversible. CARE identified major opportunity costs in the ways we were addressing gender inequality, stemming in part from a lack of sophistication about the very nature of that injustice:

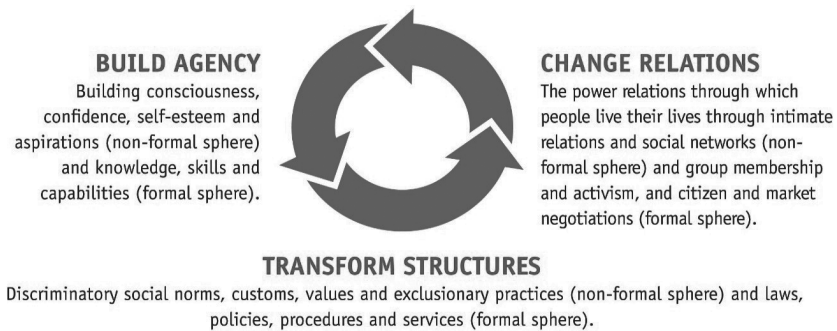
On one side, we see a clear aptitude to work at the scale of 9 million women in a single project, fostering changes in women's knowledge, income, skills, participation, decision-making in households and communities, health-seeking behaviors, and literacy. On the other, we see the failure to guide those changes to their strategic potential due to weak understanding of gender, power, and the political economic context. . . . Our research demonstrates a widespread tendency in CARE to call "empowerment" (or "gender equity") any activity which is intended to benefit women.<sup>9</sup>

These sobering findings led to a new era of gender equality programming within CARE based on the adoption of CARE's Gender Equality Framework, which recognizes that gender (in)equality is created through the interplay of individual agency, relations, and structural factors. The Gender Equality Framework is depicted in figure 2-1.

The organization also redoubled efforts to support staff capacity building and accountability systems to deliver more robust gender equality outcomes. While these have been positive developments, we are constantly pushing ourselves to deliver sufficiently transformative gender interventions, which not only take account of gendered conditions but also seek to change the very rules and

9. Mosedale (2005) and Martinez (2006).

Figure 2-1. CARE's Gender Equality Framework



Source: CARE International, 2018a.

systems that enable them to persist. It bears asking why we, and so many others, are tempted to solve a complex, systems-level problem like gender inequality with discrete, individual-level solutions. We see four overarching reasons for this tendency:

### *It Is Easy to Confuse Ends and Means*

Gender inequality is not caused by shortcomings within women and girls, though it is manifest when women and girls lack skills, opportunities, and a sense of self-efficacy as compared to their male counterparts. It is a common mistake to conflate ends with means and causes with consequences. The success of efforts to address gender inequality must be assessed through their impacts on the women and girls who overwhelmingly bear the burden of that injustice. And similarly, the pathways to gender equality must critically engage and amplify the voices of women and girls. But achieving gender equality is not possible with an *exclusive* focus on women and girls; after all, gender equality is a social ideal that necessarily involves people of all genders and changes in the institutions that govern human opportunities, rights, and behavior.<sup>10</sup> It is well understood among both feminists and mainstream development practitioners that the achievement of gender equality is dependent on structural change. In fact, this was a demand well met in the articulation of SDG 5—which, unlike the MDGs, has an explicit

10. This brief article focuses on men and boys and women and girls; however, CARE International's 2018 Gender Equality Policy recognizes that gender is non-binary.

focus on structural change, expressed in targets focused on nondiscrimination in political institutions, elimination of gendered forms of social control such as harmful traditional practices and violence against women, and addressing such barriers to employment as unpaid care. Nevertheless, the idea persists that targeting women and girls with individual-level interventions is sufficient in itself to contribute to greater gender equality. And this error has profound practical implications. Focusing on women's and girls' capabilities without addressing the relationships and systems that shape their opportunities makes them less likely to deliver sustainable results. The good news is, as box 2-1 illustrates, that with deliberate intent, many interventions that might otherwise focus only on individual skills-building or improved sectoral outcomes can contribute to gender-related social change.

### *The Political Nature of Gender Can Be Uncomfortable*

Individual-level solutions are attractive in part because they tend to be technical in nature and relatively apolitical. Addressing gender dynamics at the family, community, and institutional levels is inescapably about adjusting power relations and can be uncomfortable or untenable for policymakers, politicians, and implementers whose viability may be threatened by wading into potentially controversial social issues. One of the obvious implications of this fact is that governments, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and other actors wary of the political nature of structural change are not capable of being, and should not be, the principal enablers of gender equality, though they can be critical partners. Feminist thinkers have noted the risks of technocratic approaches that are incapable of the activism that would challenge power holders while at the same time drawing power and funding away from underfunded women's movements.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Weldon and Htun's extraordinary work analyzing data from more than seventy countries showed that it was feminist activists who were the "most important and consistent factor driving policy change" to address violence against women.<sup>12</sup> The upshot is that traditional development actors may have access to important capacities and funding, but it is women's movements that have the intention and the orientation to deliver transformative change. Until traditional development actors acknowledge the value of women's rights actors and partner with them effectively, we will continue to see interventions that are useful and even innovative, but fall short of the political ambition of realizing universal gender equality.

11. Arutyunova and Clark (2013), Cornwall (2014).

12. Weldon and Htun (2013).

### Box 2-1. The Transformative Potential of VSLAs

CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) platform reaches some of the poorest communities in the world. These are self-help groups of fifteen to twenty-five members who come together to buy shares, lend to one another, grow businesses, access insurance, and build up savings to invest in things like education, housing, agriculture, small businesses, and health services. Participation in VSLAs has been proven to increase women's savings, knowledge of basic financial principles and entrepreneurship, and contribute to household resilience to economic shocks, food security, and improved health and nutritional outcomes. With deliberate efforts to account for the interpersonal, social, and structural context of women in a particular community, VSLAs have further potential to contribute to gender equality. These "VSLA+" models include contextualized approaches to address women's workloads and the burden of care, engage men and boys in ensuring equitable intra-household relationships, reduce the risks of gender-based violence, and develop women's social capital and group political consciousness for collective action.

Source: CARE 2017 (working paper)

### *We Prefer What We Can Count*

It is easier to count workshops delivered, number of women and girls trained, and percent changes in knowledge and attitudes than it is to assess shifts in policy implementation, social norms, or domestic workloads—and the complex interplay between these phenomena. When policymakers and practitioners invest in what is easier to measure, we create false proxies for gender equality and fail to follow through on the systemic work needed for broad-based change.

Accountability should be the foundation of any development effort. But what does accountability look like in practice, and how do we establish the proof and the accompanying narrative of what is effective for gender equality, as for any development outcome? The more complex a goal the harder it can be to identify and measure the manifestations of change, and the longer we may have to wait to see impact. This is not to argue that it is impossible to evaluate progress toward gender equality or that we should not try—indeed, there are many strong examples of measures, indexes, and approaches that suggest that the state of the art in measuring gender equality is evolving. Research from the Evidence-Based Measures for Research on Gender Equality (EMERGE) project led by the University of California at San Diego and tools such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index are cases in point. Evaluators have demonstrated ways to constructively engage with the “messy complexity” that is inherently a part of

social change, but this is often methodologically difficult and resource-intensive work.<sup>13</sup>

If we are attached (as we should be) to the idea that we need to demonstrate progress, and we have limited resources (money, time, or human capacity), in many cases we are incentivized to either (1) skew our choice of measures toward false proxies that are not actually suited to assess a phenomenon as complex as gender equality, or (2) opt for simpler interventions with easily quantified outcomes that are ultimately insufficient to address gender inequality. It is easy to say that we should not fall for such perverse incentives, but in practice this happens all the time. We need to establish systems to effectively counter this tendency while we continue to develop improved practices for measuring gender outcomes, especially at the level of relations and structures.

### *The Imperative to Scale Can Be Tricky*

The ambition to “leave no one behind” requires massively scaling up the reach and impact of efforts to empower *all* women and girls. That global urgency has not consistently translated into meaningful country-level action, however, and lackluster efforts are one reason why we see insufficient progress on gender equality. Even where there is the will to demonstrate progress, governments and partners must grapple with a number of complex and sometimes conflicting imperatives raised by the mandate to scale. The challenge is summed up in this Brookings publication:

An important finding from the case studies is that the more comprehensive and multifaceted a program is in terms of the developmental problem that is being addressed and in terms of the range of interventions that are covered, the more difficult it is to systematically and effectively focus on scaling up . . .<sup>14</sup>

This is completely logical, and yet gender inequality is arguably one of the most complex and multifaceted development challenges imaginable. So, what to do? Much like our affinity for easily quantified inputs and outcomes, development actors are attracted to approaches that can be easily replicated and aggregated to affect larger numbers of people. But we’ve just argued that the simplest, individual-level, apolitical interventions are necessary but not sufficient

13. With regard to “messy complexity,” see Agnes Quisumbing, “Data Can Be Sexist. Here’s How IFPRI Is Fixing that Problem,” *IFPRI Blog*, February 20, 2019.

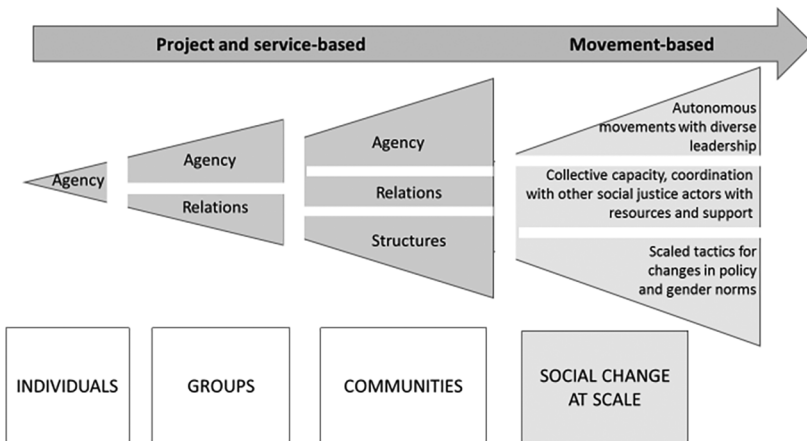
14. Begovic, Linn, and Vrbensky (2017).



to contribute to profound systemic change. So we find ourselves lodged between the rightful demand to create impact on a society-wide scale and the reality that the easiest interventions to scale may be unable to catalyze necessary structural change. To get ourselves out of this quandary, we have to move away from a project mindset that would equate scaling with larger unit numbers of the same intervention, to a paradigm that recognizes that as we aim for society-wide impact, we have to adopt altogether different approaches. In other words, societal change is not just individual or community change on a larger scale; it is a qualitatively different objective with unique requirements. The CARE framework in figure 2-2 highlights these distinctions.

From left to right, the first three building blocks at individual, group, and community levels are drawn from the CARE Gender Equality Framework and are more typical of project-level interventions (with most interventions in the development sector focused on the skills-building aspects of individual agency). The fourth domain, social change at scale, requires a shift in tactics in support of movement actors who are best placed to leverage the positive momentum and progress achieved at the other levels for widespread action and change. Even within more traditional project-based approaches, however, it is possible to embed strategies that are supportive of the political consciousness (within individuals) and solidarity (within groups) that are foundational for movement-based

Figure 2-2. CARE's Continuum of Collective Action for Gender Equality



Source: Adapted from a CARE Internal Working Paper written by Bartel, 2017.

action. Such strategies need to be carefully considered and paired with risk mitigation measures to counter potential backlash. While the arrow suggests an overall direction from left to right, the diagram is not intended to suggest a linear “to-from” process. The most appropriate entry points for intervention, the strategies for developing each building block, and the ideal mix and sequencing among them varies based on the local context and is likely to change over time. This reinforces the importance of gender and power analysis in a given context, willingness to set long-term goals while pursuing feasible changes in the short-to-medium run, and a commitment to adaptive management.

### **Why Are We Not Focused on the Right People?**

As changemakers become more clear-eyed about the root causes of gender equality and intentional about the multilevel, transformational approaches that are necessary to “solve” such a complex problem, a corollary question emerges: at global, national, and local levels, which groups of people are the rightful beneficiaries of efforts to hasten the realization of gender equality? The SDG agenda requires that we consider which people are most likely to be left behind by development efforts, including those who suffer the most from gender discrimination. From the most macro lens, the answer is women and girls, but this is an insufficiently specific starting point for effective intervention, as women and girls are not a monolithic group. Moreover, focusing broadly on “women and girls” not only results in blind spots about *which* women and girls, but also overlooks the potential vulnerabilities of some men and boys as well as people who do not fit into binary gender categories. We note that three shortcomings hamper our ability to serve those most affected by gender inequalities:

#### *We Do Not Know Which Women and Girls*

The SDG mandate is to empower *all* women and girls. But there is no doubt that some women and girls are much more likely to be left behind, and efforts to address gender inequality must explicitly target them. This requires the tools and the intention to understand who these women and girls are, and the multiple dimensions of their vulnerability in very specific contexts. This is hardly a new concept in development, but we have been surprisingly bad at moving from theory to practice.

Intersectionality is the understanding that gender inequality overlaps or intersects with other forms of vulnerability to compound the disadvantage experienced by the most marginalized groups. The dimensions of vulnerability that should be considered in an intersectional analysis are dictated by context, but

typically include issues like age, income, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability. While intersectionality is a concept that comes from feminist theory,<sup>15</sup> it is one that is widely understood in development circles, even if not referred to in the same terms. In addition to seeking the stories of individual women and girls, we have to be able to generate and analyze data across place and time to identify typologies of vulnerability, as box 2-2 highlights. This is the basis both for designing effective interventions and for assessing progress. Yet currently there is not enough reliable data to fulfill the global monitoring requirements of the vast majority of SDG targets, much less to generate sophisticated intersectional analyses that would help identify those most likely to be left behind in a given country, region, or community.<sup>16</sup> While data gaps exist across the SDGs, commentators from Melinda Gates to Caroline Criado Perez have noted that data can be sexist, and the lack of data on women and girls in particular suggests that policymakers simply do not prioritize their needs or experience.<sup>17</sup>

For many of the SDG targets and indicators, information is not yet disaggregated by sex, there is no intention to disaggregate by sex, or there are data gaps that prevent us from measuring key issues, which hamper our ability to understand today's gender differences and the direction of travel for the well-being of girls and women. Indeed, gender bias is often ingrained in the way that we measure—or fail to measure—aspects of a person's life.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, we frequently have no idea which women and girls are most vulnerable, or even if gender discrepancies are at play for some key outcomes. This suggests a critical need to step up efforts to collect and analyze gender data and enable women's rights and other social justice actors to utilize this information to hold governments and other actors accountable for leaving no one behind.

### *We Focus Only on Women and Girls*

It is necessary to acknowledge that women and girls will be the prime beneficiaries of gender equality efforts, not only because the international community has made a commitment to them as a group continuously left behind, but also because this commitment is constantly under threat. Part of the debate about

15. Crenshaw (1989).

16. UN Women (2018).

17. Criado-Perez (2019), Bill and Melinda Gates, "We Didn't See This Coming," Gates Notes, February 12, 2019.

18. Equal Measures (2018).

### Box 2-2. Why Intersectional Analysis Matters

Intersecting social and income-based factors can lead to vastly different profiles of vulnerability across women and girls, even within the same country. For example, in Nigeria, women and girls from the poorest households are nearly five times as likely to be married before the age of eighteen as those from the richest households. In the United States of America, the share of black and Native American women who live in poverty is twice as high as the share of white women. And in Nepal, poor women and Madhesi Dalit women are two to three times more likely than the average Nepali woman to report that being a woman is a disadvantage. The availability, analysis, and use of multidimensional gender data is critical so that policymakers can institute targeted efforts to reach the women and girls being left behind, and so that rights advocates can hold them accountable for doing so.

Sources: UN Women (2018) and the Asia Foundation (2019)

male engagement for gender equality stems from legitimate concern that men and boys might co-opt these efforts, diminishing the possibilities for systemic change and undermining the voices of women and girls. The backlash to the #MeToo movement is one example in which some have attempted to disproportionately shift public focus to the specter of false accusations against men rather than the more systemic problem of sexual violence experienced by women. This co-option can also manifest in the erosion of limited resources to address the priorities of women and girls in order to accommodate strategies to work with men and boys.<sup>19</sup> This is why SDG 5 calls for the empowerment of all women and girls—to ensure that the mandate for gender equality is unmistakably female-centered.

Yet gender equality is also relevant for men and boys, not only because they may be allies to or detractors from the equality agenda, but also because their lives are governed by gendered norms and opportunities.<sup>20</sup> Given the tension between possible subversion and the requirements for holistic social change, there is little consensus among development and assistance practitioners about when and how to engage men and boys in the promotion of gender equality. The International Center for Research on Women succinctly captures this tension: “The primary challenge embedded in this work is how to engage men and boys effectively without instrumentalizing them as a pathway to women’s empowerment on the one hand, or marginalizing women and girls in gender equity work on the other.”<sup>21</sup> Achieving this balance requires program approaches that are practical but also

19. CARE International (2016).

20. An exclusive focus on women and girls may also cause us to overlook the vulnerability of people who do not fit into a binary gender framework.

21. Glinski and others (2018).

political, grounded in larger structural realities. Gender-synchronized programming is a promising approach that attempts to address these needs by enabling exploration of the experiences of individual men and boys while situating those within a larger framework that holds men accountable to gender equitable progress that benefits all people.

### *We Get Stuck in the Humanitarian/Development Divide*

Despite the universality of the SDGs, the international community tends to focus on development contexts and neglect the possibilities for advancement in emergencies or fragile states. This is perhaps especially true when considering gender equality, since it is not typically considered a “basic human need” and is therefore a secondary consideration, if a consideration at all, in humanitarian responses. Radhika Coomaraswamy, former Special Rapporteur of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Women, wrote in her review of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, “In spite of the repeated call to bridge the distance between development and humanitarian actors, none of the 169 individual targets contained in the seventeen sustainable development goals addresses the specific needs of women and girls—or civilians generally—in conflict zones.”<sup>22</sup> Thinking about humanitarian versus development scenarios can lead to the assumption that transformative change is impossible across crisis situations. This misconception results in missed opportunities to address gender dimensions of vulnerability for some of the world’s most marginalized people.<sup>23</sup>

The impact of crises on people’s lives, experiences, and material conditions differs based on their gender and sexuality. And in many cases gender inequality is an underlying cause of vulnerability in crisis. Our activities during a humanitarian response can increase and reinforce, or reduce, existing inequalities. Many humanitarian actors have experience delivering gendered and intersectional analyses that enable the adaptation of crisis response along a continuum from gender sensitive to transformative, depending on the context. Such adaptations might mitigate gendered risks, increase equitable access to and benefits from services and interventions, or support strategic opportunities to promote gender equality given changing gender norms and relations in crisis.

For example, CARE’s rapid gender analysis in Mozambique, in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai, revealed heightened safety concerns within transit camps among widows, adolescent girls, and persons with mobility issues, at the same time that

22. Sen (2018).

23. If current trends persist, more than 80 percent of the world’s poorest populations will live in these fragile contexts by 2030. Kharas and Rogerson (2017).

a lack of systemic collection of sex, age, gender, and disability disaggregated data among humanitarian responders was inhibiting efforts to identify whether cross-sectoral responses were meeting the needs of these at-risk groups.<sup>24</sup> Surfacing this contradiction led to clear recommendations for improved monitoring and evaluation practice to reduce protection risks and increase accountability to vulnerable groups.

In Yemen, joint research by Oxfam, CARE, and GenCap showed how the conflict was upending traditional gender roles and causing backlash against women in the form of gender-based violence (GBV). At the same time, it also presented opportunities for the renegotiation of gender roles and relations within families and communities, as survival had become contingent upon new ways of dividing labor, care, and decisionmaking.<sup>25</sup> As a result, CARE became much more deliberate about GBV prevention programming, as well as including women and girls in income generation and “cash for work” opportunities.

Addressing gender equality within humanitarian response is not only a question of instituting appropriate programmatic approaches, however; it also means enabling women (and girls, when appropriate) to lead at local, regional, and international levels (box 2-3). This is relevant to staffing within international humanitarian organizations but, more important, implies increased funding and support for local women’s organizations. While INGOs and donors have increasingly endorsed the localization agenda and some (notably Canada, Sweden, and France) are applying a feminist lens to humanitarian assistance, we are far from realizing either of these ambitions.<sup>26</sup> Both frameworks—localization and feminism—require significant power shifts as well as fundamental changes to the modalities of assistance. Until we better enable these priorities, women and girls in crisis—and especially the most vulnerable subgroups—will continue to be left behind.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

The SDGs set out two propositions that are at once radical and inspiring: the first, that we should commit ourselves to the profoundly political project of realizing a gender equitable world by 2030; and the second, that we should bring about that world by focusing on those with the least amount of power, so that no one is left behind. While the word “feminist” does not feature in the SDG

24. Haneef and Tembe (2019).

25. Gressmann (2016).

26. 2016. “The Grand Bargain—A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need,” and Thompson and Clement (2019).

### Box 2-3. Six Contributions of Local Women Responders

Collaboration with women-led groups, organizations, and networks is often assumed to take place when a crisis is over and development work starts. CARE's research in Malawi and Vanuatu showed how women responders contribute to a more contextualized and effective humanitarian response overall. The six core contributions of women responders include:

1. The access women responders may have, permitting them not only to act as first responders but also support more marginalized populations.
2. The contextual *understanding* women responders bring to the needs and realities of different groups, of how to engage with key stakeholders and of how to respond creatively to barriers.
3. Their ability to use social capital and networks to *reach* other women.
4. Their ability to provide a space for and *raise women's voices* and support women's *leadership*.
5. Their ability to offer *solidarity* to other women and girls in day-to-day spaces and activism.
6. Their ability to make interventions *gender-transformative* and potentially more *sustainable*.

Source: CARE International 2018(b)

Agenda, the core elements of that agenda are broadly aligned with what we might consider a feminist approach to international development—namely, recognition of the centrality of gender and other intersecting forms of identity-based marginalization in determining who risks being “left behind”; critical awareness of power relations with an intent to transform them; and accountability to the voices and solutions of the disenfranchised.

Given the implicit feminism of the SDGs, the challenge for international actors committed to gender equality is not to define a new way forward, but to be accountable to that already progressive framework. Doubling down on our commitment to gender equality is especially urgent given the increasing threats to women's rights and shrinking civic space. Our brief review in this chapter suggests two levels of action that would enable us to recommit to accountable progress on gender equality, especially for the women and girls most likely to be excluded from the benefits of change. The first level of action is more easily tackled within the existing paradigm of international assistance and focuses on addressing the conceptual and data-related challenges that hinder our ability to better understand what works where and for whom. The second level of action requires aid actors to take an honest look at ourselves to assess whether the

current incentive structures and normative frameworks that shape our practices and accountabilities enable us to do what is required to contribute to gender equality by 2030.

With these two levels of action in mind, we offer the following four recommendations:

First, international actors should invest in improved “gender data” and measurement systems for gender equality, with a focus on how this information translates into power and action. Improving intersectional approaches to data collection, analysis, and use is key to targeting the most vulnerable women and girls with relevant and effective interventions. Multidimensional gender data needs to be collected and used across all sectors, and particularly where such data is lacking, as in fragile contexts and domains such as public finance and rural development. Partnering with local, women-led organizations to leverage their knowledge of marginalized women and girls across the continuum of development and humanitarian contexts, and supporting women’s rights groups to interpret and use gender data to inform evidence-based advocacy for gender-equitable practices, services, policies, and laws, is critically important and currently underfunded.

Second, policymakers and practitioners must adopt approaches to promoting gender equality that recognize the complexity of social change. This requires long-term planning while instituting feasible, short- and medium-term changes based on clearly elaborated assumptions that are tested along the way. Gender markers, well-developed theories of change, feedback and consultation with program participants, and appropriate measurement and evaluation for course correction are essential tools on this path. Aiming for social change at scale also implies supporting collective action for gender equality and building learning and evidence around gender-synchronized approaches.

Third, we recommend strengthening and diversifying international, national, and local coalitions for gender equality. Donors and implementers should dramatically increase assistance to women-focused and feminist organizations and networks through flexible funding modalities that are sustainable, predictable, and grounded in partnership rather than paternalism. Government actors can accelerate progress toward gender equality by providing funding and convening opportunities for cross-sectoral planning, data sharing, and accountability to gender equality outcomes. And private sector actors should be encouraged through both business and moral arguments to consider how gender equality is vital to the achievement of their own goals.

Last, we urge development and assistance actors to build a culture of self-reflection and transparency—in which we forthrightly address the power dynamics at global, national, local, and institutional levels that affect which women and



girls are left behind and shape our own behavior and accountabilities as a sector.<sup>27</sup> Practically speaking, this means embedding gender-transformative policies and practices within development institutions; acknowledging the tensions and complexities between the demands to sustain our own organizations and the imperative to shift power to local actors; and inviting women’s rights activists to hold aid actors accountable by publicly sharing our program data with them and including them as critical partners in strategy development and evaluation efforts.

We still have more than a decade to reach our goals for 2030. The complexities and slow pace of change toward gender equity can be disheartening; however, women across the globe are on the move. Every day, through our work at CARE, we see determination and a sense of possibility reflected even in the depths of some of the most protracted crises in the world—from Afghanistan to West Bank Gaza. Our obligation is to make sure that the women and girls who face seemingly insurmountable odds because of their gender and where they were born, their social class, or the color of their skin are not “left behind” by discriminatory institutions. Everyone should enjoy the benefits of social and economic progress. We must tap into and unleash individual passion as an engine for collective action, remove obstacles in the paths of women and girls, and hold the powerful—including ourselves—accountable for commitments to gender equality. Will we achieve gender equality by 2030? That future is not written, but radical hope and concerted action is the only option worth considering.

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27. As Paul O’Brien writes in this same anthology, “. . . we may have to take some of the attention we have been putting toward better understanding those being ‘left behind,’ and marshal our efforts to ask, ‘being left behind by whom?’”

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