

Women are under-represented in leadership globally and across sectors. In 2016 in Australia one quarter of organisations reported that they still have no women (none!) in key management positions.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of gender equality in the humanitarian world tells a similar story. As of January 2016, there are 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators globally and only 9 of these are women. As the professional humanitarian workforce worldwide consists largely of women – up to 75% – this disparity is absurdly at odds with the rhetoric about empowerment and equality within the sector.<sup>2</sup> And this in spite of everything we know about the positive impacts of women in leadership positions.

### Why is it important?

Evidence has shown that women are powerful agents of change in leadership positions and as part of decision-making processes. A recent United Nations study<sup>3</sup> concluded that when women are in decision-making roles, humanitarian response outcomes are more effective and inclusive. A recent example is the response to Fiji's Tropical Cyclone Winston, which made landfall in February 2016. Women have been described as 'the backbone of Fiji's disaster recovery',<sup>4</sup> playing a critical role in saving the lives of others following the disaster. Stories emerged from Fiji that highlighted the incredible leadership shown in the response by women coming together to support each other; initiating joint livelihood ventures; taking an active role in educating other women about their rights to disaster relief and justice; and helping to protect and support vulnerable groups.<sup>5</sup>

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*Some leaders are born women*  
(Geraldine Ferraro)

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Women often have unique perspectives of, and insights into, the needs of their communities. They often design programs that take a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of everyone. Increasingly, humanitarian response strives to address the needs of women and girls in the wake of a disaster. Facilitating women to lead humanitarian response operations ensures that the unique needs of women and girls are incorporated into programming. It also ensures that the varying impacts are understood and addressed in programming objectives.

We also know that having women in leadership can have far-reaching impacts on the empowerment of girls and women more broadly. Strong leadership by women has been linked with raising the aspirations of young girls and changing the dynamics that prevent women from accessing power.<sup>6</sup> Surely something to which we should all aspire.

### Why hasn't it happened already?

In contexts of severe gender inequality, barriers to women's leadership have included the inability to locate women with the necessary skills and self-confidence to participate in local decision-making processes.<sup>7</sup> In contexts where you might expect the barriers to be fewer, research suggests that women still self-select out of humanitarian leadership roles. This has been attributed to the tension between caring roles and professional responsibilities, and the long hours and often non-family postings in which humanitarian programming takes place. There are also a number of attitudinal and cultural barriers for women to overcome in order to take up management positions.<sup>8</sup>

Within the humanitarian world organisations are getting better at addressing gender issues in their programming, but at the same time failing to address sexism and discrimination in humanitarian action. Gender programming is unlikely to produce the results or impact we are seeking if workplaces are not progressing towards gender equity.

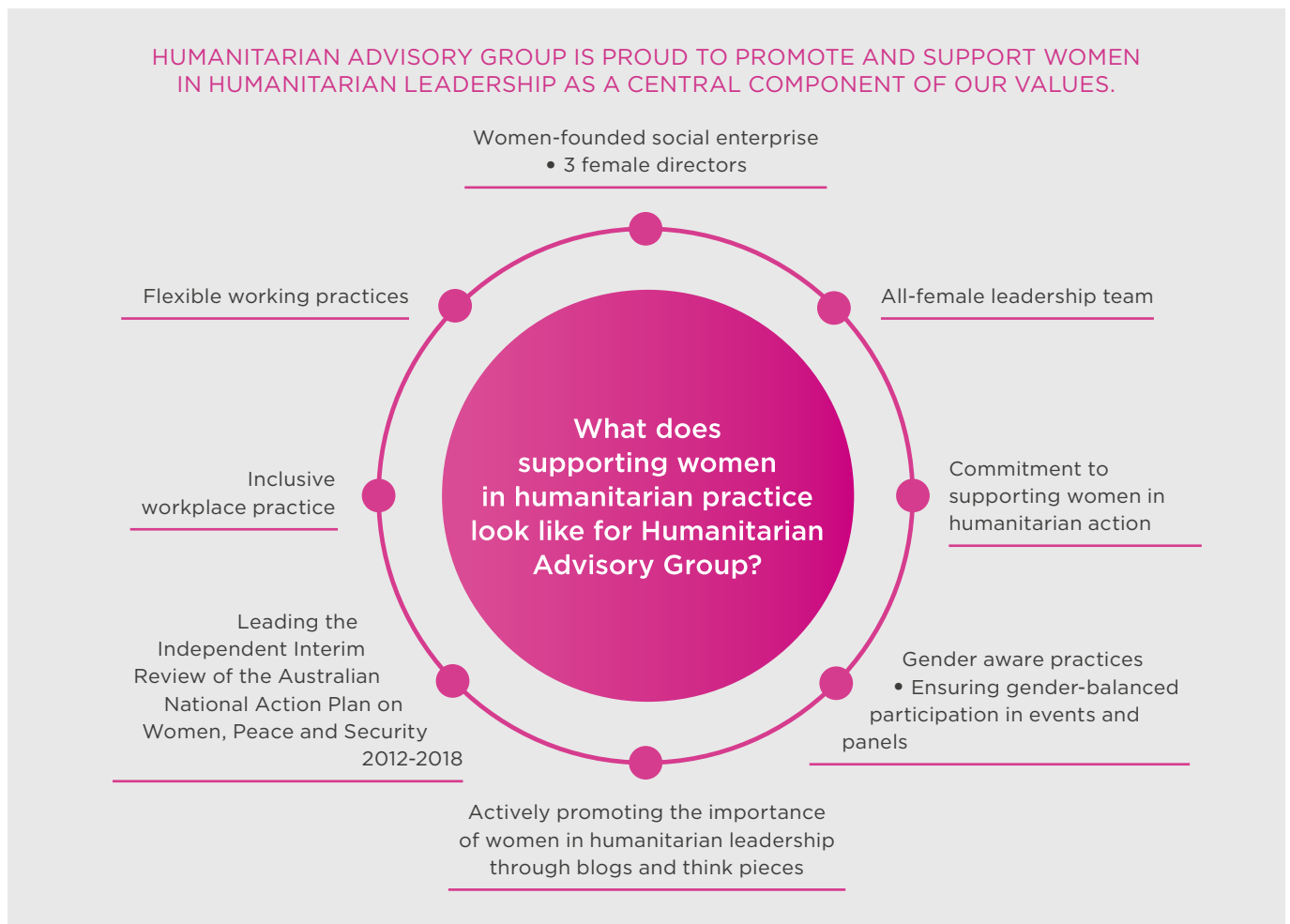
## What can and must be done?

We need to break the cycle. We need to make sure that women have the skills and confidence to take up leadership positions so that absence of these qualities never provides a reason for under-representation of women at the top.

We need to make it feasible for women to keep engaging in the workplace in the same way men do. All too often, women subjugate their own professional aspirations in order to facilitate the men in their lives to achieve. They need to be

supported equally and equitably by workplaces and provide equally for their families. This means making flexible working a reality for men and women that allows both to better balance caring and work roles preventing the burden from falling disproportionately on women.

We need to actively mentor and support women in contexts where natural and complex emergencies are a frequent occurrence. This means making time and creating opportunities for professional development of women in contexts as varied as Kenya, Syria, Timor-Leste and Afghanistan.



- 1 Australian Government, Workplace Gender Equality Agency, February 2016.
- 2 Eggleston B., and Jidinger, E., Walking the Talk: Five ways to increase women's humanitarian leadership, 2016, accessed 18 April 2016, <[www.whydev.org/walking-the-talk-5-ways-to-increase-womens-humanitarian-leadership](http://www.whydev.org/walking-the-talk-5-ways-to-increase-womens-humanitarian-leadership)>
- 3 UN Women, The Effect of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes, 2015, accessed 18 April 2016, <[www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/unw%20effects%20of%20gender%20equality%20on%20humanitarian%20outcomessinglepgsweb.pdf](http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/unw%20effects%20of%20gender%20equality%20on%20humanitarian%20outcomessinglepgsweb.pdf)>

- 4 Bolitho, S., 2016, Cyclone Winston: Women the backbone of Fiji's disaster recovery, 26 February, accessed 18 April 2016, <[www.care.org.au/media/media-releases/cyclone-winston-women-the-backbone-of-fijis-disaster-recovery/](http://www.care.org.au/media/media-releases/cyclone-winston-women-the-backbone-of-fijis-disaster-recovery/)>
- 5 UN Women Fiji 2016, Snapshot, UN Women, 14 March.
- 6 UN Women, The Effect of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes, UN Women, 2015.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Sutton, K., Women in Humanitarian Action, PHAP, 2013, accessed 18 April 2015, <[www.phap.org/articles/women-humanitarian-action](http://www.phap.org/articles/women-humanitarian-action)>

