



# WOMEN IN HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

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PREPARED FOR CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN  
LEADERSHIP - DEAKIN UNIVERSITY BY

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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Globally, women are 118 years away from closing the gender gap (Chen et al. 2016, p. 2). In 2016, women make up only 35 per cent of the average company's workforce at the professional level and above. As women's careers progress, the representation of women declines over time, particularly evident when examining the percentage of women in leadership positions. Women make up 26 per cent of senior managers, and only 20 per cent of executives. (Chen et al. 2016, p. 17). The lack of women in leadership has impacts across sectors and countries. It inhibits productivity and performance of work places and has individual and national health, education, political and socio-economic impacts.

In the humanitarian sector women still have limited access to positions of leadership (Domingo 2013). In the United Nations system, women comprise 42.8 per cent of all employees, with a much greater concentration of women at the entry-level (UN Women 2016), and as of January 2016, only 9 of the 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators are women (31 per cent) (UNDG 2016). This paper explores the existing evidence in relation to women in humanitarian leadership. It asks how much of a gender gap exists in leadership in the humanitarian world, as well as why the gap exists and the existing and potential implications. This paper also identifies gaps in the evidence base and suggests areas for future research.

**Positional Leaders are leaders who have been appointed to their occupied positions and are typically remunerated for their efforts. Positional leaders use formally recognised positional power to influence others rather than personal leadership qualities alone.**

The paper adopts a positional definition of leadership. There are multiple definitions of leadership, spanning different contexts, exercised at different organisational levels, and with different levels of formal authority. It is by no means limited to formally attributed

positions of power, however these positions do bring with them greater opportunities to influence and be recompensed for effort. In order to measure and compare data and literature, this review will focus on positional leaders: leaders who have been appointed to their occupied positions and are typically remunerated for their efforts. For the purpose of this report this will include, middle and senior management, as well as board members. These are people who are in positions of power, that are formally recognised and rewarded in an evident manner (Hill et al. 2016 p. 17).

Leadership equality is not about simply having the same number of men and women in positions at the top or in the organisational structure, it is also about ensuring there is equal opportunity for both women and men to get there. The focus of this paper is women in positions of leadership within the international humanitarian system and the opportunities for men and women to attain those positions. For the purpose of this paper the international humanitarian sector includes donor institutions, the United Nations, international NGOs and local NGOs. Much of the available data combines international development and humanitarian action into a single sector. Where this is the case we present combined data and highlight the lack of evidence specific to the humanitarian sector. The paper also draws on relevant research and findings from other sectors that may be applied to the humanitarian sector or inform the suggested areas for future research.

## 2. WHAT IS THE LEADERSHIP GENDER GAP?

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### Women in leadership across sectors

There is a wealth of research available analysing women's representation in the workforce, pipeline, promotions, and policies to promote women's leadership across many sectors. Findings from this body of research consistently indicate that women remain underrepresented in leadership positions and are disadvantaged in the path to attaining them. While this is observed to varying degrees across professions and country contexts, the one constant is that the gender gap persists.

The concept of leadership remains underdeveloped and contested in the social sciences. Definitions tend to focus specifically on individuals with specific traits, such as vision, charisma and ability to bring along a constituency (Domingo et al. 2015, p. 9). In this respect, leadership is defined by the exercise of influence: a form of persuasion in the pursuit of individual or group goals. It involves the capabilities for, and process of, mobilising people and resources. Therefore, whether exercised collectively or individually, leadership enables the 'power over' others to achieve change or drive certain outcomes (Rowlands, 1997 and Higgitt, 2011, cited in Domingo et al. 2015).

Research has found that the representation of women in organisations declines as career level rises – globally women make up 33 per cent of managers, 26 percent of senior managers and only 20 per cent of executives (Chen et al. 2016, p. 15). Just 35 per cent of the average company's workforce at the professional level and above are women (Bloom et al. 2013). Challenges to increasing female leadership exist all over the world, though when data is examined by region there are some interesting disparities. When considering 2025 projections, Asia is projected to have the lowest levels of female representation in leadership positions (28%), European and American organisations are

likely to make no real change in terms of representation of women at the top (37%), Australia and New Zealand have the second lowest rates after Asia (33%), while Latin America is expected to come the closest to achieving gender parity (44%) (Chen et al. 2016, pp. 16-17). Women hold only 12 per cent of the world's board seats (Deloitte 2015).

In Australia, the labour force of women has increased by 27 per cent since 1978, with 49.7 per cent of today's labour force being women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015; WGEA 2016). Despite making up half of the nation's workforce, the 2016 Gender Equality Scorecard, released by the Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), revealed that full-time female employees in Australia take home just 77 per cent of men's average full-time income – a staggering \$27,000 less. While the size of the female labour force has steadily increased over the decades, the growth of women in management positions has increased at a considerably lower rate, with women making up 16.3 per cent of CEO positions, and 37.4 per cent of senior management positions (*ibid.*). Only one in six Australian CEOs is female and one-quarter of organisations have no women in key management positions (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015).

Statistics around global politics remain similarly bleak. Around the world there are 38 States in which women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, as of June 2016, including 4 chambers with no women at all (Parliamentary Union 2016). The fact that women in politics face gendered stereotypes with regard to the roles they are likely to fill has been supported by research conducted by Haack. This research found that women are more likely to lead what are commonly known as "soft" portfolios, those seen as "compassion issues", such as healthcare, education and childcare, while men are more often associated with, and likely to control, military spending, crime, and foreign trade (Haack 2014, pp. 221-222).

While gains have definitely been made over the last 50 years for women in the workplace, progress remains slow. As stated earlier, at current growth rates it will take 118-years

to close the gender gap in the workplace. Research revealed progress made between a 2014 study and a 2016 study was not the result of systemic improvements in good practices to sustain long-term change, but rather seemed to result from ad hoc actions, such as increased hiring at the top (Chen et al. 2016, p. 15). Time will ultimately not solve the gendered leadership gap; meaningful considered action to support sustainable change will. Organisations are consistently failing to develop future female talent pipelines and current hiring, promotion and retention rates will not facilitate the creation of gender equality over the next decade (*ibid.*).

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*Women's representation in leadership will not increase substantially without major changes in the culture, policies, and practices of the organisations where women learn and work (Hill et al. 2016)*

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### **Women in leadership in the humanitarian sector**

While an abundance of research on women in leadership exists, research solely examining women leaders in the humanitarian sector is almost entirely absent. A recent study conducted, by Mercer, across 42 countries and 583 organisations, described as “The World’s Most Comprehensive Research on Women in the Workplace”, disaggregates data by sector and geographic region. However, within this “comprehensive” research, only one of the 583 organisations analysed could be considered a humanitarian organisation—Oxfam. As a result, the evidence base with respect to women’s representation and contribution to leadership in the humanitarian sector is limited at best.

#### **RESEARCH GAP 1:**

**The humanitarian sector is not adequately represented in the research and analysis that is taking place more broadly on women in the workplace. There are very limited facts and figures on the percentage representations of men and women at different levels of management and leadership in the global humanitarian sector.**

There is available, however, evidence from the non-profit sector that incorporates humanitarian actors and is assumed to be comparable. In the non-profit sector a gender gap is evident. Research focussed on the United States found women account for 75 per cent of the non-profit workforce, but only 43 per cent of CEOs. Women are more likely to be in leadership positions than in other sectors but are still underrepresented (Stiffman 2015, cited in Hill et al. 2016). Similarly, a study in 2015 found that out of 151 non-profit organisations in the US only 21 had boards with at least 50 per cent women (Boston Club 2015, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 13). Figures from the Australian non-profit sector tell a similar story. Whilst these statistics compare favourably to other sectors, there are interesting differences within the non-profit sector with women more likely to have leadership positions in smaller organisations and organisations which focus on women and gender issues. (Domingo et al. 2015, p. 3)

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*At the smallest non-profit organisations [in the US], women make up 55 per cent of CEOs, compared to the largest non-profits, categorised by budgets of \$50million or more, where women make up 18 per cent of the CEOs. (Branson et al 2013, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 9)*

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In the humanitarian workforce, the evidence available suggests it is likely women dominate entry-level and mid-level positions, given that women comprise 75 per cent of the non-profit workforce. However, the percentage

appears to be skewed in favour of men in high profile positions such as UN Humanitarian Coordinators. As of January 2016, of the 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators globally, only 9 of these are women (UNDG 2016). A recent report on the status of women in the United Nations system found that only the lowest two levels of professional employment had achieved gender parity, with the representation of female employees over 50 per cent. As the level of employment increases, the percentage of women employees continually decreases, with women comprising only 27.3 per cent of employees at the highest professional level (UN Women 2016, p. 8). A breakdown of female representation by professional level in the UN is provided in Figure 1.

The recent appointment of the United Nations Secretary-General has also been analysed in terms of the challenges for women to reach high profile positions, with António Guterres being appointed as the new UN Secretary General ahead of several credible women including Helen Clark, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand and head of the United Nations Development Programme.

*Backroom political deals among the old boy's establishment prevailed once again...It is not that António Guterres is a bad choice, but his appointment*

*indicates that the UN is unable to reform and unwilling to accept that women can be strong leaders. It suggests that women are held to a higher standard than men, who simply need to show up. Women need a voice, but that cry went unheard. We will hold the new secretary general accountable to his promise to reach gender parity at the highest levels throughout the UN system. (Krasno 2016)*

There is little material available on the kind of leadership that is required in the humanitarian sector as opposed to the corporate sector, whose culture and leadership requirements vary enough for the humanitarian sector to warrant its own analysis. Leaders in the humanitarian sector require diverse, adaptable skillsets that enable them to effectively work across many cultures and contexts, working with communities, national and international staff, and national and international partners, whilst ensuring their leadership style facilitates capacity building opportunities for national staff and partners. As the humanitarian landscape changes and increasingly recognises and acknowledges the need to change its approach (Ki-moon 2016), this gap in research prevents thorough critical reflection on the needs of the sector and impedes the ability to properly address these.

**Figure 1: Representation of Women in the UN, by Level**  
(Data source: UN Women 2016, p. 8)

Men		Women	
%	Count	Count	%
72.7%	216	81	27.3%
69.6%	387	169	30.4%
66.4%	1,135	573	33.6%
64.0%	4,062	2,289	36.0%
58.1%	6,163	4,435	41.9%
54.7%	5,506	4,557	45.3%
42.5%	1,516	2,049	57.5%
38.5%	72	115	61.5%
57.2%	19,057	14,268	42.8%

## RESEARCH GAP 2:

Research on effective humanitarian leadership is lacking, thus so is an understanding of what makes an effective leader in the humanitarian sector going forward.

### Box 1: Female Versus Male Leadership

#### DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP STYLES?

It is unclear whether men and women lead differently, and if they do, why they do. Consensus around leadership styles and the explanation for them varies. If there are differences in leadership style, does this have any impact on the quality of leadership? Two opposing views:

##### YES, women and men *DO* lead differently

Research on this side of the argument, firmly believes that there are gendered differences in leadership between men and women. Some evidence from meta-analyses in the 1990s and 2000s suggest that women may have more democratic leadership styles and less authoritative styles of leadership. Researchers have also found that women are more likely to adopt a transformational approach to leadership, motivating followers through intellect and connection with the individual (Matsa & Miller 2013).

Young argues, in his paper 'Women, Naturally Better Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', that "more and more companies now recognise that collaborative, rather than competitive behaviour creates more success and as such women are well placed to lead in this century" (2016, p. 4). This research found that women have natural attributes that when identified and maximised, make them ideal leaders, though they acknowledged that the challenge is seeing more women in leadership positions so that they can deliver this advantage (*ibid.*, p. 10).

##### NO, women and men *DON'T* lead differently

Researchers that have explored the essential ingredients of leadership found no gender differences in leadership effectiveness (Hyde 2014, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 17). Women and men are considered to provide equally competent leadership (Deloitte 2016B). What is critical is that research has shown that diverse teams, with equitable representation from men and women, as well as representation of a variety of backgrounds, results in a much higher performing team (Deloitte 2016B, p. 14).

It is not the principal of gender equality in leadership that results in a more holistically representative and successful team, but rather the principles of diversity and inclusion that result in greater team success. Bourke's research found that innovative capacity is enhanced when teams are diverse and not skewed towards any particular gender (Bourke 2016, cited in Deloitte 2016B). When a diverse group of individuals, both male and female work together, they are typically higher performing resulting in greater benefits to the organisation. In short, men and women, from all backgrounds, lead better in combination.



### 3. WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE GENDER GAP?

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#### **Performance of leadership teams is compromised by having fewer women**

Gender diverse managerial teams are related to positive performance outcomes (Menguc and Auh 2006, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 15). At present organisations neither take full advantage of the available talent pool, nor do they consistently match the right jobs with the right people (Bohnet 2016, p. 42) As a result, organisations are often failing to hear from their best people (*ibid.*, p. 72). Research has found that when women lead at the top of organisations, the bottom line benefits. Companies who reported having at least one woman on their board yielded a higher return on investment compared with companies who had no women on their boards. Further, when there are more women in leadership the gendered pay gap, between colleagues with similar work experience, tends to be smaller (Hill et al. 2016, p. 15). The absence of equal representation at the top means the opportunity to capitalise on the wide ranging benefits that result from having equal representation in leadership are lost within the organisation.

#### **Impact on performance in humanitarian context**

In the humanitarian sector the gendered leadership gap is thought to impact on humanitarian outcomes, though there is a lack of substantive data to support this claim. It is clear that when representation at the higher levels is unequal the talent pool is not properly taken advantage of; over half the world's population are women and their productivity, intelligence, and insight is lost at the highest levels of decision making. To better ensure this happens, in 2000, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, specifically demanded greater representation and participation of women and gender issues at all levels (UNSC 2000).

It has also been suggested that greater levels of female representation in leadership positions could automatically lead to improved humanitarian programming and outcomes. The implication is that having more women in decision-making and leadership positions will automatically lead to improved gender considerations in programming and greater achievement of gender equity goals. It is well known within the humanitarian sector that a humanitarian crisis such as a conflict or natural disaster has a different impact on men, women, boys, girls and the trans community (IASC 2006). Women and girls in many contexts experience gender-based discrimination based on entrenched gendered social norms and relations, leading to overt inequalities. These pre-existing social norms are often intensified during a time of crisis and often result in women and girls being restricted from accessing essential services and rights such as sanitation, food, and access to medical assistance and education (*ibid.*). This may be intensified by the lack of female representation in decision-making processes, and within the humanitarian structure (Sutton 2013).

Action Aid have reviewed women's participation in humanitarian response more broadly and particularly participation of women from communities as first level responders. The valuable contribution and impact of women as first responders has been increasingly recognised as critical to successful disaster response, with humanitarian agencies commissioning research to better understand and harness the positive impact of women's leadership in this sense (see Action Aid report: Barclay, Higelin & Bungcaras 2016). A recent impact study commissioned by CARE examined whether gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction makes a difference in disaster prone communities, drawing on evidence from Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu. Results found, in line with anecdotal observations prior to the study, CARE's gender-sensitive DRR initiatives did have positive impacts on community level preparation, response and recovery efforts (Webb et al. 2016, p. 29). CARE's approach led to greater representation of women in community decision making processes, the preparation and response phases, and

increased respect for women's roles in disasters overall (*ibid.*, p. 31).

While the body of available literature and research slowly expands, there remains very limited concrete data on whether women's leadership *actually* results in greater gender equality or improved humanitarian programming. The evidence that exists is largely anecdotal. Placing more women in leadership positions within the humanitarian sector does not necessarily mean the 'trickle down' impact is clear cut in terms of leading to improved humanitarian outcomes, though anecdotally it remains assumed that with more female leaders at the top there would be more women actively involved at all levels.

The UN Secretary-General's report on Women's Participation in Peacebuilding (2010) cautions against such linear or simple assumptions, stating it is far more complex than simply placing women in leadership positions, stating the need to also address entrenched gender biases in social norms and formal legislation (cited in Domingo 2013, p. 16). Though with this in mind, one could reason that with more women in leadership positions at the highest levels, these issues would be more likely to come to the fore and be more readily addressed. There is substantial evidence that increasing women's collective political voice has resulted in gender-responsive legal and policy reform; the resulting impact has been found to have included increased transparency in government decision-making, increased budget allocations for services that benefit women, and more accessible and responsive services for women (Domingo et al. 2015, pp. 2-4).

#### **RESEARCH GAP 3:**

**There is inadequate evidence on the impact of women's humanitarian leadership on program outcomes.**

## 4. WHY DOES THE GENDER GAP PERSIST?

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### **Unconscious (or Conscious) Bias that Disadvantages Women**

In some work contexts bias, or discrimination, is still an issue that results in hostile work environments for women. (Hill et al. 2016, p. 28) This is likely to result in women choosing to leave or being actively prevented from stepping into leadership positions within their workplace. More common, however, are the stereotypes and unconscious biases that present obstacles to women's leadership (*ibid.*, p. 7). These may be less obvious and more difficult to address. For women of different ethnicities and backgrounds (for example, women of Asian or African descent) the disadvantage is even more acute (Hill et al. 2016, p. 1). Men can play an important part in either facilitating or inhibiting women's leadership. Recognition of women and the strengths and abilities they bring to the table varies across contexts; "In some situations, there is broad recognition of the strength and diversity women bring to leadership. In other contexts, there is less recognition of their value. [It was recently] reported 1 in 3 technology CEOs do not think gender diversity is important." (Young 2016, p. 5).

The Centre for Ethical Leadership conducted a Gender Equality Project (Wood and Whelan 2012), the objective of which was to produce new, innovated, validated and tailored solutions to address gender inequality in leadership roles. The research found that recruitment targets and quotas aimed at increasing the employment of women often evoked negative reactions. Women were seen as less likable and competent, by both men and women, and less deserving of their positions. A reluctance to acknowledge disproportionate disadvantage, and a rejection of strategies to address it can be viewed as an example of unconscious bias. Instead of these targets and quotas being viewed as steps to address a disproportionate disadvantage experienced by women through no fault of their own, they were instead viewed as giving an undeserved advantage to women. The gender targets challenged

the mindsets of many managers, yet often resulted in rejection and a lack of commitment to them (Wood and Whelan 2012).

Researchers in another study found “male participants implicitly associated positive managerial characteristics (i.e., competent, executive, productive) with men rather than women.” (Latu et al. 2011, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 36).

Mullany’s research concludes it is through language that leadership is constructed and enacted, making language a crucial aspect for consideration when examining the relationship between gender and leadership (2011). There has been much interesting research done on how unconscious bias translates into the language of news and reports that inform much of daily life, and arguably continue to embed stereotypes. Over a 12-month period from August 2015 to July 2016, 13,000 articles from 18 Australian newspapers have been analysed to identify gender differences. The ratio of “he” to “she” in Australian news reporting is 3.4 to 1. Furthermore, the top 20 names featured in articles over the same period are all male with the first female name appearing ranked at 21. The Australian public is certainly exposed on a daily basis to far more male leaders being publically featured and profiled than women (Lukin 2016).

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*If you are a “he” or “she” in a text, it means you have a prominent grammatical role—you are the subject of the clause, and you have lasted long enough in the story to graduate from proper name to pronoun. (Lukin 2016)*

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## **Unconscious (or Conscious) Bias in the Humanitarian Sector**

It is not clear what conscious or unconscious bias exists in the sector, although anecdotal evidence suggests women may be acutely disadvantaged by stereotypes and bias. A recent Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) call for submission of think-pieces addressing reform within the sector, resulted in very few submissions from women. This caused ACFID staff to reflect

on the role biased language may have played in the lack of uptake by women to make submissions:

“...Maybe we received so few submissions from women because women are less likely than men to put their ideas out there. Or maybe we chose our language poorly, and by calling for ‘thought leaders’ and ‘experts’ we triggered the almost sub-conscious mental processes that we women have developed as both a response to and a consequence of the patriarchal society we live in: “I won’t bother – they’re not interested in hearing from me”.” (Ridge 2016)

There is also a lack of gendered analysis of media specific to humanitarian issues to provide insights into how unconscious biases may be reinforced or countered in popular humanitarian media sites, such as Relief web or Irin News, or in mainstream media in relation to critical humanitarian events such as the election of the UN Secretary General. Despite calls from the outgoing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urging the security council to elect a woman as his replacement, after 70-years we have still never had a woman leading the United Nations, and we won’t for another 10-years. The possibility of a woman as Secretary-General sparked excitement in the media and among supporters around the world, yet despite the momentum, a closed door decision by the Security Council resulted in favour of a male candidate. The rhetoric surrounding this decision has, oftentimes inadvertently, focused on the inherent (whether conscious or unconscious) bias in favour of male leadership (Krasno 2016).

### **RESEARCH GAP 4:**

**There are few innovative research initiatives to investigate the role of unconscious bias and stereotypes in embedding the gender gap in the humanitarian sector.**

## **Pipeline Problem**

Women are not just denied leadership positions when they get to the top; opportunities continually disappear at various points along the way, making each transition

to the next level more difficult to attain (Hill et al. 2016, p. 28). The gender gap becomes more distinct the higher in the organisation you look. In a study conducted across law firms in the U.S. from 2003 to 2011, it was found that despite an almost equal number of male and female lawyers entering at the associate level, only 23 per cent were female at the top levels of management and leadership (Ganguli, Hausmann and Viarengo cited in Bohnet 2016 p. 28).

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*Dramatic changes in women’s educational attainment and workforce participation have given millions of women the background and skills they need to become leaders—taking on roles that were once reserved for men and providing organisations with a larger and more diverse pool of potential leaders. In other words, qualified and ambitious women are not in short supply (Hill et al 2016, p. 16)*

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Research conducted by Price Waterhouse Cooper’s Genesis Park leadership development programme, while failing to reveal any evidence of deliberate, conscious gender bias, suggested the “status quo does suggest a lack of pro-active consideration of females for major assignments, a lack of gender consideration in succession planning, and a reticence amongst senior men to mentor women at the leadership level – all contributing to the current condition found throughout the professional services industry” (Gender Advisory Council 2008, p. 3).

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*The assumption that we ‘lower the bar’ for female candidates must be challenged. Blaming a shortage of qualified women for leadership roles must be challenged. (Mitchell 2016)*

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Promotion gaps remain prominent. Women are less likely to apply for, and negotiate, leadership positions (Bohnet 2016, pp. 68-

69). Research found women are less likely to pursue promotions than men due to the fact they anticipate stronger negative outcomes to result from promotion to higher-level positions: “possible negative outcomes include unfeasible burden of responsibility, stress, anxiety, time constraints and conflict with other life goals” (Gino cited in Bohnet 2016, pp. 69-70). This results in a contribution to the promotion gap. Though the lack of pipeline remains prominent, there are some areas of improvement; Australia’s 2016 Gender Equality Scorecard found the pipeline of women into management roles was strengthening (WGEA 2016B).

### **Pipeline Problem in Humanitarian Sector**

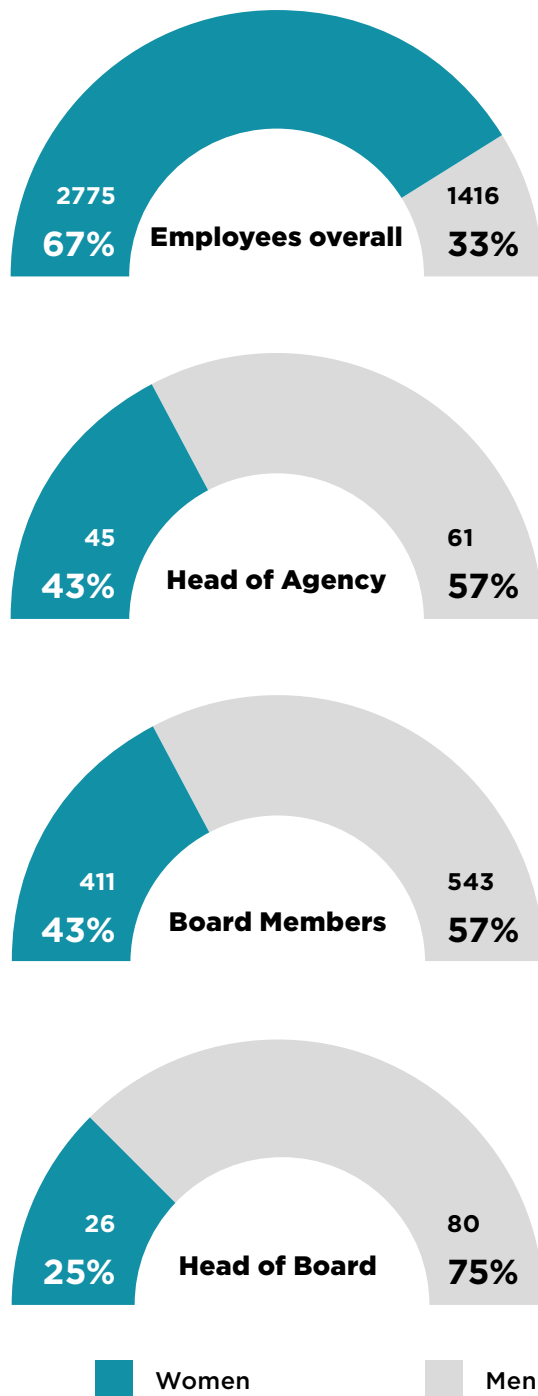
The pipeline problem exists within the humanitarian sector as well. Women make up nearly 30 per cent of international staff in UN peacekeeping missions, but they are highly concentrated in the most junior positions (Conaway & Shoemaker 2008, p. 9). Research by Conaway and Shoemaker (2008) of female leadership in UN peacekeeping missions found there is a prevailing perception that female leadership in the UN is inhibited by poor organisational structure ill-equipped to groom staff at the mid-level, lack of career track and professional development opportunities in the system, as well as relatively low compensation packages in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations compared with other UN agencies.

The ACFID Annual report 2015-2016 provides a profile of staff in international development and humanitarian agencies in Australia. It should be noted that the figures cited refer to data from 2014-2015.

- Overall, 67 per cent of employees are women and 33 per cent are men
- At the CEO level, only 43 per cent are women and 57 per cent are men
- Boards are comprised of 43 per cent women members
- As heads of boards, 75 per cent are men and 25 per cent are women

Despite women being far greater in numbers at entry level into the sector in Australia, as one climbs the leadership ranks women are increasingly underrepresented, at leadership levels and even on boards (ACFID 2015, p. 31).

**Figure 2: Overview of the Gender Balance in ACFID Member NGOs, 2014-2015**  
(Data source: ACFID 2015, p. 31)



Although comprehensive figures are not known globally for entry level into humanitarian work or at the highest levels

of leadership, we do know that just over 30 per cent of the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinators around the world are women, and that across 60 years of UN peacekeeping, from the year 1948 to 2008, only seven women ever held the post of Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UNDG 2016; Conaway and Shoemaker 2008). At present the UN is currently piloting initiatives to deliberately develop a strong pipeline of talented female leaders. The initiative is led by UN OCHA in partnership with Deloitte (Box 2).

**Box 2: Developing Female Leaders in the United Nations**

A collaboration between Deloitte’s Humanitarian Innovation Program and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) focusses on strengthening the UN’s pipeline of “diverse leaders for senior roles in the humanitarian and development sectors” with a particular emphasis on strengthening women’s leadership (Deloitte 2016). Their Inter-Agency Talent Program for Female Leaders in the UN System targets high-potential women from seven participating UN agencies to “accelerate their readiness for senior leadership roles across the UN system” (Pearson 2016). The program sees participants undertake 1-year rotations through roles selected to maximise their leadership development, receive personalised coaching, and in-person leadership training led by Deloitte (*ibid.*).

This innovative program is the UN system’s first attempt to build a strong female leadership pipeline by specifically targeting female talent in UN agencies to broaden their exposure. There is potential for this program to shift the leadership landscape within the UN system and on the humanitarian sector as a whole. Currently, the first cohort of women are enrolled in the program, with Deloitte stating it is “off to a strong start and is receiving encouraging reports among the agencies involved.” It is not yet clear how the impact of the program will be measured.

(Deloitte 2016; Pearson 2016).

## Self Confidence Gap

Stereotypes and biases affect how women view themselves as well. Women are more likely to diminish and undervalue their professional skills and achievements than their male counterparts (Schuh et al. 2014, cited in Hill et al. 2016, p. 34). In a recent study of leadership and emotional intelligence performance, Leadershape (a UK-based leadership focused not-for-profit) compared results from men and women and found the largest behavioural difference related to self-confidence. (Young 2016, p. 11). Relatively lower self-confidence can translate into women less frequently putting themselves forward for leadership opportunities, or even when they are in leadership positions taking less floor time to propose their approaches and opinions. In Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, 40 per cent of MPs are women. Despite this, women give significantly fewer speeches than male MPs (Bohnet 2016).

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*A man will look at a job application and think ‘I can do 20 per cent of that, I think I will apply’ and a woman will think ‘I cannot do 20 per cent of that; I don’t think I can apply’.* (Young 2016, p. 11)

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The self-confidence gap is also evident in the lack of submissions by women to the ACFID call for think pieces discussed earlier in this section. It is challenging to get women to express their opinions and perspectives to the same extent as men. Less than a third of the total submissions received were from women. It was suggested in the sector that this is a reflection of women being less likely “to put their ideas out there” (Ridge 2016).

## Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities

Women still disproportionately shoulder the bulk of caring and domestic responsibilities. Cross-generational research on perspectives of work-life balance and its impact on opportunities for women in the workplace revealed that from Baby Boomers to Generation Y, women reported a work-life balance is not the answer (it was suggested

the solution to this may be ‘integrating’ work- life commitments) (Roebuck, Smith & Haddaoui 2013). This research found many women were inclined to sacrifice career advancement opportunities, such as into high-level leadership positions, if the personal cost was deemed too high (*ibid.*, p. 54). Women reported that without strong appropriate support in the workplace it was often easier to just leave entirely (*ibid.*, p. 55).

The delicate act of balancing work to accommodate life is typically seen as the domain of women, with women more likely to have caring responsibilities, more likely to work irregularly or part-time, or spend periods of time outside of the workforce (Deota 2014). It is women’s career advancement opportunities that are typically sacrificed in favour of the men in their lives. Differences in earnings, and the gendered pay gap also play a role in this. Oftentimes when one parent is leaving the workforce to undertake caring responsibilities, it is typically the higher paid parent who remains in the workforce. This is also typically the male. For women who are mothers and full-time employees, attaining a work-life balance can be particularly challenging:

“Today’s career women are continually challenged by the demands of full-time work and when the day is done at the office, they carry more of the responsibilities and commitments to home. The majority of women are working 40-45 hours per week and 53% are struggling to achieve work-life balance. Women reported that their lives were a juggling act that included multiple responsibilities at work, heavy meeting schedules, business trips, on top of managing the daily routine responsibilities of life and home.” (Deota 2014, p. 41).

## Balancing Work and Family Responsibilities in Humanitarian Sector

The unique demands of a humanitarian career, such as the need to rapidly deploy, non-family postings and long work hours, disadvantage those with caring responsibilities, typically mothers of children. Research on leading effectively in the humanitarian sector resulted in some ambiguity, with no clear answer as to

whether gender-based discrimination posed any specific barriers to women obtaining and succeeding in operational leadership roles (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven 2011). More examples were available at the headquarters level as opposed to the field level, with speculation the tension between work and family roles may be responsible for this disproportion (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven 2011, p. 52). This disproportion feeds the self-perpetuating cycle whereby the very few examples of female role models at the senior levels exacerbates the perception amongst women that advancement opportunities are limited, potentially resulting in reduced female aspirations for leadership (Gender Advisory Council 2008, p. 3).

Conversely, during the course of this same research it was found that women did not seem to experience particular gender-based barriers to leadership though it was noted women need to work harder at the outset to gain respect and credibility in the male-dominated political context and that political relationship building was more difficult for women than men (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven 2011, p. 52). As with all sectors, the difficulty of balancing work and life inhibits the ability of some women to continue progressing their careers at the same rate as their male counterparts. While the humanitarian sector has its own unique elements which pose difficulty to women, there are broader commitments from all organisations that are required to help facilitate the continued advancement of women's careers even after they begin families.

Flexible working practices are increasing in prominence and popularity, and becoming more commonplace in Australian NGOs. The following practices were provided by Australian NGOs as examples to demonstrate how they better facilitate staff achievement of a healthy work-life balance:

- Range of formal and informal work arrangements and/or a Flexible Working Policy, to help engage, support and retain employees who continue to perform at their best (Save the Children Australia 2015, p. 56; Plan International Australia 2015, p.31).

- Implementation of a Gender Action Plan (2014-2016) developed to strengthen gender equality outcomes across the organisation's work, including programs, policy, research, advocacy, marketing, communications and in the workplace (Plan International Australia 2015, p. 32).

## **Lack of Effective Networks and Mentors**

Long-term, targeted mentoring programmes can help build political and leadership skills for women, particularly when they foster networks between women and explicitly seek to address issues of inequality in leadership opportunities (O'Neil & Domingo 2016, p. 33). Some research has found mentors and networks to be more beneficial to gaining promotions than performance and skills (Hill et al. 2016, p. 20). While men and women are equally likely to have mentoring relationships, women are also likely to benefit less from these partnerships, particularly in areas of salary and promotions (*ibid.*).

The newer area of 'sponsorships' is growing in prominence and appeal compared to mentoring. Sponsoring is a form of mentoring where a sponsor opts to share both status and opportunity. Forms of sponsorship might include, a commitment to co-author articles to aid with status and visibility, providing key contacts, establishing important meeting opportunities and even actively seeking to identify or create career opportunities for a protégée (Hill et al. 2016, p. 20; Barsh, Cranston & Craske 2008, p. 44). Once again however, women are disadvantaged in these types of arrangements. Research revealed that women often reported greater difficulty than men in securing sponsorship, identified factors attributing to this included the perception that women aren't always willing, or able, to reciprocate favours, and the sometimes awkward, real or perceived, sexual politics between senior men and younger women (Barsh, Cranston & Craske 2008, p. 45). While male-female sponsorship relationships are reportedly effective and valuable, it stands to reason that ultimately with more women in leadership, there would be more leaders available to provide effective sponsorships to women at the entry and mid-

career level reducing the difficulty women experience in securing sponsorships.

There is little available information about mentoring and sponsorship specific to the humanitarian sector available. But the same premise applies - when there are more women in leadership positions, there will be more opportunities available for sponsorship at the entry and mid-career level for women, thus aiding in the progression of more women to leadership positions. Again, while sponsorships could be formed across genders, having more women in leadership would likely reduce the difficulty some women report in finding suitable sponsors. The importance of facilitating networks to benefit women aspiring to leadership positions cannot be underestimated, nor can the importance of the women who have 'made it' committing to support those women who aspire to do the same. Though as the number of women in senior leadership roles remains low, male leaders need to be actively encouraged to consider sponsorship of younger women, to contribute to increasing the number of women in leadership positions.

**RESEARCH GAP 5: There is little evidence in relation to the role of mentoring and sponsorship on the emergence of women leaders in the humanitarian sector.**



## 5. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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It is a fact that women are underrepresented in leadership in the humanitarian sector. It is a fact that too little is known about how women become leaders or what the challenges are to promotion (Domingo et al. 2015, p. 3). While anecdotal evidence prevails, very little hard quantitative or qualitative data exists regarding women's leadership in the humanitarian sector.

This paper highlights the paucity of research focussed on women in leadership in the humanitarian sector. These are summarised below with proposed approaches to addressing the research gap. It is important to further explore these areas with the potential to provide insights into how we can overcome barriers to getting more women in leadership positions and how we can improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

**RESEARCH GAP 1: The humanitarian sector is not adequately represented in the research and analysis that is taking place more broadly on women in the workplace. There are no basic facts and figures on the representation of men and women at different levels of management and leadership in the humanitarian sector.**

**Proposed approach to addressing gap:** Partnership with companies with established methodologies for gathering relevant data to establish a baseline of quantitative and qualitative data for the humanitarian sector. Potential partnership might include McKinsey & Co., Deloitte or Mercer. Each of these organisations has previously conducted in-depth research on women in leadership across sectors, but none specifically on women in leadership in the humanitarian sector.

**RESEARCH GAP 2: Research on effective humanitarian leadership is lacking, thus so is an understanding of what makes an effective leader in the humanitarian sector going forward.**

**Proposed approach to addressing gap:** Conduct largescale research to determine the leadership needs in the humanitarian sector by interviewing a diverse sample of humanitarians for their perspective on leadership needs and how both women and men can contribute to and lead change in the sector.

**RESEARCH GAP 3: There is inadequate evidence on the impact of women's humanitarian leadership on program outcomes.**

**Proposed approach to addressing gap:** Conduct research to answer the question of what differences, if any, exist in humanitarian responses under women-led/gender-equitable leadership teams. This would require, primarily, mapping of the gender composition of leadership teams across a series of humanitarian responses (which does not currently exist). Secondly, the identification of metrics to measure differences in response, for example, the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of humanitarian staff within the response operation or the differences in the content of the Strategic Response Plans (SRPs).

**RESEARCH GAP 4: There are few innovative research initiatives to investigate the role of unconscious bias and stereotypes in embedding the gender gap in the humanitarian sector.**

**Proposed approaches to addressing gap:** Conducting a gendered media analysis of Relief Web or Irin News over 3-6 months would provide interesting primary data on the gendered language of humanitarian action and gender bias of 'experts' and 'leaders' quoted and referred to in the humanitarian news; analyse language used by men and women from various organisations (at the headquarters and field level) when they are asked to describe their own leaders within their organisations; Conduct a longitudinal study with women and men, studying their annual performance reviews to examine language used, feedback, salary increases and the framing of future opportunities.

**RESEARCH GAP 5: There is little evidence in relation to the role of mentoring and sponsorship on the emergence of women leaders in the humanitarian sector.**

**Proposed approach to addressing gap:** Conduct a cohort or case-control study to follow the progress and determine achievements of women supported or unsupported by mentor or sponsor programs within the humanitarian sector.

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