

Raising women's voice and leadership in humanitarian settings



Learning and impact from Women Lead in Emergencies programming across six countries



Women and girls are hardest hit by conflict and disasters. Women are also often the first to respond to meet the needs of their families and communities. Despite this, women affected by crisis often have little or no influence over the design and delivery of humanitarian assistance. This matters because women have a right to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. It also matters because, without women's participation, humanitarian assistance often does not meet women and girls' needs. It can reinforce gender inequalities and cause harm.

Since 2018 CARE has been working with partners, including women's rights organisations and women's community groups, to address gaps in the humanitarian system by piloting tools and approaches which support women's voice and leadership by shifting power and resources directly to women¹ in communities affected by crisis.

The result of these pilots is the Women Lead in Emergencies (Women Lead) approach: a set of adaptable programmatic components and tools to support women's participation and leadership in crisis and improve the accountability, inclusivity, and ultimately the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

¹ Women Lead also works with adolescent girls in some contexts including in Uganda and Niger.

This summary covers results and learning drawn from pilots undertaken across 15 locations in 6 countries. An original test of the model was undertaken in Tonga in 2018 and then pilots began in Uganda (2018), Niger (2019), and in Colombia, Mali and the Philippines (2020).

What issues does Women Lead seek to address?

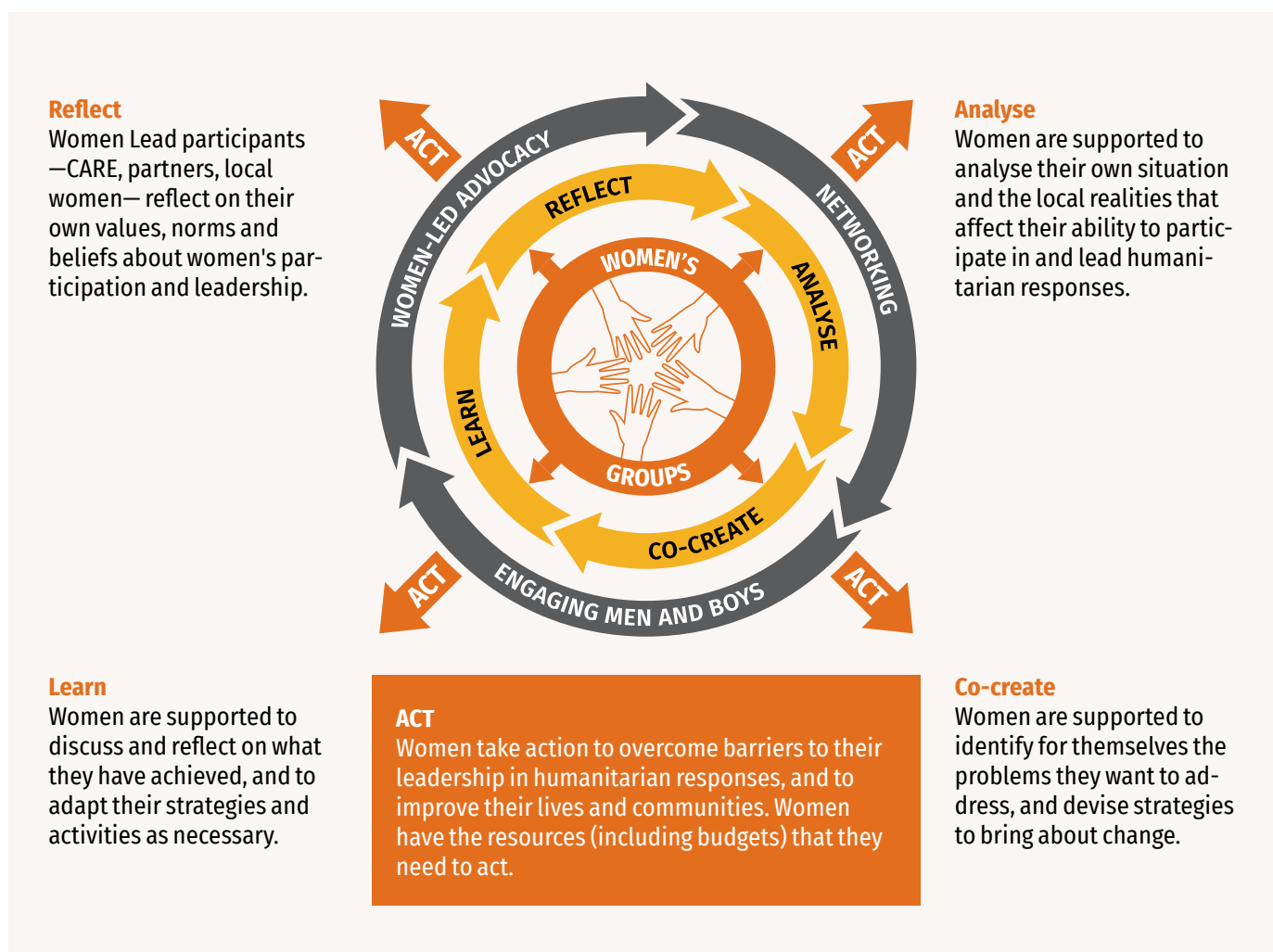
Women's limited involvement in humanitarian decision-making is embedded in a flawed humanitarian system that is both exclusionary and unaccountable to women. The complex and intertwined mechanisms of marginalisation include:

- ▶ **Humanitarian actors ignore the root causes of gender inequality:** Humanitarian stakeholders rarely address the underlying or root causes of women's and girls' exclusion. Mandated to save lives, humanitarian responses may at best address some symptoms of gender inequality but often also perpetuate barriers to women's meaningful participation. Humanitarian stakeholders frequently fail to understand and respond to women's context-specific capacities and aspirations.
- ▶ **Women have few opportunities to develop participation and leadership skills:** In some cases, rigid social norms prevent women and girls from equal participation in the public and decision-making sphere. Less access to education, and lack of exposure to public roles and collective organising, keeps women from participating in decisions that affect their lives.
- ▶ **Women are at best consulted rather than enabled to participate:** Affected women know best about their priorities and needs, yet they tend to be excluded from decisions and from defining what success in humanitarian responses looks like. In best case scenarios, women are consulted but not consistently involved or enabled to lead.
- ▶ **Participation spaces are unwelcoming:** When women and girls are present in decision-making processes, they often do not feel able to be active participants and are not actively listened to by others or given the same respect as men. Often, women's leadership is not acknowledged; at times, it is considered a threat. Limited exposure to collective organising can constrain capacities to strategise and act.
- ▶ **Men are gatekeepers of power and the status quo in humanitarian contexts:** Men often help form and reinforce social norms around gender, power and participation. Where men are unsupportive of, or even barriers to, women's participation in decision-making, this can have a significant effect. However, this also means that where men are engaged as allies, they can provide critical support to women's participation.
- ▶ **Humanitarian actors lack a set of tools to enable women's participation and leadership:** Humanitarians lack practical guidance on how to increase women's participation in humanitarian decision-making and action, both through and within their partnerships and programming.







How does Women Lead address these issues?

The Women Lead in Emergencies approach looks to address many of these issues by directly supporting women's groups, through a combination of:

- ▶ **A five-step model** that consists of five interconnected steps designed to increase women's meaningful participation and leadership and empower them to act collectively on the problems and issues most relevant for them.
- ▶ **A dedicated activity budget, combined with targeted support.** The model ensures that budgets controlled by groups themselves can be used to meet their needs or to achieve goals they identified as part of the 'Act' Phase. However, groups are also empowered to request that CARE and partners provide targeted support, e.g., technical and logistical support.
- ▶ CARE's use of its profile and power to **make space for women within humanitarian and community decision-making spaces.** Supporting women to engage community leaders, humanitarian actors and men and boys to be allies of women's participation and leadership.



Multi-country evaluation: Summary of results

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| In 2021 there were... | 813 | WOMEN LEAD IN EMERGENCIES GROUPS | 26,157 | PARTICIPANTS |
| WOMEN ARE MORE CONFIDENT In Niger, at the end of the project 88% of Women Lead participants felt confident that they understood their rights and entitlements compared to only 58% of non-participants. |  | 88% | WOMEN LEAD PARTICIPANTS | |
| |  | 58% | NON-PARTICIPANTS | |
| WOMEN PARTICIPATE MORE IN PUBLIC MEETINGS In both Niger and Uganda, Women Lead participants were more likely to speak in public meetings than non-participants (77% to 49% in Niger and 83% to 73% in Uganda). |  | 77% | WL PARTICIPANTS (NIGER) | |
| |  | 83% | WL PARTICIPANTS (UGANDA) | |
| WOMEN PARTICIPATE MORE IN PUBLIC MEETINGS In both Niger and Uganda, Women Lead participants were more likely to hold leadership positions than non-participants (31% to 9% in Niger and 22% to 14% in Uganda). |  | 31% | WL PARTICIPANTS (NIGER) | |
| |  | 22% | WL PARTICIPANTS (UGANDA) | |

Women Lead in Emergencies has shown results across all our key outcome areas

Women Lead looks to achieve the outcomes that women themselves want to see and at the pace that is right for them. Data, primarily from our longest running pilots in Uganda and Niger, combined with learning from our pilots in Colombia, Mali, and the Philippines, demonstrates that:

- ▶ **Women Lead effectively prepares women to be able to meaningfully participate,** lead and influence within their communities with tailored approaches to supporting confidence, skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy.

- ▶ **Women were not only more regularly present in decision making forums, but they were also inventive in how they engaged.** In some cases, women engaged with existing institutions, committees, and authorities but women were also just as likely to claim space in their own ways: creating new organisations or engaging in advocacy activities.
- ▶ **We see clear evidence of increases in leadership among Women Lead members, with women’s informal leadership increasing more so than formal leadership.** Nevertheless, there are early indications that Women Lead can help to increase women’s participation in the formal political sphere. Future work will focus on increasing efforts in this space.
- ▶ **The action-oriented focus of the Women Lead model is supportive of collective action and engenders more inclusive and relevant humanitarian response.** Women Lead supports women working collectively to address problems or to make change within their communities and on their own terms. The process of women taking action was transformative and legitimising and helped to address key issues faced by women, individually and as communities, which traditional humanitarian modalities were not addressing. Community members including men and community leaders often recognised the contribution women were making, and increasingly called on them to participate.

The Women Lead in Emergencies approach is innovative and cohesive in design. It addresses a gap in humanitarian programming and can in, some contexts, yield results quickly

The approach fills a gap within humanitarian practice. The toolkit provides an approach which can yield results quickly (interventions should be at a minimum 9 months). It is innovative and successful because it:

- ▶ **Shifts power to women:** It gives women control over budgets and over activities. It supports women in ways they define and ensures that they define what ‘success’ looks like.
- ▶ **Meets women where they are:** It can flex to the capacities and needs of women and moves at the pace they are comfortable with. As such, many groups have chosen to address pre-conditions of participation such as illiteracy training or economic dependence before looking to participate in community or local government decision-making.
- ▶ **Provides usable and adaptable tools:** The aim of Women Lead is to address a gap in current humanitarian practice. Women Lead does this by offering practical and flexible resources including tools, guidance notes and examples of how they can be adapted, which can be used across different kinds of context and types of emergencies.



Key learning

- ▶ **Engaging men is a vital component of Women Lead and does yield results, though it should be noted that progress on social norms is frequently not linear:** Through engaging men CARE has seen early signs of positive social norms shifts. However, it is also the case that loss of power by any dominant group is uncomfortable. We observe complex reactions of men to Women Lead, which highlights the need for continued engagement. Whilst all Women Lead projects include an ‘engaging men and boys’ approach there is a need for greater documentation of this and clearer integration into the model.
- ▶ **The Women Lead cycle is useful for supporting participation and giving women opportunities to take action. However, as Women Lead programmes mature there is a need to think about how groups move towards more systematic and regularised participation:** Women Lead members have engaged in highly visible and targeted actions and successfully influenced change. However, Women Lead seeks also to habituate humanitarian actors to women’s meaningful participation in decision-making and increase the ‘regularisation’ of women’s participation. CARE should build on existing tools from CARE’s Inclusive Governance programming and on learning from our pilots to facilitate this.
- ▶ **There is a need for greater documentation of project outcomes:** The Women Lead in Emergencies approach is now moving from a pilot stage towards greater uptake across CARE. However, there have been challenges in documenting some of the higher-level outcomes, and particularly those related to advocating and influencing. The project would benefit from working with country teams to develop solutions to documenting this information, to ensure it is possible to capture the full depth of outcomes from Women Lead in Emergencies.

Next steps include:

- ▶ **Scaling the model:** With evidence that the model is effective and can adapt to different kinds of programmatic contexts, CARE will support the scaling of Women Lead by working with partners, women's groups and others to roll out to new contexts and communities.
- ▶ **Updating the Women Lead model, theory of change and toolkit:** With the pilot phase of Women Lead in Emergencies complete, CARE will be looking to strengthen the model and tools. We will also look to reassess our Theory of Change to ensure we test our assumptions in areas such as the modes of participation that women choose, and how we can tailor support for these.
- ▶ **Moving from a project 'cycle' to a 'spiral' to enable greater regularisation of women's leadership:** Women Lead uses a 'cycle' model but in fact, as groups mature from cycle to cycle there is the potential to expand their scope, potentially moving towards more systemic or deeper participation and leadership.
- ▶ **Development of more sophisticated understanding of humanitarian stakeholders and how to influence them:** The Women Lead team will use political economy analysis to better understand incentives and power dynamics within the humanitarian system that are barriers to more and better quality funding for women's participation, as a basis for advocacy strategies that maximises Women Lead's transformative potential for the sector.
- ▶ **Developing more effective approaches to capturing learning and impact:** Evidence is an important part of learning and of peer-exchange. As such developing new, more feminist approaches to monitoring and evaluation will be important for further understanding the effects and impact of Women Lead.

Want to find out more?

Read the [learning paper](#) for more information about the findings from our independent [multi-country evaluation](#), and from other learning and evaluative work undertaken since 2018.

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