

Create spaces,
not occupy them!

Co-creating learning
pathways in **POWER UP!**



Introduction

The Power Up! programme (2021-2025) aims to build, mobilise and transform power around three strategic agendas – bodies, voice and resources – and engages with women, girls and members of the LGBTQI+ community. As part of the Power Up! Consortium, which implements the programme, Gender at Work is supporting Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAAS) in India; Collective for Research & Training for Development - Action (CRTD-A) in Lebanon and its partners, Kadirat and Doria Feminist Fund, in Tunisia and Palestine; Kaleidoscopio in Mozambique; and Labour Research Service in South Africa to promote a just and equitable world in which all women live lives free of violence, exercise their voices and agency in decisions that affect them and access and control economic resources.

In 2022, Gender at Work initiated a learning process to harness lessons about the strategies being implemented by in-country partners. A series of learning events were held to bring together participants from the above organisations. These sessions led to several reflections about the principles that should guide learning processes. This learning brief describes these principles, as articulated by participants. To learn more about the curiosities guiding the exploration of in-country strategies and implementation under the Power Up! programme, please click on [this link](#).

A priority for Gender at Work is to work with activists and researchers to build contextual knowledge. This involves looking at deep structures of inequality in different contexts, developing feminist tools and bridging theory and practice.

– madeleine kennedy-macfoy, Gender at Work

Learning and reflection moments have the power to connect us and re-energise us.

– Heera Rautela, AAAS, India



Importance of the Space

In a programme such as Power Up!, there is pressure to remain primarily accountable to the donor through monitoring, evaluation and learning requirements. While meeting these requirements, the important values of intentional and slow learning, which benefit women's rights organisations and their movement agendas, can be lost. These guiding principles can bring the focus back on the process, and not only the outcomes, so that learning embodies key feminist principles while also meeting donor requirements.



Even if we don't have a common language, we are bound together by our cause – we are connected.
– Shubhada Desmukh, AAAS, India

The most important value associated with the learning space is peer exchange – the process of bringing activists together to recognise their commonalities and learn about each other's context. To make this happen, we have to create opportunities for cross-regional dialogues between women in community groups from different projects across the Power Up! programme. This makes visible the grassroots activists and people at the heart of the projects. However, convening spaces, especially in the post-pandemic context, have become more virtual, which reproduces access inequalities. It is important that we reclaim physical meeting grounds and make these spaces accessible to grassroots women, so that they are the sense makers of the changes they are instigating and witnessing.



What do we mean by learning?

Many different meanings of learning co-exist in Gender at Work's practice. Perhaps the most common is that associated with Gender Action Learning. In this note, we focus on programme learning. This refers to the cycle of reflection and learning focused on the process as well as the outcomes of specific initiatives, projects or programmes.

Ensuring authenticity and voice during learning processes

There is a complex link between voice, language and representation. Several learning processes inadvertently rely on the voices of people who interpret changes rather than the voices of the change-makers themselves. During this process, the role of the mediators and enablers in amplifying the voices of the change-makers is crucial. They must learn to keep their own voices in check. This is a difficult line that global organisations involved in producing knowledge must tread, ensuring that there is no co-option of voices from the ground.

We can create alliances and get to certain spaces that grassroots activists cannot get to. The question is how we do that, in whose name, whose voice and whose needs do we take to those spaces? Or do we end up claiming those spaces for ourselves because we want to retain our access, privilege and power?

– Katia Taela, Kaleidoscopio, Mozambique


Participants underscored the need to produce the knowledge from reflections and learning into accessible narrative formats, including art, music, storytelling and other forms of creative expression. These strategies can also alleviate the power asymmetries that exist between knowledge holders and knowledge interpreters by bringing into the public domain women's voices in their own words, cadence and forms of expression. Power Up! in-country processes are already engaged in expressions of this nature, and this work needs to be further supported.

How can we, within Power Up!, shift this idea of knowledge creation and documentation so that it recentres who has knowledge and shifts our practice of how we document and support the use of new knowledge.
– Carol Miller, Gender at Work

Acknowledging and locating privilege

Gender at Work and its partners recognise that programme implementation processes involve power being exercised in multiple ways. There is the power that exists between the donor and implementing partners as well as the power within consortia among the lead organisations and those they fund. Those involved in programme implementation have access to great privilege that differentiates them from those whose lives they seek to change.





Participants underscored the need to locate oneself in one's privilege when engaging in the entire programme process. In advancing learning processes, we must make choices about who is in a room and who is not and how we can best design spaces to allow the most important voices to be heard. We must also take care to capture and disseminate new knowledge in the service of grassroots activists rather than showcasing it in formats that are preferred by donors but alienate the women whose collective and individual voices form the foundation of all learning.

I have learnt that I must be aware and acknowledge privileges, which means that there are certain things that I will not understand, certain things that people will not trust me with, certain things that I can't do. For example, I can't facilitate in certain spaces because I might close the space even before I open my mouth due to my race and class.

– Nina Benjamin, LRS, South Africa



Looking ahead

Future Power Up! learning processes will focus on the following levels:

1. Learning and knowledge creation efforts will be supported and facilitated at the country levels, allowing women to create their own knowledge based on their learning. These creation efforts will be shared in ways that are not extractive but instead amplify women's voices and agency.

2. Cross-regional dialogues will be held to examine the threads that bind projects together. These dialogues will include, but are not limited to, the following topics: learning from strategies in India, Tunisia and South Africa to harness traditional knowledge and promote intergenerational solidarities; understanding what works and what doesn't in funding women's rights organisations in fragile political and economic climates in the MENA

region; unpacking alternative economic strategies rooted in feminist principles; and understanding what works across all implementation countries.

3. Access will be facilitated for in-country partners to attend global forums held by the Power Up! Consortium, enabling their practice to inform global learning and knowledge and related debates and bring much-needed authenticity to global learning spaces.

I want to be part of global networks, where we can bring the voices of grassroots women, related to their empowerment journey, and I want to fly and fly... towards the limitless sky with my beautiful friends.

– Richa Audichya, AAAS, India

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Gender at Work is supporting partners in India (Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi), Lebanon (Collective for Research & Training for Development - Action CRTD-A, which also covers Palestine and Tunisia), Mozambique (Kaleidoscopio) and South Africa (Labour Research Service) in their work that aims for transformative change leading to gender equality. Gender at Work, as the convenor, holds annual learning and reflection events. The contents of this brief have been developed based on discussions that occurred during a series of learning events held in October 2022.

Learning events: Reflect | Innovate | Inspire (11, 19 and 25 October 2022)

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