



WORKING PAPER

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

From principles to practice

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January 2026

Global 50/50 | global5050.org



This working paper, *Towards a Framework for Measuring Feminist Leadership: From Principles to Practice*, was commissioned by Global 50/50 and written by Priya Nanda and Aarushi Khanna. The authors thank Kent Buse, Sarah Hawkes, Aishwarya Rajeev, Lynsey Robinson and Sonja Tanaka of Global 50/50 for their inputs and feedback. The development of the framework was further shaped through discussions at a convening held in Berlin in October 2025; the authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all workshop participants.

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Global Health 50/50 is a registered UK Charity (Registration Number: 1194015).

SUGGESTED CITATION

Nanda, P., & Khanna, A. *Towards a Framework for Measuring Feminist Leadership: From Principles to Practice*. Working Paper. Global 50/50, Cambridge, UK, 2026.

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Mountain Flowers. Balıkesi, Anatolia, 2019. Hüseyin Can.

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ABSTRACT

Feminist leadership offers a transformative alternative to hierarchical models by embedding values of equity, care, and accountability into organisational culture. While widely discussed, its implementation remains difficult to assess due to the absence of standardised measurement tools. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a framework to operationalise feminist leadership across three interconnected levels: explicit (policies and structures), semi-explicit (relational), and implicit (individual). Five core principles (leadership parity, accountability and transparency, safety and care, collaboration, and wage equity) are translated into measurable indicators that can be defined, applied, and assessed over time. By integrating feminist theory with systems change approaches, the framework enables organisations to move from aspirational values to evidence-based transformation, offering practical tools for benchmarking progress, fostering accountability, and aligning internal practices with feminist principles.

Introduction

Feminist leadership has emerged as an alternative to the limitations of traditional leadership models, which often model or reinforce patriarchal, hierarchical systems that tend to be exclusionary. Gaining prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, the idea of feminist leadership developed within feminist organisations where internal cultures failed to align with their external commitments to justice and equality (Batliwala, 2010).

A lack of coherence between espoused values and internal practices, referred to as a 'crisis of credibility', manifested itself in several ways within feminist organisations during this period (Batliwala, 2010). Many groups that advocated publicly for women's rights and gender equality found themselves reproducing the very power dynamics they sought to challenge externally in the wider society. Internal hierarchies often mirrored traditional corporate structures, with decisions concentrated among a small group of leaders, limited opportunities for meaningful participation from diverse voices, and cultures that inadvertently excluded marginalised women based on race, class, sexuality, or other identities.

The development of feminist leadership theory drew from multiple streams of feminist thought, including intersectionality theory, which emphasised the interconnected nature of various forms of oppression, and feminist organisational theory, which critiqued traditional bureaucratic structures as inherently masculine and exclusionary. Scholars and activists began articulating leadership approaches that would embody feminist values not just in outcomes, but in processes and organisational cultures. Key principles that emerged were collective decision making, inclusivity, care and empathy, and transparency and accountability – all oriented towards creating equitable organisational cultures.

In essence, feminist leadership acknowledges the presence of gendered and systemic power imbalances within institutions, challenges oppression, and fosters both individual and collective transformation. Rather than simply placing women in leadership roles, it emphasises how leadership is practiced—rooted in equity, inclusion, accountability, transparency, care, and shared power.

As feminist movements have evolved, so too has the understanding that leadership must be reimagined and requiring shifts in both personal behaviour and institutional culture (Kark 2004). Deeper transformations in how power is practiced are deemed essential for women's rights and social justice organisations committed to value-driven change.

While there is growing discourse on feminist leadership, measurement lags significantly behind theory. A critical gap remains in how to assess whether organisations are genuinely practicing feminist leadership or merely adopting surface-level changes. This paper explores the conceptual foundations of feminist leadership, proposes a practical framework for assessing its implementation, and outlines a pathway for developing tools to help organisations embed and evaluate feminist leadership in practice.

Defining feminist leadership: a multifaceted approach to transformative power

Feminist leadership is not a fixed model, but an evolving set of values and practices aimed at transforming power relations across personal, organisational, and societal levels. It emerged prominently four decades ago, as feminist organisations confronted a disconnect between their external advocacy and their internal cultures that were either hierarchical or exclusionary (Batliwala, 2010).

The feminist leadership approach operates on two interdependent dimensions:

- **Power within:** Fostering self-awareness, agency, and personal empowerment
- **Power with:** Building collective strength, inclusion, and mutual support.

Unlike traditional models that equate leadership with hierarchy, control, and top-down accountability, feminist leadership promotes shared decision-making, transparency, and mutual accountability. It emphasises intersectionality and reflexivity, recognising that power operates in visible, hidden, and invisible ways (Wakefield, 2017; Batliwala, 2014).

Across scholarship and practice, feminist leadership is consistently framed around these ideas:

- Challenging hierarchies and building relational power rooted in empathy and mutual accountability (Batliwala, 2010)
- Transforming systems through collective agency, driving both personal and institutional change (FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders, 2020)
- Confronting internalised oppression to create inclusive, affirming spaces (African Feminist Forum, 2007, p. 17)
- Embedding equality, care, and learning into everyday practices that promote ongoing personal and organisational reflection (Rao & Kelleher, 2000)

Despite some variations in how it is defined, feminist leadership principles are unified by a commitment to link personal empowerment with collective transformation, aligning internal organisational culture with external advocacy goals and transforming both culture and systems.

Bridging the gap between values and practice

Social impact and women's rights organisations have long championed justice, inclusion, and equity – yet many still reproduce the hierarchies they seek to dismantle. When internal practices conflict with espoused values, trust erodes, credibility goes down, and

organisational impact may be compromised. These misalignments have far-reaching implications. Staff may experience disillusionment and burnout, particularly when they encounter hierarchical or exclusionary behaviours in spaces that profess equity and inclusion (Batliwala, 2010; Rao & Kelleher, 2000). Such contradictions undermine both internal cohesion and external credibility, especially when values appear performative rather than embodied (AWID, 2021). Rigid, top-down decision-making can silence diverse voices and stifle innovation, especially those closest to communities and marginal contexts (Batliwala, 2014). Further, unexamined power dynamics can reinforce inequalities within the organisation, including gendered labour norms, the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ staff, or unaddressed harassment and discrimination (COFEM, 2021; Kloosterman, 2014). This misalignment between external advocacy and internal practice creates a crisis of organisational effectiveness. Contradictions breed internal conflict and erode trust, forcing organisations to expend significant energy managing internal strife rather than pursuing collective impact.

Feminist leadership offers a compelling alternative by providing both a vision and a practical pathway to shift power dynamics. It equips individuals and organisations with tools to examine and transform internal power dynamics by centering integrity, transparency, shared leadership, and care. It promotes inclusive work culture that reflects the change organisations advocate externally.

It reframes power not as finite or positional, but as relational and regenerative manifested through access to knowledge, emotional intelligence, networks, and the capacity to empathise (Batliwala, 2010). In today's constrained civic spaces globally—marked by shrinking freedoms, increased scrutiny, and internal pressures for equity—feminist leadership becomes both a moral compass to assess how far are their practices and a diagnostic tool to understand what exactly is lacking and needs to be fixed. It enables organisations to:

- Identify misalignments between values and practices
- Take steps to build inclusive, care-based cultures that can sustain long-term collective work
- Embody justice not only in outcomes, but in everyday practices.

Organisations are dynamic relational systems shaped by social political forces. In times of backlash or authoritarian pressure, aligning internal culture with feminist values becomes essential not just for their integrity, but for resilience and transformative impact. Feminist leadership helps organisations to lead differently. It also inspires staff to imagine more equitable futures and take intentional steps to build them.

Why measurement matters: linking vision to practice

The discourse on feminist leadership has expanded significantly over the years, with a few examples of how value-based leadership can foster stronger organisations. However, much of the evidence is limited and practice based; systematic tools for tracking and measuring these shifts remain limited.

Despite the growing nominal adoption of feminist leadership amongst rights-based organisations, many struggle to translate these values into consistent practice. One telling indicator is the persistent underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. According to the 2025 Global Health 50/50 Report and Index, produced by Global 50/50, which assesses around 200 organisations active in global health on gender-related policies and practices, 40% of senior management bodies had more men than women in 2025. This imbalance is also evident at the level of CEO: women represented 39% of CEOs of non-profit organisations, while just 22% of CEOs of for-profit organisations were women (Global 50/50, 2025).

This gender gap in leadership representation is concerning, but even more problematic is the assumption that women's presence in leadership automatically translates to feminist leadership. Research shows that organisations led by women often demonstrate stronger performance across various metrics (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014), yet these outcomes are not necessarily driven by feminist values or leadership practices. As scholars note, women's leadership is often understood simply as distinctiveness from male leadership or women's proclivities for particular styles, rather than as an explicitly political feminist project focused on transforming power relations (Pullen & Vachhani, 2020). Eagly and Carli (2007) in a review of studies have found that, in contrast to the stereotypic expectation that women lead in an interpersonally oriented style and men in a task-oriented style, female and male leaders did not differ in these two styles. Consistent with stereotypic expectations they found that female leaders tended to adopt a more democratic or participative style and a less autocratic or directive style than male leaders.

The correlation between women leaders and better performance may reflect selection bias—where exceptional women break through barriers—or structural advantages unrelated to feminist leadership approaches.

The distinction matters: feminist leadership is values-driven and explicitly seeks to transform power, whereas women in leadership roles may or may not practice leadership grounded in feminist principles. There is a growing recognition that transforming leadership culture requires more than aspirational values—it requires intentional systems for internal accountability, feedback and learning.

Evaluations of participatory grantmaking by funds like Mama Cash and FRIDA similarly highlight the value of trust, shared decision-making, and legitimacy in feminist leadership. Numerous organisations have developed tools for self-assessment to reflect their own leadership practices (e.g., EM2030¹, ActionAid², Oxfam³, COFEM⁴). However, despite this commitment to measure change, there remains no standardised measurement system to

assess progress in implementing feminist leadership practices or its effectiveness. Crucially, what counts as “effective” leadership varies by context: whether one prioritises financial performance, employee well-being, social impact, or transformative change. These differing interpretations underscore the need for grounded, participatory, and values-aligned frameworks that measure feminist leadership on its own terms.

The absence of standardised indicators and tools presents several practical challenges. Organisations struggle to benchmark progress, compare practices across the sector, or demonstrate tangible improvements in their feminist leadership journeys. Without consistent metrics, it is difficult to track meaningful change over time, identify best practices, or hold themselves accountable to their stated feminist values.

This lack of shared standards often leads organisations to develop their own ad hoc assessment tools, resulting in inconsistent methodologies and the potential omission of critical dimensions—such as care, power-sharing, and intersectionality. This gap is both a challenge and an opportunity: it highlights the urgent need for validated, comprehensive, yet adaptable measurement frameworks that support transformation while accommodating diverse organisational contexts and cultures.

A standardised, yet adaptable measurement framework would enable:

- **Benchmarking progress** over time across organisations.
- **Sector-wide learning** by identifying patterns, gaps, and successes.
- **Accountability and trust-building** within organisations and with external stakeholders.
- **Culture changes** through ongoing reflection and evidence-based feedback loops.

Measurement matters not because of compliance but because it enables organisations in making their feminist values visible, trackable, and actionable. It creates space for reflective learning, alignment, and growth—bridging the gap between vision and practice.

Conceptual framework for measuring feminist leadership

At the heart of feminist leadership lies a commitment to destabilising hierarchical power structures and building inclusive, equitable, and caring spaces where all voices—especially those historically marginalised—are heard and valued. Multiple organisations and scholars have proposed conceptual models to guide this work. Across these efforts, these key principles consistently surface: collective power, accountability and self-awareness, intersectionality, empathy and care, transparency, and representation. These principles shape how leadership is enacted on a day-to-day basis, shifting it from a model of authority to one grounded in shared purpose and responsibility.

Measuring feminist leadership, therefore, requires going beyond individual performance metrics. It means evaluating how leadership practices permeate the organisation, cultivate belonging, foster collaboration, and transform accountability systems. A key framework that supports this shift is the "4 Ps" model articulated by Srilatha Batliwala, and others (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010), focusing on Power, Position, Principles, and Practices. This model encourages organisations to interrogate how power operates at every level and align their leadership approach with feminist values in both structure and spirit.

Building on these 4 Ps, it is clear the feminist leadership intervention is about transforming internal level attitudes and practices as well as changing practices across people in the system which is termed here as the external level.

We propose a conceptual framework that maps feminist leadership across two intersecting axes: doing internally focused work versus externally focused work and influencing individual and collective spheres. These axes intersect to form four quadrants where core principles of feminist leadership can be observed and assessed:

- **Internal–Individual:** Self-awareness of power and privilege and personal accountability to one's values and principles; "power within".
- **Internal–Collective:** Care, empathy, collective well-being, cultures of inclusion and psychological safety.
- **External–Collective:** Amplifying underrepresented voices, embedding inclusive, participatory decision-making.
- **External–Individual:** Open communication, building trust with others, transparency and relational integrity.

These four domains exist within and are shaped by the broader organisational ecosystem. Systemic constraints – including organisational policies, regulatory requirements, funding structures, and external political contexts—create both limits and possibilities for what can be achieved at individual and collective levels. For example, rigid governance hierarchies may constrain participatory decision-making, while supportive leave policies enable care-based practices. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for realistic assessment and strategic intervention.

The framework is inherently dynamic and interactive. These domains are not isolated quadrants but mutually reinforcing spheres where changes in one area catalyze transformation in others. Personal accountability (internal-individual) strengthens the foundation for transparent external communication; authentic relationships (external-individual) build trust necessary for collective care cultures (internal-collective); and inclusive organisational cultures (internal-collective) create conditions for systemic voice amplification (external-collective). This interconnectedness means that organisations cannot effectively advance feminist leadership by focusing on only one domain - sustainable transformation requires simultaneous attention across all four.

By aligning leadership practices across these intersecting domains, organisations can translate abstract feminist values into measurable behaviors and observable cultures.

The framework serves as both diagnostic and developmental tool: it enables reflective assessment of current practices while providing clear pathways for action. Leaders can identify specific domains where their organisation excels and where gaps or contradictions exist, then design targeted interventions that address the right level (individual versus collective) through the appropriate approach (inward development versus outward engagement).



Figure 1 Mapping feminist leadership across four domains

Operational framework: translating concepts to indicators

To translate the conceptual model of feminist leadership into practice, we propose a structured, systems-based operational framework for measurement and organisational transformation. Meaningful change cannot be reduced to isolated individual behaviour – it requires intentional shifts across the entire organisational ecosystem: individual mindsets, relational dynamics (teams and peers), and structural systems (policies and governance).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: INTEGRATING SYSTEMS CHANGE AND FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Our approach integrates two foundational bodies of work: the Six Conditions of Systems Change Framework (Kania et al., 2018) and feminist leadership theory (Batliwala, 2010). Both frameworks emphasise that sustainable transformation requires addressing visible and invisible forms of power simultaneously, offering complementary scaffolds for embedding feminist principles into daily operations, institutional culture, and governance practices.

THREE LEVELS OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

The Six Conditions framework identifies three interrelated levels at which change must occur, organised by their visibility and tangibility:

EXPLICIT LEVEL (MOST VISIBLE)

Formal, documented, and readily observable organisational elements:

- **Policies:** Written rules, regulations, HR manuals, codes of conduct
- **Practices:** Documented procedures, standard operating protocols (SOPs), programmatic guidelines
- **Resource Flows:** Budget allocations, salary structures, time distribution, asset management

SEMI-EXPLICIT LEVEL (PARTIALLY VISIBLE)

Interpersonal and organisational dynamics that are observable but not formally documented:

- **Relationships and Networks:** Quality of collaboration, trust between individuals and teams, informal communication patterns
- **Power Dynamics in Practice:** Who actually influences decisions, whose voice carries weight, patterns of deference or dominance in meetings

IMPLICIT LEVEL (LARGELY INVISIBLE)

Deeply embedded beliefs, assumptions, and cultural norms operating largely unconsciously:

- **Mental Models:** Underlying beliefs about leadership, hierarchy, gender roles, whose knowledge counts, what constitutes success
- **Cultural Norms:** Unspoken rules about "how things get done here," what behaviours are rewarded or punished, what gets normalised versus questioned)

ALIGNMENT WITH FEMINIST LEADERSHIP THEORY

These three levels deeply resonate with feminist theory's understanding of how systemic inequality is reproduced:

- Explicit policies and structures create formal advantages for some groups over others
- Semi-explicit relationship patterns enact power dynamics that may contradict stated policies
- Implicit mental models and cultural norms shape interpretation and implementation of both policies and relationships, often perpetuating bias unconsciously

Feminist leadership transformation recognises that change must occur simultaneously across all three levels. As Batliwala (2010) emphasises, altering formal rules alone (explicit) without addressing underlying beliefs (implicit) and relationship patterns (semi-explicit) means new policies will be undermined, resisted, or implemented in ways that reproduce existing inequalities.

FRAMEWORK STRUCTURE: FIVE PRINCIPLES ACROSS THREE LEVELS

Our framework maps five core feminist leadership principles across these three interconnected levels

- Leadership Parity
- Accountability & Transparency
- Safety/Care/Well-Being
- Collaboration
- Wage Equity

At each level these principles can be:

- **Defined:** Clearly articulated in relation to the organisation's specific context and mission
- **Applied:** Embedded in policies (explicit), cultivated in relationships (semi-explicit), and embodied in individual mindsets (implicit)
- **Assessed:** Monitored over time through participatory indicators, feedback loops, and reflection tools appropriate to each level's visibility

This approach enables organizations to move from aspirational values to concrete, trackable transformation.

Importantly, each principle manifests differently across the three levels. For example, accountability at the explicit level involves formal grievance systems, at the semi-explicit level involves peer feedback cultures, and at the implicit level involves internalized beliefs about responsibility for one's impact on others or bias about who should be held accountable.

HOW THE LEVELS INTERACT

The three levels (explicit, semi-explicit and implicit) are deeply interconnected. Individual change or implicit mental models must be supported by healthy relationship dynamics (semi-explicit) and reinforced through institutional systems (explicit policies); or structural policies i.e. explicit shifts are enacted through relationship patterns (semi-explicit) that are shaped by individual beliefs (implicit).

This framework functions as both a diagnostic and a methodology for change—supporting organisations in identifying and shifting towards inclusive, accountable, and care-centered leadership.

In the section that follows, we unpack each level of the framework in more detail, with illustrative examples drawn from feminist leadership toolkits and organisational efforts to operationalise these values.

EXPLICIT – STRUCTURAL LEVEL INCLUDING POLICIES AND REGULATIONS (INSTITUTIONALISING FEMINIST VALUES):

Structural transformation involves embedding feminist principles into the core of organisational operations through formal policies, governance structures, and institutional practices (Batiwala, 2011). Embedding feminist principles and value into the structure ensures their sustenance, beyond the tenure of individual leaders.

Characteristics: Highly visible, relatively easy to measure and change through formal decisions, but changes at this level alone are often superficial and unsustainable without deeper transformation.

SEMI EXPLICIT – RELATIONAL AND NORMS LEVEL:

It interrogates the exercise of power in everyday interactions and organisational culture. It seeks to identify and call out hidden patterns of dominance and microaggressions that often go unrecognised and unchecked, even in organisations that espouse feminist values. The relational patterns shape how individuals relate to one another across hierarchies, teams, identities, and generations within an organisation.

Characteristics: Observable through interaction but not captured in formal documents; shape how explicit policies are implemented; more difficult to change than policies but once changes happen in this space, they are more stable. Measured through staff surveys and observations or qualitative methods.

IMPLICIT – TACIT NORMS AND CULTURE:

The implicit level addresses the innermost layer of leadership within the self. More specifically it refers to individual beliefs, behaviours, biases, beliefs about gender norms, hierarchy, and success. Unspoken rules about "how things are done here," what behaviors are rewarded or

punished, whose knowledge counts and what gets normalized or questioned. It shapes how one responds to conflict, shares power, and acknowledges one’s privilege and positionality within organisations.

Characteristics: Deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes at the individual level, which are largely invisible. These internal mindsets influence how people interpret and respond to changes in policies and relational norms. Transformation at this level requires significant self-reflection and awareness, often supported by perspective building workshops. While it is the most challenging level to change, it can lead to the most transformational shifts.

Measurement domains

Below are the five key feminist leadership principles that would need to be tracked at each of these levels, with examples of types of indicators.

TABLE 1

Leadership Parity: Diversity and inclusion with authentic processes to enable parity including sustaining women's leadership. In policy and practice it can show up as representation and meaningful engagement of diverse voices in leadership, board composition, strategy planning processes.

Explicit: Rules, regulations, policies that inform and encourage parity with inclusion and diversity	Semi-explicit: Norms and relational processes around encouraging distributed decision making and leadership	Implicit: Individual level beliefs and mindset that act as barriers or facilitators to achievement of leadership parity at the explicit and semi explicit level
• Hiring and promotion policy • Transparent criteria for hiring and promotion • Policies around mentorship	• Processes that determine who gets invited into decision making • Processes that define who gets to shape decisions • Inclusion audit processes	• Individual level internalised privilege or bias around certain intersectional identities • Beliefs around who can lead and social capital of a 'good' leader • Beliefs around one's ability of capacity to lead based on one's social privilege and power

TABLE 2

Accountability and transparency: Bidirectional mechanisms that ensure collective responsibility for decisions and actions, alongside systems to prevent and address abuse of power and enforce consequences.

Explicit	Semi-Explicit	Implicit
- Comprehensive, documented grievance redressal system - Publicly accessible or transparently shared budgets - Published board meeting summaries or decisions - Written performance review criteria tied to organisational values - Documented protocols for handling complaints and power abuses - Whistleblower protections and reporting mechanisms - Conflict of interest policies	- Regular organisational feedback and reflection processes (town halls, retrospectives) 360-degree feedback practices that are used - Peer accountability mechanisms within teams - Leaders' responsiveness to staff concerns and questions	- Internalised beliefs and assumptions around who should be held responsible and answerable - Patterns like saviourism, control, or emotional detachment - Lack of prioritisation to address accountability mechanisms in place - Individuals level belief about self-power and authority (recusing from responsibility) - Defensive behaviour round feedback - Perceived impunity to feedback

TABLE 3

Safety, care and empathy: This includes safeguarding protocols, survivor-centred complaint mechanisms, and zero-tolerance policies for harassment and discrimination.

Explicit	Semi-Explicit	Implicit
• Written safeguarding and anti-harassment policies • Survivor-centered complaint mechanisms with clear processes • Zero-tolerance policies with documented consequences • Flexible work policies (remote work, flexible hours) • Comprehensive leave policies (caregiving, bereavement, mental health, menstrual leave, maternity and paternity) • Mental health benefits and employee assistance programs • Budget allocated specifically for staff well-being • Physical safety measures (secure spaces, emergency protocol, safety trainings) • Ways of working policy	• Team cultures where asking for help or support is normalised versus stigmatized • Leaders modeling boundary-setting and rest (not just permission but practice) • Peer support systems and mutual aid practices • How care responsibilities are discussed and accommodated • Response patterns when someone experiences harm (support vs. silencing) • Psychological safety in meetings (can people dissent, admit mistakes)	• Belief that care is central to (not opposed to) productivity and excellence • Rejection of glorification of overwork • Value placed on rest, sustainability, and work-life integration • Assumptions about whose care needs are legitimate (gendered, racialised patterns) • Comfort with emotional expression and vulnerability in professional settings • Beliefs about whether asking for accommodation signals weakness • Mental models about who is "resilient" and who "needs support"

TABLE 4

Collaboration: Designing decision-making and strategic planning processes that shift away from hierarchical, siloed power which can be situated in conflict resolution policies.

Explicit	Semi-Explicit	Implicit
• Documented participatory decision-making protocols • Co-leadership or rotating leadership structures • Cross-functional team mandates and integration mechanisms • Conflict resolution policies emphasising dialogue and repair • Meeting protocols designed for equitable participation • Collaborative performance metrics (team vs. only individual goals) • Knowledge-sharing systems and platforms • Use of tools that promote cross team engagement and collaboration; teams, slack, Microsoft planner	• Who speaks and is heard in meetings (time distribution, interruption patterns) • How ideas are developed led by or co creation • Credit-sharing practices (whose contributions get recognised) • Practices of attrition or contribution • Cross-team information flow and coordination • How conflicts are handled (competitive vs. collaborative approaches) • Inclusion of diverse perspectives in planning processes • Quality of listening and building on others' ideas	• Beliefs about what constitutes "expertise" (credentials vs. lived experience) • Assumptions about whether collaboration slows things down or improves quality • Perfectionism and control tendencies versus trust in collective process • Beliefs about whether good ideas come from individuals or groups • Value placed on relationships and process versus only outcomes

TABLE 5

Wage Equity: Structural expression of feminist commitment to economic justice. It means not only eliminating unjustified pay gaps by gender but also assessing compensation structures for positional and racial disparities

Explicit	Semi-Explicit	Implicit
• Written compensation policy: Documented framework for how salaries are determined, including clear criteria and rationale • Published salary bands: Transparent pay ranges for each role or level, accessible to all staff • Equal pay for equal work standards: Policy explicitly stating commitment to eliminating unjustified pay disparities by gender, race, caste, and other identities • Regular pay equity audits • Market benchmarking and transparent criteria for progression	• Open discussions about compensation • Transparency around criteria for salary gaps and progression scales • Fairness perception among different tiers of staff • Perception on 'value' of certain roles • Patterns of negotiation across groups and by certain categories (race gender class caste gender diversity disability)	• Beliefs around meritocracy • Class assumptions: Are there unspoken beliefs about who "needs" money versus who works for passion/mission? Does this correlate with class, privilege and access? • Worthiness based on credentials vs. experience • Beliefs about "market value": Are market rates accepted uncritically, or is there recognition that markets reflect existing biases? Is willingness to pay for certain roles questioned? • Deservingness narratives

Methods

To translate this framework into practice, a participatory, iterative approach to tool development and validation is recommended. This would involve designing self-assessment tools and indicators grounded in the three levels, followed by a series of facilitated workshops to socialise these tools with interested organisations. Data should be collected from a cohort of organisations that already have baseline data through GH5050 or have been independently tracking their internal leadership and equity practices. This will allow correlation of new feminist leadership indicators with existing metrics to validate relevance and alignment. Currently the available data may be restricted to select indicators at the explicit level for each of these principles.

Explicit-level measurement is relatively straightforward through document review and quantitative analysis, but risks superficiality. Organisations can have exemplary policies that exist only on paper.

Semi-explicit-level measurement requires resource-intensive qualitative methods: observation of meetings and interactions, staff surveys about relationship quality and power dynamics, network analysis of communication patterns, and focus groups exploring collaboration and inclusion. These methods demand time, expertise, and participant trust.

Implicit-level measurement is most challenging, requiring deep interpretive work to surface unconscious assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs. This involves in-depth interviews, participatory reflection processes, cultural assessment, and analysis of language and framing – approaches that are subjective, context-dependent, and difficult to standardise or compare across organisations.

Given these constraints, we recommend periodic comprehensive staff surveys as the most feasible measurement approach for most organisations. Conducted every 2-3 years, well-designed surveys can capture:

- **Explicit-level data:** Awareness and utilisation of policies, demographic representation, resource access
- **Semi-explicit-level data:** Perceptions of fairness, experiences of inclusion/exclusion, quality of communication, trust levels, power dynamics in practice
- **Implicit-level data:** Beliefs about leadership, assumptions about whose contributions matter, comfort with vulnerability and care, attitudes toward hierarchy and power

The intention should be to build a cohort of motivated organisations that are willing to delve deeper into the semi explicit and the implicit domains. With consensus through workshops across settings key indicators could be prioritised for which tools would need to be developed for data collection (through staff surveys for example). The tools and indicators should then be piloted, tested, and refined in real-world settings. The goal is to streamline a set of easy-to-use indicators that are context-sensitive yet comparable across organisations. These tools should be capable of tracking progress over time while encouraging reflective learning. The paper recommends inviting a motivated cohort of volunteer organisations to engage in this testing phase, leveraging their internal commitment to feminist values and change to co-develop practical, usable measurement strategies.

- **Importance vs Relevance:** Distinguish between what's important for feminist leadership and what's merely relevant or politically correct?
- **Feasibility Focus:** Direct question about measurement difficulty and cost?
- **Utility for Change:** Whether tracking actually drives improvement or just creates empty compliance?
- **Actionability:** Whether poor scores lead to concrete improvement steps?



Figure 2 Building a Feminist Leadership Ecosystem

Analysis

For organisations for which Global 50/50 has baseline data on policies, further analysis can be conducted by correlating this existing data with indicators gathered through a feminist leadership self-assessment tool that captures key indicators across the three levels. Some of these baseline indicators may align with core dimensions of feminist leadership and can serve as proxy measures for identifying positive practices.

The analysis can generate an overall score assessing how effectively an organisation is fostering an enabling environment through supportive policies and practices. Each of the three levels and four framework domains internally, internal/collective, external/individual, and external/collective – can be evaluated against specific indicators or parameters. Based on performance, organisations can be categorised into three levels of alignment: Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced.

This scoring and classification system sheds light on the degree of alignment between current organisational practices and the broader feminist leadership framework. It also provides organisations with a roadmap for targeted improvement and learning.

To ensure contextual relevance, analysis should account for legal and cultural contexts, especially in environments where rights-based policies may be mandated. Piloting the framework internally through staff surveys and reflective workshops can offer deeper insights and serve as a foundation for refining the measurement process and ensuring its adaptability to diverse organisational contexts.

Use different data collection methods appropriate to each level:

- **Explicit:** Document review, quantitative indicators
- **Semi-explicit:** Observation, surveys, network analysis
- **Implicit:** In-depth interviews, participatory reflection, cultural assessment

Challenges

While this framework provides a comprehensive approach to assessing feminist leadership, significant practical challenges exist in its implementation – particularly around data availability, measurement complexity, and organisational motivation.

The most fundamental challenge is that much of the data required for this assessment is not publicly available. Unlike financial metrics or program outputs that organisations routinely report, information about internal power dynamics, compensation equity, decision-making processes, and organisational culture is rarely documented or disclosed externally.

This data challenge means external stakeholders – including funders, researchers, or the public – cannot readily assess organisational feminist leadership without active cooperation from the organisation itself. The framework therefore relies on self-assessment and internal development tools as much as external evaluation or benchmarking exercises.

Another limitation is that feminist leadership measures are deeply contextual. What constitutes equitable compensation, appropriate power-sharing, or effective care policies varies significantly based on sector norms, size, legal requirements, resources, historical legacy to name a few issues.

Perhaps the deepest challenge is cultivating intrinsic organisational motivation to engage in this difficult, often uncomfortable work. Measuring feminist leadership reveals gaps between values and practice, surfaces power imbalances, and requires acknowledging complicity in oppressive systems. Intrinsic motivation — either driven by the desire to understand practices against values or the belief that feminist leadership helps improve organisational functioning — must therefore be cultivated.

Recommended approach: participatory development and testing

Given these challenges, we recommend a participatory, iterative approach to translating this framework into practice. This involves:

Building a Committed Cohort: Invite motivated organizations—particularly those already tracking internal equity practices or participating in initiatives like the FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders Monitor⁵ or Global50/50—to co-develop and pilot assessment tools grounded in this framework.

Prioritising Feasibility: Recognize that while comprehensive measurement across all three levels is ideal, periodic staff surveys (conducted every 2-3 years) offer the most practical approach for most organizations. Well-designed surveys can capture explicit-level data (policy awareness, demographic representation), semi-explicit-level data (perceptions of fairness, power dynamics in practice), and implicit-level data (beliefs about leadership, comfort with vulnerability and care).

Enabling Depth: For organizations with capacity and commitment, encourage deeper qualitative work—observations, focus groups, participatory reflection processes—particularly at the semi-explicit and implicit levels where the most transformative change occurs.

Correlating with Existing Data: Where baseline data exists (such as through GH5050), correlate new feminist leadership indicators with existing metrics to validate relevance, identify patterns, and build evidence for what drives genuine transformation.

Refining Through Practice: Pilot tools in real-world settings, gather feedback, and iteratively refine indicators to balance rigor with usability, standardization with context-sensitivity, and comprehensiveness with feasibility.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined both the rationale and the complexity of measuring feminist leadership in organizations committed to social justice. While discourse on feminist leadership has expanded significantly, a critical gap remains in translating aspirational values into measurable, trackable transformation. The framework proposed here—grounded in systems change theory and organized across explicit, semi-explicit, and implicit levels—offers a pathway for organizations to move beyond rhetoric toward genuine accountability.

The value of this framework lies not merely in measurement for its own sake, but in its dual function as both diagnostic and developmental. By mapping five core feminist leadership principles—Leadership Parity, Accountability & Transparency, Safety/Care/Empathy, Collaboration, and Wage Equity—across structural, relational, and individual levels, organizations gain a comprehensive lens for understanding where transformation is taking root and where it remains superficial. This approach recognizes that changing formal policies without addressing underlying power dynamics and mental models will inevitably reproduce existing inequalities in new forms.

The framework underscores that feminist leadership cannot be reduced to women's representation in leadership positions, progressive policies documented in handbooks, or even strong organizational performance. Rather, it requires simultaneous transformation across all three levels—embedding feminist values in institutional structures, cultivating them in relationship patterns and organizational culture, and embodying them in individual mindsets and behaviors.

Annex

DOMAIN	PRINCIPLE	EXPLICIT (POLICIES & SYSTEMS)	SEMI-EXPLICIT (NORMS & PROCESSES)	IMPLICIT (INTERNALIZED BELIEFS & PRACTICES)
Inclusion & Leadership Parity	Equal access, diversity, non-discrimination	Hiring & promotion quotas; transparent criteria; mentorship policies	Who gets invited into leadership discussions; whose voices shape decisions; inclusion audits	Leaders reflect on privilege/bias; staff unlearn internalized exclusion; recognition of intersecting identities
Wage & Pay Equity	Fairness and transparency in resource distribution	Pay transparency policies; compensation audits; published salary bands	Equitable workload distribution; reviews of promotion patterns; staff input in policy review	Challenging meritocracy myths; recognizing undervalued “feminized” labor
Care & Well-Being	Care as core to leadership and organizational culture	Caregiving leave, mental health support, flexible work	Regular care check-ins; organizational rituals that normalize rest and emotional well-being	Leaders model vulnerability; staff challenge internalized guilt around care; normalization of collective well-being
Safety & Protection	Safe, stigma-free, accountable workplace	Anti-harassment & safeguarding policies; grievance redress	Confidential reporting processes; regular training; active monitoring of safety culture	Recognizing how fear, silence, or stigma are internalized; unlearning normalization of harm
Accountability & Transparency	Shared responsibility and trust	Public budgets; staff access to board minutes; participatory evaluations	Regular reviews with staff/community; inclusive decision-making forums	Leaders admit mistakes; culture of feedback and reflexivity; dismantling deference to authority
Collaboration & Shared Power	Collective agency over hierarchy	Co-leadership structures; conflict resolution policies	Cross-team agenda setting; participatory planning tools (Slack, Miro, etc.)	Shifting from competition to solidarity; unlearning hierarchical conditioning; valuing interdependence

Feminist leadership domains and principles across explicit, semi-explicit and implicit levels.

Notes

- 1 EM2030 Equal Measures 2030 <https://equalmeasures2030.org/>
- 2 <https://actionaid.org/feminist-leadership>
- 3 <https://www.indikit.net/document/88-a-how-to-guide-to-measuring-womens-empowerment>
- 4 https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/COFEM_Learning-Brief-Series_Digital.pdf
- 5 The FAIR SHARE Monitor: <https://fairsharewl.org/info-monitor/>

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