



Learning Through Practice

INSIGHTS & LESSONS FROM THE
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF WOMEN JUDGES (IAWJ)

Overview of Women in Leadership Community of Practice

The Women in Leadership Community of Practice (CoP), convened by Busara Africa, brings together eighteen (18) Co-Impact partners from Kenya, Nigeria, India and the Americas who are driving institutional change to advance women's leadership in law and economics.

During a recent virtual convening, the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) shared their work advancing women's leadership within their context. Here are eight (8) key insights that emerged from that conversation.

2. Learnings: Insights from Practice

1. Feminist Mentorship Must Include Sponsorship

Mentorship plays a vital role in building confidence, offering guidance, and strengthening individual capacity. However, mentorship alone does not guarantee access to opportunities or decision-making spaces. Sponsorship is what shifts potential into progression. It involves individuals in positions of influence actively advocating, endorsing, and opening doors for others. Without sponsorship, mentorship risks becoming advisory rather than transformative.

REFLECTION

Where in your context is mentorship strong, but sponsorship missing? Who holds the power to sponsor, and how are they being engaged?

2. Institutional Change Requires Both Relationship-Building and Formal Partnerships

Informal relationships can open doors, but sustained institutional change depends on structured, intentional partnerships with key actors. Engaging institutions as partners, rather than stakeholders to be influenced from the outside, creates the conditions for shifts in policy, norms, and practice.

REFLECTION

Are your current relationships translating into formal commitments and accountability within institutions?

3. Advancing Women's Leadership Requires Shifting Systems, Not Just Individuals

Capacity-building at the individual level is important, but it is not sufficient to drive lasting change. Enduring progress requires engaging with the systems that shape access to leadership, policies, structures, norms, and incentives.

REFLECTION

Where are you focusing more on individuals than the system that shapes their opportunities?

4. Power and Political Awareness Are Central to Institutional Change

Technical solutions alone cannot drive institutional transformation. Understanding how decisions are made and who influences them is critical. Power is not static; it is exercised through formal and informal channels. Effective strategies account for both.

REFLECTION

How well do you understand the decision-making landscape in your context? Where is influence actually happening?

5. Data Must Be Designed for Influence, Not Just Reporting

Data becomes powerful when it informs decisions and shifts priorities. Disaggregated, context-specific data is especially valuable when used strategically to engage decision-makers and challenge assumptions. Data that cannot be used in decision-making spaces has limited impact.

REFLECTION

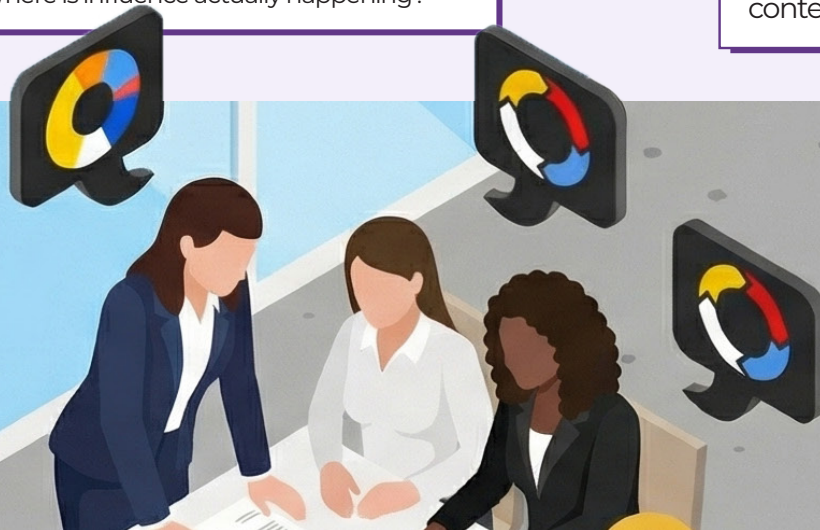
How is your data being used in decision spaces? Is it influencing decisions, or only documenting progress?

6. Care and Safety Are Foundational to Leadership

Leadership pathways are shaped by access to enabling conditions. Without attention to care responsibilities and safety, participation remains unequal. These are not additional considerations; they are core to whether leadership is accessible and sustainable.

REFLECTION

What barriers related to care and safety still exist in your context, and how are they being addressed?



7. Narratives Shape Who Is Seen as a Leader

Leadership is not only about capability, it is also about perception. Perceptions of leadership are influenced by dominant narratives. Visibility and storytelling play a critical role in challenging existing norms and expanding ideas of who belongs in leadership. Changing narratives is a necessary strategy for shifting institutional culture and expectations.

REFLECTION

Whose stories are visible in your context? Whose leadership is being normalised or overlooked?

8. Sustainable Change Depends on Local Ownership and Institutional Embedding

Change is most durable when it is owned within institutions and embedded in their structures. Local champions, formal roles, and internal systems ensure that progress continues beyond external support. External actors play a critical role, but the goal is to strengthen internal capacity, not replace it.

REFLECTION

How embedded is your work within local institutions? What would it take for it to sustain without external support?

Conclusion

Across these insights, a common thread emerges: advancing women's leadership requires working at the level of systems, power, and institutions, not just individuals.

As a community of practice, the question is not only what we know, but:

- What we are actively testing
- What we are willing to shift
- And how we are influencing the systems we operate within.