USING RESEARCH FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE

IDRC | CRDI
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BACKGROUND

The new Sustainable Development Goals underscore the critical objective to "leave no one behind"—but important gaps in data prevent the global community from fully seeing, counting and valuing women, girls and other marginalized populations. The challenges affecting these individuals are not always known or well understood, which makes it impossible to effectively meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

> ### Gender-Transformative Change (GTC)
> *Striving towards changes that address the root causes of gender inequality, moving beyond the individual to the structural*

IDRC and AJWS designed a study to unpack actionable feminist research practices that can be used to increase the impact of research on gender-transformative change (GTC). The researchers conducted a comprehensive literature review 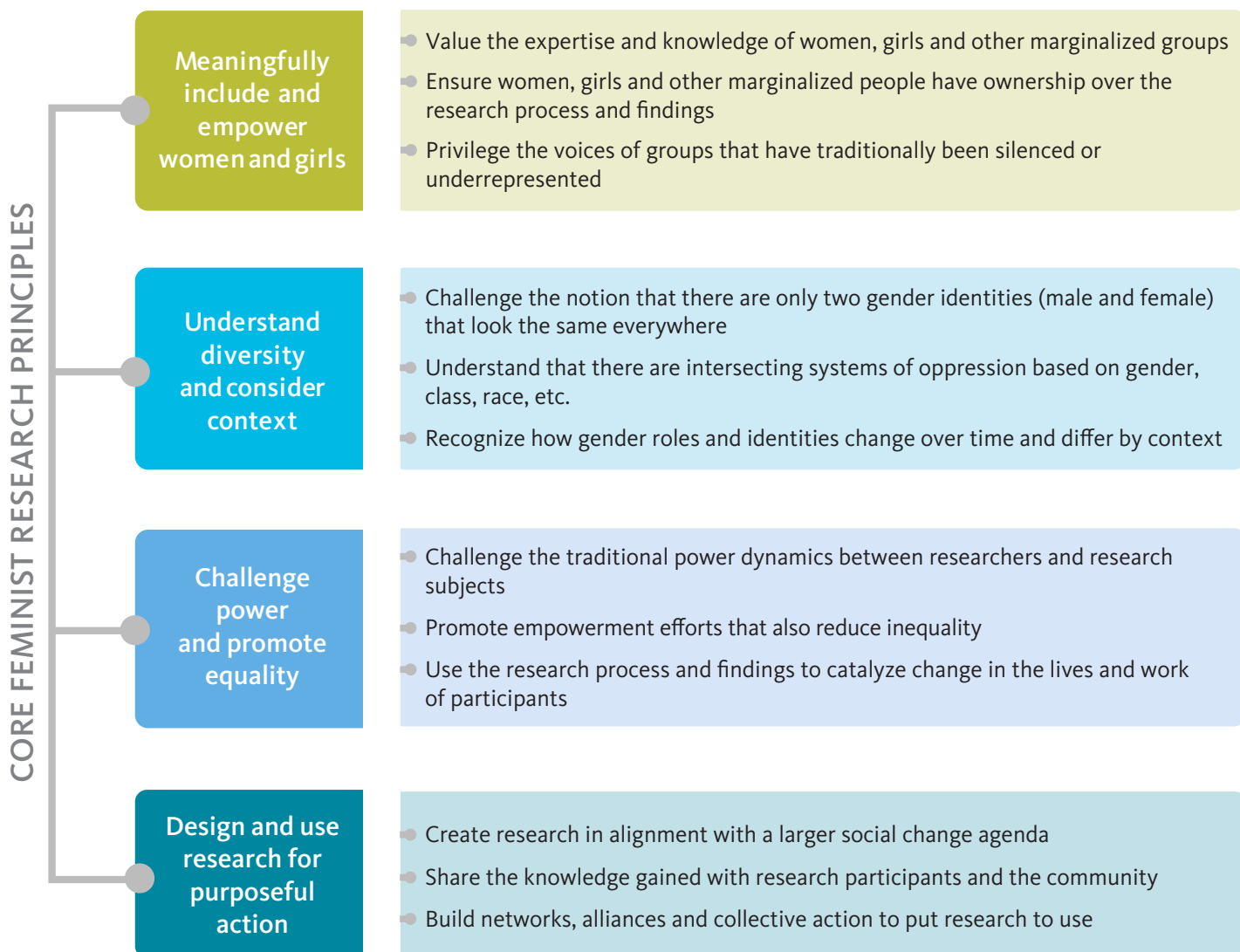and interviews with 19 GTC leaders from 17 academic and advocacy organizations worldwide. Questions revolved around how organizations conceptualize GTC, the role of research in reducing gender inequalities and the best practices for research leading to GTC.

WHAT RESEARCH PRINCIPLES DRIVE GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE?

Interviewees—along with other experts surveyed via the literature review—indicated that several core principles (see graphic below) are crucial to building a research practice with the potential to transform the lives of women and girls. Most of these principles are closely related to well-established feminist and critical theory approaches to research. The common agreement about these principles suggests that they are critical to achieving gender-transformative change.

What Is Feminist Research?

Feminist research refers to a range of methodologies or approaches to conducting and using research that challenge patriarchy, promote gender equality and work

CORE FEMINIST RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

Meaningfully include and empower women and girls
- Value the expertise and knowledge of women, girls and other marginalized groups
- Ensure women, girls and other marginalized people have ownership over the research process and findings
- Privilege the voices of groups that have traditionally been silenced or underrepresented

Understand diversity and consider context
- Challenge the notion that there are only two gender identities (male and female) that look the same everywhere
- Understand that there are intersecting systems of oppression based on gender, class, race, etc.
- Recognize how gender roles and identities change over time and differ by context

Challenge power and promote equality
- Challenge the traditional power dynamics between researchers and research subjects
- Promote empowerment efforts that also reduce inequality
- Use the research process and findings to catalyze change in the lives and work of participants

Design and use research for purposeful action
- Create research in alignment with a larger social change agenda
- Share the knowledge gained with research participants and the community
- Build networks, alliances and collective action to put research to use

for social change. Feminist research seeks to remove power imbalances inherent in research processes and correct for biases that shape what we know. Feminist approaches surface the discrimination women and girls confront based on gender, age, caste, class and other factors, along with the deeply ingrained nature of gender inequality at social, structural and political levels.

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH?

Translating core feminist research principles into practice can be challenging, and there is no single approach that works for all research projects. However, a variety of best practices (see graphic below) can guide application of these principles at each stage of the research, from planning to implementation to dissemination and utilization.

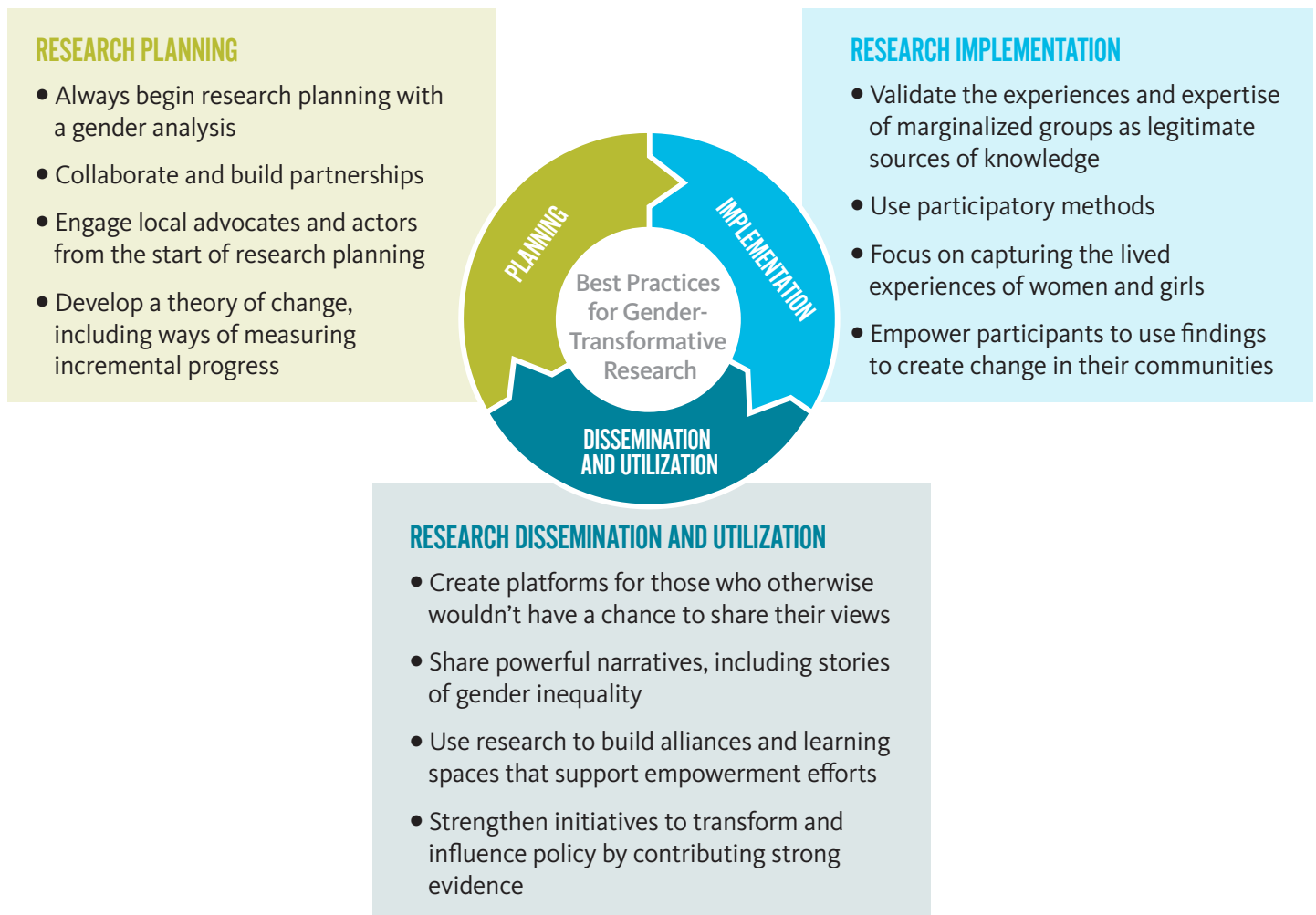## HOW HAVE ORGANIZATIONS PUT THESE BEST PRACTICES TO WORK?

Research Planning

The Indian NGO Abhivyakti Media for Development is engaging local young women leaders to conduct an action research project in 10 rural communities on the issues of young women's education, livelihoods and rights. During the planning stage, they partnered with other local organizations to host a workshop for the youth. The workshop included a gender analysis, in which adolescents identified the factors that nurture and hinder the growth of young girls in their communities, then explored links between patriarchy, poverty and powerlessness. The adolescents developed a theory of change for analyzing what keeps young women from participating in literacy and basic skills programs and how to use findings to advocate for new services and policy changes.

Research Implementation

The international media and human rights NGO Video Volunteers challenges ideas about who gets to create knowledge by training community members to use cameras for community storytelling. The participatory methods allow people to speak directly about their lived experiences on video, rather than being spoken for. Video Volunteers then empowers participants to create change in their communities by incorporating the videos into formats that can be used to pressure government officials to act.

RESEARCH PLANNING

- Always begin research planning with a gender analysis
- Collaborate and build partnerships
- Engage local advocates and actors from the start of research planning
- Develop a theory of change, including ways of measuring incremental progress

RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

- Validate the experiences and expertise of marginalized groups as legitimate sources of knowledge
- Use participatory methods
- Focus on capturing the lived experiences of women and girls
- Empower participants to use findings to create change in their communities

Best Practices for Gender-Transformative Research

PLANNING · IMPLEMENTATION · DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION

- Create platforms for those who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to share their views
- Share powerful narratives, including stories of gender inequality
- Use research to build alliances and learning spaces that support empowerment efforts
- Strengthen initiatives to transform and influence policy by contributing strong evidence

Research Dissemination and Utilization

An organization* in Egypt crowdsources reports of sexual harassment and assault to promote change. The tool creates a platform for women to anonymously report incidents. This allows women to share narratives that broaden the community's understanding of the forms sexual harassment can take. By disseminating map results through TV and social media, the project staff built alliances and provided evidence that helped spur activism among 20 anti-harassment groups and agencies. As a result, the government set up dozens of safe zones with increased police presence and Cairo University implemented a new sexual harassment policy.

EXPANDING THE USE OF FEMINIST RESEARCH: NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

To more effectively use feminist research as a social change tool, donors, governments, organizations and researchers will have to address the following needs.

Need 1: Guidance and support for organizations on how to adopt feminist principles and engage in feminist research

Opportunities:

- Develop a curriculum for staff trainings on feminist research.
- Facilitate cross-organizational dialogue on internal policies and grantmaking practices that best support GTC.

Need 2: Greater collaboration dedicated to increasing and improving feminist research practices

Opportunities:

- Create spaces for practitioners, advocates, academics and researchers to share learnings about methodologies and approaches.
- Train donors and stakeholders on the many uses of feminist research.
- Support organizations to conduct action-oriented research that brings local expertise into national and global advocacy spaces.

Need 3: More data and evidence that measures GTC across sectors

Opportunities:

- Build evidence on how gender empowerment can contribute to reducing poverty and other societal ills.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks that reflect what increased gender equality would look like in a project.
- Create feminist measurement tools for the Sustainable Development Goals that make inequalities visible and that aim to direct resources to the most effective interventions that help those typically left behind.

THE TAKE-AWAY

The community of researchers, practitioners and advocates dedicated to feminist research is growing rapidly. Now is the time to seize the opportunity to better organize the field, increase expertise through collaborative networks and ensure that funding for this critical work is sustained.

Name of organization withheld due to security concerns