

# Feminist Governance

## The Power Up Programme





“

When breaches happen, the solution isn't to throw away the system, but lean into those accountability mechanisms.”

**Mukami Marete**  
UHAI

# Contents

1. Why is governance relevant to power and movements?	4
• FRIDA, Global South	5
• UHAI, East Africa Sexual Health and Rights Initiative	6
• Young Women's Trust, UK	7
2. Cross-cutting challenges and lessons learnt	8
3. Resources	13
• Resources produced by Power Up Groups	13
• Resources from the field	13
4. Acknowledgements	14
Interrogating Power and Movements	15

Power Up: a programme funded by Comic Relief

# 1. Why is governance relevant to power and movements?

Governance is the system by which entities are controlled and directed. It influences how an organisation's objectives are set and achieved, how risk is monitored and addressed and how performance is optimised.

- It is conventionally conceptualised as the role of an organisation's board, which has power over the organisation's direction, resources and staff.
- Many governance systems lack compassion, exercising 'power over' staff and volunteers.
- Feminist movements seek to shape governance that aligns with their values of accountability to their constituents and those most affected by inequities, so that they model 'power with' and 'power to'.
- Feminist governance means identifying all of the spaces that shape an organisation's strategic direction and accountability and then interrogating where power lies and how it is exercised, as a basis for establishing meaningful accountability to constituents in the first instance, and to boards and funders.



**Feminist governance means identifying all of the spaces that shape an organisation's strategic direction and accountability and then interrogating where power lies and how it is exercised."**



## FRIDA, Global South

### Aim

- Enable participatory decision-making, disrupting outdated ideas about hierarchy and power.

### Sources:

- Mbali Khumalo, 'Maintaining and fostering trust and growth in leadership of movements in digital/ virtual working spaces – Learnings from FRIDA, The Young Feminist Fund', Power Up Workshop, 12 May 2021;
- Mbali Khumalo (FRIDA) on 'Governance: What are we testing and learning and feminist and democratic forms of governance and accountability to our constituencies', 3 November 2021;
- Majandra Rodriguez, FRIDA Young Women's Fund, discussant in Power Up Workshop, 26 January 2022.

### How we used our power in our organisation – strategies

- Produced the Happiness Manifesto on care and wellbeing practices in which staff commit to show up with honesty, vulnerability, as their true selves. FRIDA worked to make this real in its internal working. For example, with Covid, staff sharing how they were being personally affected, and out of that, identifying what steps to take; holding quarterly team reviews not only to reflect on work, but also about how each staff member feels supported in their team.
- Within three months of Covid, developed support mechanisms to enable staff to do the work even under Covid conditions – access to coaching, emergency support stipend.
- Being very clear as part of change management about what the organisation is and stands for and putting in time to ensure the whole team is aligned with that vision.

- Compulsory in-person annual team meeting.
- Quarterly team reviews and semesterly staff reviews include reflections about work and how it feels to work at FRIDA.
- Consistent transparency and participatory decision-making processes including from junior to senior staff participating in creating human resources policies that promote equity and fairness.
- Recruiting more human resources support.
- Every call starts with mandatory check-in questions.
- Sharing work priorities on SLACK and having an organisational calendar.
- Power Up: Strengthening women's movements – Comic Relief 6
- Safe online platforms; sharing responsibility for facilitation and note-taking;
- No knowledge hoarding – organisational issues and challenges are documented and available to all staff.
- Leadership playing a facilitative role rather than imposing decisions – ensuring there are spaces and resources so staff can contribute to collective reflection and decision-making – an infrastructure for participation.
- Whistleblower policy and clear escalation processes. Transparency about processes of accountability in case of any form of abuse of power by senior staff.
- All staff review leaders annually and are kept in the loop about relationship between co-exec directors and board.
- Hired external (non-FRIDA) Community Care Facilitators to work with grantees who have asked FRIDA for support in conflict mediation, healing and restorative justice processes (so that grantees aren't made vulnerable by having to share internal challenges with their funder).

## UHA, East Africa Sexual Health and Rights Initiative

### Aim

As a participatory, activist-led grantmaker, ensure that decision-making power resides with grant beneficiaries and the broader movement in keeping with UHA's values around agency, power sharing and the belief that people who are affected by decisions need to be involved in making those decisions.

### Sources:

- Mukami Marete, UHA EASHRI 'Exploring Governance', Power Up Workshop 'Governance: What are we testing and learning on feminist and democratic forms of governance and accountability to our constituencies', 3 November 2021.



**Our internal policies have been developed through engagement with all staff – if a policy affects staff then they need to be involved in generating it and to understand its rationale."**



### How we used our power in our organisation – strategies

- Established governance mechanisms beyond board decision-making so that all key areas of work are guided by our constituency. For example, a Peer Grants Committee directing how the majority of grants are made; a Knowledge, Evaluation and Learning Activist Task Force to inform our evaluation framework; committees to shape our convenings.
- Strategic planning over some months through conversations in all 7 countries to ensure vision, mission and priorities still align with the movement's priorities.
- UHA's policies and procedures (all manuals) are collectively developed and reviewed. Our internal policies have been developed through engagement with all staff – if a policy affects staff then they need to be involved in generating it and to understand its rationale.
- Continuous strengthening of our systems and of leadership capacities of all of those involved since inception in 2009.
- Weathering challenges that have arisen as issues of conflict of interest have surfaced and been addressed including, learning how to help people recognise and name what are and what are not conflicts of interest.
- Question and change governance processes when needed, for example, currently have a Board and staff committee to steer UHA through a five-month transition plan reflecting on the pros and cons of our shared leadership approach including co-executive directorship.

## Young Women's Trust, UK

### Aim

Redress the hierarchy between paid staff and service users so that young women's expertise shapes internal policy and processes.

### Sources:

- Diana Galloway, Young Women's Trust, discussant in Power Up Workshop, 26 January 2021;
- Young Women's Trust Final Report to Comic Relief, September 2022; Eleanor Davies-Lawley.

### How we used our power in our organisation – strategies

- Advisory Panel of young women informs our governance strategies – ran focus groups on how they see their role in governance and actioned their feedback.
- Have joint meetings with the Board of Trustees and Advisory Panel throughout the year.
- The Panel have received governance training from the Young Trustees Movement.
- Have transparent conversations with senior members of staff and administrators on their wellbeing and what more YWT can do
- Findings of research designed and conducted by minoritised women peer researchers were shared with YWT's Equity,

Diversity and Inclusion working group and fed into the three year Action Plan.

- Created a participation programme so young women who have used YWT's services can get involved in shaping the work – for example, by research or media. They shape how to tell their stories, what the boundaries should be and support each other.
- Ambassadors programme shares the stories.
- In 2020 ran a Digital Inclusion Fund pilot where we supported 61 young women facing digital exclusion with laptops, a year of data and smart phones.
- Identifying the skills staff carry, for example, in facilitation, and building those among young women with facilitation training so that they now lead workshops they were previously participants in; they co-design rather than staff telling them.



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## 2. Cross-cutting challenges and lessons learnt

### Challenges

- Substantive consultation internally and with diverse constituencies in multiple countries takes time and resources.
- Staff time is a big challenge because these processes take a lot of time and 'some decisions just take the time they take to make'.
- The larger the organisation's staff or constituents to which it is accountable, the harder it is to build the necessary relationships.

### Lessons learnt

- Governance processes must be planned for timeously; they must be resourced with time and funds.
- Good governance is premised on building of trust which requires relationship-building.

### Challenges

- When all staff and at minimum leadership of constituency groups are involved in shaping governance, it is relatively easy to model the values articulated in our policies. But as staff or volunteers move on, sustaining that understanding and those ways of operating can be a challenge.

### Lessons learnt

- The goal is to build trust-based accountability and focus on sustaining that as the actual members of different decision-making groups changes over time. This requires both putting significant care into selection or election of representatives onto any bodies responsible for any aspect of governance, so that they share the values of the organisation, and doing continual orientation and reminders to all participants of organisational policies and values.

### Challenges

- New staff members can find it difficult to understand their organisation especially when its history or practices lack transparency and misinformation abounds.

### Lessons learnt

- The goal is to build trust-based accountability and focus on sustaining that as the actual members of different decision-making groups changes over time. This requires both putting significant care into selection or election of representatives onto any bodies responsible for any aspect of governance, so that they share the values of the organisation, and doing continual orientation and reminders to all participants of organisational policies and values.

### Challenges

- We live in a deeply violent world and carry lots of pain and trauma depending on our intersecting identities. We bring that into our organisations.
- The workspace itself might cause harm to individuals or the organisation.

### Lessons learnt

- As part of governance, organisations have to identify firstly how to not do harm to staff or constituents, and need an agreed set of policies and standards for addressing any harm they do.
- Leadership has to hold that complexity with patience and care and humility – an unlearning and decolonising process. So feminist leadership involves a lot of emotional labour.

### Challenges

- In a culture committed to participation and collective decision-making, as well as to enabling staff wellbeing, the demands on leadership to support every issue facing any staff member can become insurmountable, as can lack of balance in an organisation between staff needs and getting the work done.

### Lessons learnt

- Feminist leadership have to remain clear that there's a boundary – 'We're here together to do work, it is not about friendship – what can I deal with that allows us to do our work better, and what is not my responsibility to deal with?'
- Organisations need to continually articulate and return to the values they're aiming for. One Power Up group, GLITCH, chooses one value a month which staff review in meetings, what it means and how the team or individuals have exemplified that.



## Challenges

- A culture committed to participation and collective decision-making can make demands of staff and volunteers that go beyond what they consider reasonable in relation to their experience, time and resources. Participation can feel coerced. Where do we draw the line between collaborative processes and someone having a (paid) role to lead and do the often difficult organisational culture work to enable collective decision-making?

## Lessons learnt

- Ensure that those in leadership positions are able to take the risk of making decisions in an effective process of participatory decision-making.
- Organisations need to be clear that there are differences not of hierarchy or superiority, but about roles – the leadership of an organisation carry more risk and responsibilities.

## Challenges

- Having one or two constituency representatives on a board doesn't really talk to ensuring our overall direction is consistent with the lived experience of constituents more generally.
- Finding ways for constituents (or representatives of any excluded group) to contribute to governance without them feeling as though they need to share their lived experience, or they are only there because of their lived experience.

## Lessons learnt

- Recruiting so that the majority of board members hold deep experience of our constituency is essential both for any community representatives to feel comfortable and for their expertise and experience to shape our direction.
- Having people with a mix of roles on the board, from financial management to working on the ground, the board will understand the organisation's reality better and make better decisions.

## Challenges

- Those most connected to the movement are likely to be well placed for decision-making roles which makes conflicts of interests inevitable.
- When a member breaches trust – how do we compassionately and empathetically co-create solutions for building that trust back and how do we deal with the effects of a process or trust that hasn't been honoured?

## Lessons learnt

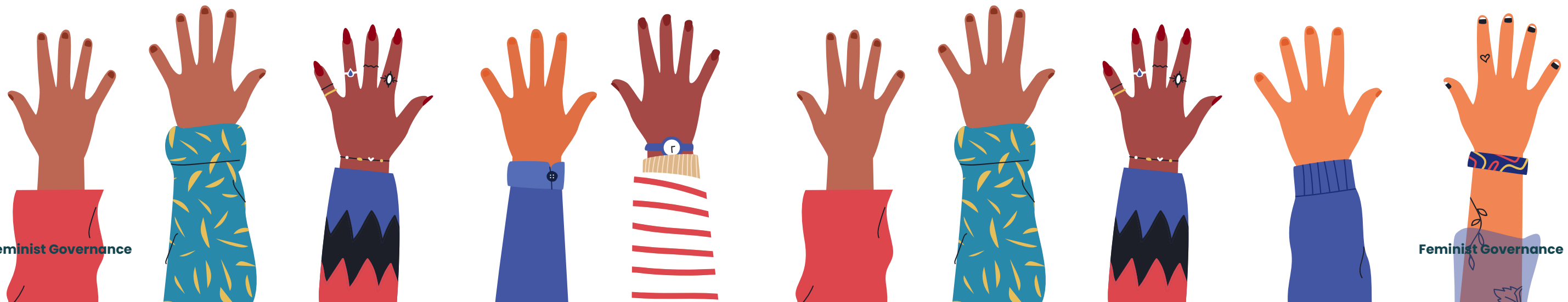
- All those participating in governance need to be oriented to feminist values in the approach to governance, including their own roles and responsibilities and how to identify and address conflicts of interest.
- The structure in which a member broke trust needs to address the breach of trust, demonstrating collective responsibility for governance.
- Establish robust systems to identify conflicts of interest and ensure they don't undermine fairness and transparency, enabling corruption.

## Challenges

- When we have diverse constituents with different lived experiences they may hold the organisation to account for diverging priorities.
- What to do when not all staff will have a feminist consciousness or way of being?

## Lessons learnt

- Have to build our deliberative capacity – ensure our processes can enable and accommodate conflicting perspectives; that consultation may not lead to consensus and strategies emerging from consultations may have to support a multiplicity of views.
- Need to hold space for those who have concerns, so that they can enable deeper conversation and issues to be addressed within the basic rules of engagement (and including not putting anyone in danger or causing harm).
- See above about continually articulating and returning to the values we're aiming for.



## Challenges

- Some organisations have a representative group of volunteers of different backgrounds, but have not, for whatever reasons, given priority to building a staff team reflecting that.
- The process of building staff ease with collaboration and sharing the mike with volunteers / constituents.

## Challenges

- Tension between legal requirements linked to organisational registration, for example, what a board and an executive director should be and do, when the organisation would like a more collective process.
- Governance is about rules / policies etc. and auditors understanding of compliance may not be aligned with our flexible funding models, for example, of groups that are not legally registered.

## Challenges

- In relation to Power Up groups who are funders: The funder's effort to meet grantees' needs means it makes multiple demands on them.
- In relation to accountability to funders, how does a grantee best respond when it has few staff and multiple funders, each of which requires the group's participation in its own learning forums?

## Lessons learnt

- Board, staff or volunteers who recognise a disjuncture between the organisation's intentions and the type of staff recruited, can pressure the organisation to rethink recruitment ideals for what kind of person would be the best fit and to be intentional about this.
- Where an organisation establishes decision-making spaces run by constituents, their needs and voices are at the core.

## Lessons learnt

- Importance of continual orientation of new people to the existence of and rationale of governance-related policies.
- Importance of sustaining honest conversation about the reality of the national legal framework or funders' governance requirements – which may limit the extent to which the organisation can practise and be held accountable o certain values it holds dear.

## Lessons learnt

- Funders (including the funders supported by Power Up) need to carefully think about any demands made of grantees and reimburse for time they put into supporting our strategic thinking and learning. They can also build this into the actual grants
- [A Learning Brief on feminist funding practices will be developed as part of our April 2023 Power Up Conference]

# 3. Resources

## How we used our power in our organisation – strategies

- [We are part of a community, Members of the Young Women's Advisory Panel to YWT, 20 December 2021.](#)
- [Peer research - The power of shared experience, Young Women's Trust, March 2022](#)
- [FRIDA Happiness Manifesto](#)
- [Reflection on Participatory Grant making Practise. FRIDA Dec 2022](#)

## How we used our power in our organisation – strategies

- [International Trans Fund Conflict of Interest Policy.](#)
- [Mansbridge - A contingency theory of accountability](#)
- [Feminist leadership: Accountability](#)
- [Reflections on Nonprofit Co-leadership](#)
- [The Feminist Diamond, Srilatha Batliwala, Fair Share for Women](#)

# 4. Acknowledgements

This Learning Brief was collated by Barbara Klugman based on the expertise and thinking of members of all Power Up groups who have participated in the Power Up learning process since March 2020; including specific sessions in May and November 2021 on 'Governance: What are we testing and learning on feminist and democratic forms of governance and accountability to our constituencies' and a January 2022 session.

These included presentations by Mbali Khumalo and Majandra Rodriguez, FRIDA, and Mukami Marete, UHAI EASHRI, and Diana Galloway, Young Women's Trust, and informal inputs by Eva Okunbor, GLITCH, and Paul-Gilbert Colletaz, RUF; the Annual Reports to Comic Relief of the groups featured in this Learning Brief; plus the specific inputs of Mbali Khumalo, FRIDA and Mercy Otekra, UHAI in consolidating the opening rationale on why feminist governance is relevant to power and movements, and the 'Challenges and Lessons Learnt' of this Learning Brief. The image on this page is from FRIDA's Happiness Manifesto.



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# Interrogating Power and Movements

These Learning Briefs form part of a series on diverse topics developed by participants in Comic Relief's Power Up Initiative. The initiative comprises 16 grantees with 34 partners, and aims to support work that builds power for women and girls. The initiative included contracting a learning facilitator, Barbara Klugman, to enable connections and learning between organisations to build their strength as movement constituents. Groups funded through Power Up are addressing a wide diversity of issues, and are themselves very different – from community-based organisations to funders to international NGOs and networks. Yet through conversations that began with lockdown in March 2020, they have found common cause in bringing a feminist analysis of power to movement-building and influence.

The Learning Briefs pick up some of the cross-cutting issues they have addressed. Each topic includes participants' understanding of how the issue is relevant to power and

movements followed by examples from a few groups of how they have both built and used their power – their strategies, and how they have influenced power – their achievements. They end with challenges and lessons learnt in addressing these, based on the collective experiences and insights of participants.

The Learning Briefs form Power Up's Year 3 Report to Comic Relief, and build on the previous reports each of which unpacked questions of power in movement-building and influence:

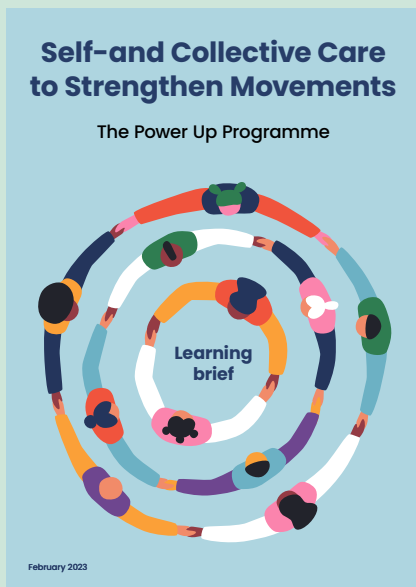
- [How has work funded by Comic Relief's Power Up programme contributed to shifts in women and girls' power? 30 June 2021](#)
- [Feminist Resilience and Innovation in a Pandemic.pdf, February 2022](#)
- [Reporting back: How one funder succeeded in doing better, and realised they'd never get it completely right, February 2022](#)

Barbara Klugman, February 2023

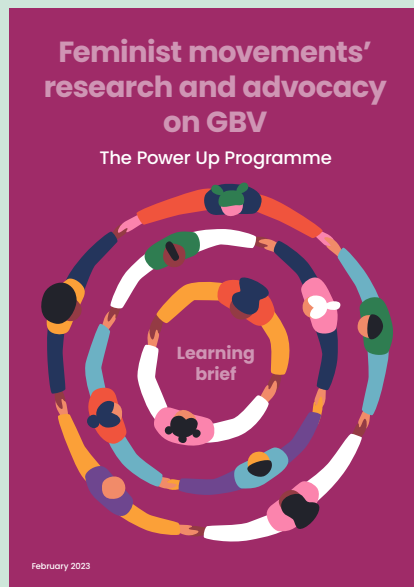




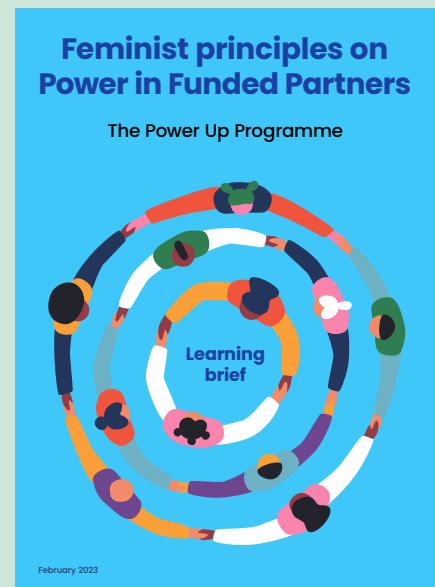
# Other titles in this series:



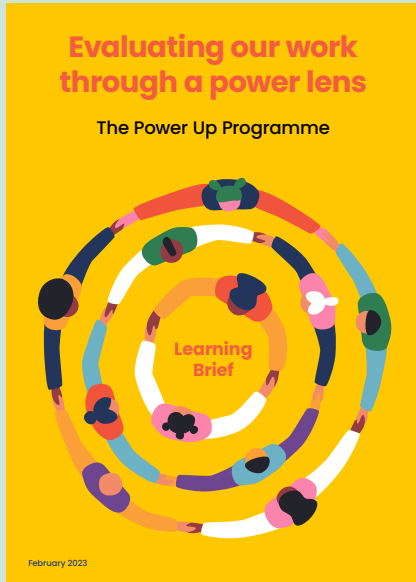
Feminist Governance



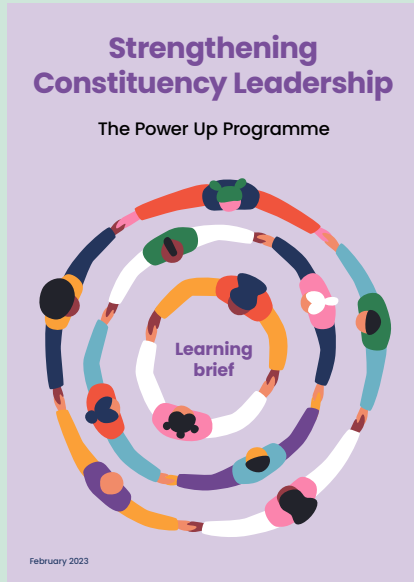
Feminist movements' research and advocacy on GBV



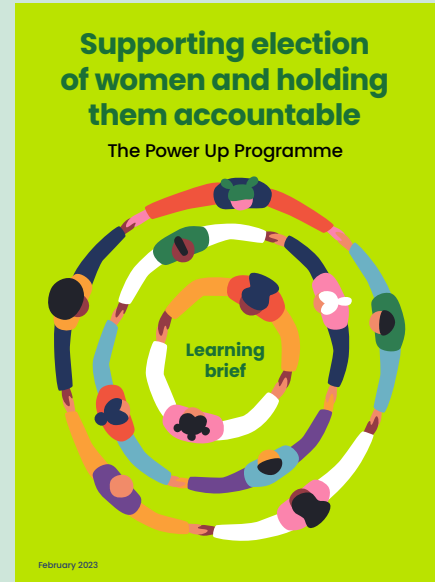
Feminist principles on Power in Funded Partners



Evaluating our work through a power lens



Strengthening Constituency Leadership



Supporting election of women and holding them accountable

Go to [www.comicrelief.com/funding/reports-and-publications](http://www.comicrelief.com/funding/reports-and-publications) to access them