

# Supporting election of women and holding them accountable

The Power Up Programme





“

We say to women aspiring for our support in getting elected, that if we provide that support, then you have to be accountable to the women’s movement agenda.”

**Sakhile Sifelani Ngoma,  
Women in Politics Support Unit, Zimbabwe**

Our issue is to get more women elected, irrespective of their political party or positions. Women need to see women in power as part of achieving equity.”

**Hannah Stevens, Elect-Her, UK**

## Contents

1. Why is supporting women to get elected relevant to power and movements?	4
• WIPSU, Zimbabwe	5
• CREA, India	6
• Equal Power, UK	7
• Kebetkache, Nigeria Women Development & Resource Centre	8
• Pastoral Women’s Council / Maasai Women Development Organization, Tanzania	9
2. Cross-cutting challenges and lessons learnt	10
3. Resources	16
4. Acknowledgements	16
Interrogating Power and Movements	17

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# 1. Why is supporting women to get elected relevant to power and movements?

- Women's representation in political and other decision-making offices is the third leg of justice and equity, along with fair distribution of resources, and social norms that recognise women as fully human.
- Representation is key to influencing both of these.
- Political participation gives women the power to exercise and access rights and justice in terms of both recognition of women and redistribution of resources towards women in general, and those who are most marginalised in particular.
- It enables them to occupy spaces where they are not visible and to be voices for those who are not heard. Holding political office enables women to use their power to enact the changes that their movements seek.
- Movements can help build their power through the election process.
- Elected women can also advocate to ensure that other women candidates have fair opportunities to campaign and to register to vote and are protected from election related violence.



**Movements can help build their power through the election process."**



## WIPSU, Zimbabwe

### Aims

- Increase the number of women elected into councils and parliament.
- Hold those elected women accountable to a feminist agenda.

### Sources:

- Rumbidzayi Cordelia Machimbirike, Power Up Presentation 15 June 2022;
- Sakhile Sifelani, Power Up Presentation 23 August 2022;
- Collective Action to Realize Equality (CARE): 'Feminist movement building in Zimbabwe', Power Up Annual Report Year 3, Oct 2022. Womankind, Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe and Women in Politics Support Unit.

### How we built and used our power – strategies

- Ran 'transformational feminist leadership trainings' for 43 elected Councillors and 210 aspirant representatives.
- Worked with parliamentary portfolio committee on women's affairs to push feminist agenda.
- Created spaces for elected representatives to interact with women to understand, hear and respond their issues.
- Create 'provincial women's forum' with elected women from different levels to identify key issues and then to bring the relevant decision-makers into the room to push them to take action.
- Tracked local to national shifts in policy in relation to women's rights agenda and use that for holding women reps accountable.
- Researched to show political parties' level of commitment to women's representation.

### How we influenced power – achievements

- Constitutional amendment number two, 2020 expanded the Quota System to 587 seats for women out of 1958 local council seats.
- Electoral Commission and Speaker committed to ensuring parties have 50/50 candidate lists & polling stations are within reach of women.
- Establishment and sustaining of a women's parliamentary caucus and a 'Women in Local Government Forum'.
- Local influence, for example, four women councillors in Zibagwe Rural District Council influenced it to buy construction equipment and roads have been graded.



**Constitutional amendment number two, 2020 expanded the Quota System to 587 seats for women out of 1958 local council seats."**

## CREA, India

### Aims

- Strengthen women's decision-making capacity & foster enabling environment for women to contest elections.
- Help elected women perform their role effectively.

### Sources:

- CREA, 'Meri Panchayat Meri Shakti Program – Strengthen Feminist Leadership and Decision-making capacity of Elected Women Representatives', Power Up Presentation 19-4-2022;
- External evaluation report MPMS 2021;
- Annual Report to Comic Relief Sept 2021 – Aug 2022;
- Anuradha Chatterji, CREA.

### How we built and used our power – strategies

- Individual capacity building and connecting with women's collectives and girls groups, health workers.
- Advocating to local & state leaders for more inclusive governance, structures & roles.
- Networking with women-led grassroots organisations to engage & hold EWRs accountable.
- Engaging elected men representatives to create enabling environments for elected women representatives (EWRs)

### How we influenced power – achievements

- Over half of the 1100 young girls, 1000 care givers, 240 EWRs and 180 health workers in the initiative have raised issues of women and girls including GBV and early marriage and these women encouraged women to stand for election.
- More women playing decision-making rather than tokenistic roles.
- More women standing for election into seats not legally reserved for women.
- EWRs have got gender based violence onto the agendas of their structures.
- The state machinery is adapting gender sensitive curriculum and discussion into their training and capacity building program for EWRs and engaging CREA in this process



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## Equal Power, UK

### Aims

- Build women's participation in public life.
- Break down systematic barriers that stop women from standing for election.
- Get political parties to commit to increasing women's representation and to publish gender data on their candidates.
- Inspire women to put themselves forward for elected office and help them progress in politics.

### Sources:

- Elect Her, Power Up Presentation 19-4-2022;
- Equal Power, Power Up Annual Report to Comic Relief, 2021;
- Equal Power Revised Annual Report to Comic Relief 2021: Citizens UK, Centenary Action Group (CAG), Elect Her, Glitch, Muslim Women's Network, UK, 50:50 Parliament;
- Glitch, 'Equal Power year 2 Workshop Snapshot, March 2021;
- Charlotte Fischer, Citizens UK, Gwen Taylor, Glitch, Frances Scott, 50:50 Parliament, Jo Gibbons, Care International, Faeza Vaid, Muslim Women's Network UK.

### How we built and used our power – strategies

- Action Group (CAG) built a coalition from across the women's sector and identified campaigning priorities including tangible demands. They worked cross-party to influence key stakeholders, raise external profile and deliver change in key areas.
- CUK supported 160 women to build campaigns on issues that they cared about in their communities.
- 50:50 led on the creation of #AskHerToStand day every 21 November.
- 50:50 ran monthly online and live #AskHerToStand outreach events with different organisations and networks to inspire and recruit women to their #SignUpToStand programme. By the end of 2022 nearly 3000 women had signed up to stand. Each women who clicks #SignUpToStand

- is sent an interactive "Personal Political Profile", allocated a 50:50 Buddy, invited to weekly BiteSize meetings and offered additional bespoke support if they are from a minority group. A strong supportive network has been created. The campaign is often contacted by the press to comment on women's political participation.

### How we influenced power – achievements

- Trainees felt more competent in digital protection and referred other political organisations who asked Glitch for training.
- 186 women supported by ElectHER stood for election; 142 got onto the ballot paper; 72 were elected.
- In 2022, the Prime Minister and all party leaders expressed support for a 50:50 Parliament and #AskHerToStand with the hashtag trending on the day with over 200 women coming to #SignUpToStand over a period of 2 weeks.
- The CEO of Muslim Women's Network UK was appointed as a Crossbench peer to the House of Lords through an independent process.
- On 30 April 2022, Oliver Dowden, Chair of the Conservative Party, announced that the Conservatives want 50% of their MPs to be women almost directly quoting from a talk by 50:50 founder.
- In the 2019 General Election, over 50 of the women standing were part of 50:50, 20% were from minority backgrounds and 9 won seats in the Commons.
- 191 women who stood were part of 50:50 #SignUpToStand; 87 won seats.
- #SignUpToStand women were a third more likely to win than women who aren't in their network.
- There is now widespread support, and action, across all the parties to ensuring more women are selected. In addition, specific changes in the way Parliament operates were made as result of CAG's input.



## Kebetkache, Nigeria Women Development & Resource Centre

### Aim

Get more women included in decision-making bodies.

#### Source:

- WoMIn, Kebetkache and CNRG Annual Report to Comic Relief October 2022;
- Additional information from Idongesit Umoh and Emem Okon, Kebetkache.

### How we built and used our power – strategies

- Kebetkache trained female political aspirants on leadership and campaign strategies and other women on issues including affirmative action principles.
- Women in Rivers State advocated for the national Assembly to support Gender Bills to get more women occupying elected offices.
- Advocacy committees in Akwa Ibom and Bayelsa states built support for women political candidates.
- In 2020 Women in Okwuzi community organised media dialogues with stakeholders in decision-making positions, demanding for women to be appointed as chiefs in the community.
- In March 2022, Kebetkache organized a rally in Port Harcourt to build support for women inclusion.
- Women in Aminigboko community in Abua Odual Local Government area organised 8 advocacy meetings and wrote to the King demanding inclusion of women.
- Increased number of women sought elective positions in the 2023 elections.

### How we influenced power – achievements

- A number of Kebetkache's project beneficiaries have been elected into political offices including as Deputy Local Government Chairman in Ogba/
- Egbema / Ndoni local government area; Ward Councillor in Etche Local Government Area; Special Advisor to the Bayelsa state Governor on Women Development; and Alternate member of the Governor Council of the Hydrocarbon Pollution Remediation Project (HYPREP).
- Women in Aminigboko community in Abua Odual Local Government area organised 8 advocacy meetings writing to the King demanding women's inclusion.
- The King of Ekunga community appointed 2 women as members of the Community Development Committee and the Cluster Development Board.
- The Council of Chiefs led by the Paramount Ruler asked women to select two women to be included in the council of chiefs.

## Pastoral Women's Council / Maasai Women Development Organization, Tanzania

### Aims

- Get more women elected into leadership positions.
- Shift social norms to create a more enabling environment for women to stand for and actively participate in leadership.

#### Sources:

- Nalemuta Moisan, Pastoral Women's Council, Power Up Presentation 19 April 2022;
- Pastoral Women's Council Annual Report to Comic Relief October 2022;
- Additional inputs from Ruth Kihui, Nalemuta Moisan, Pastoral Women's Council.

### How we built and used our power – strategies

- 34 Women Rights and Leadership Forums (WRLFs), trained in leadership, GBV, land, marriage, child and human rights. Community paralegals train trainers of WRLFs providing civic education which helps members understand the criteria and qualifications of a good leader.
- Inclusion of a small number of men traditional leaders in WRLFs.
- 130 women trained & mentored in gender equality, gender responsive budgeting & feminist leadership.
- Advocating for simplified voting processes.
- Advocating for gender transformative budgeting at village and district government levels' economic empowerment programmes, as women's financial independence is directly related to their ability to participate in political, civic and development spaces.
- Literacy training and voter education.
- Supporting women who exercise their agency to mitigate risks to their personal security.

### How we influenced power – achievements

- Electoral Commission and Speaker committed to ensuring parties have 50/50 candidate lists & polling stations are within reach of women.
- Community champions are agents of change, transforming the community mindset on women's leadership abilities and importance of electing women to carry a women's agenda.
- More than 280 women contested for leadership positions of various political parties, village and district governments in 2019, 2020 and 2022.
- 177 women gained positions in village and district government bodies; 2 as village chairpersons.
- A steady increase in budget towards women's and girls' development priorities in project district councils / governments.
- Men traditional leaders and youth promoted women's rights e.g. traditional leaders signed the declaration on women's rights in Longido district.
- A decline in resistance to women's participation in decision-making. In 2020, even men elected women to take positions

## 2. Cross-cutting challenges and lessons learnt

### Challenges

- In many communities women are not seen as leaders and face challenges from family and community when they consider or do stand for election.

### Lessons learnt

- The confidence level and the self-esteem of women need to be enhanced for them to present themselves for elected leadership responsibilities, and they need to feel backed by their own collectives, whether women's groups, or youth groups or other collectives. Success in standing and in getting elected rests on collective solidarity.
- Supporting women to gain local level leadership positions, whether on a school governing board or water committee may help to shift the social norm that women aren't leaders.

### Challenges

- The idea of standing for election is often overwhelming.
- The actual process of being positioned to stand for election, standing, winning, and holding power is obscure to many.
- Women's groups may not be aware of history and experience in improving women's representation.

### Lessons learnt

- One Power Up group, ElectHER, breaks the process down into four different stages of women's political participation and addresses each of those – so that women have the knowledge and skills at each of those places:
  1. Getting started (political literacy – what is my local government, what does it mean, what do they do?)
  2. Getting involved – do I join a party or campaign for something.
  3. Getting ready to stand (when there's an election coming up – how do I prepare?)
  4. Elections and campaigning. Women need different conversations at each stage of this journey.
- Study the history and current terrain and stakeholders before shaping our strategies.

### Challenges

- Challenge in some contexts of building multiracial and multigenerational women's movements around women standing for election.

### Lessons learnt

- When we bring women together across differences, that is part of what creates the joy, but to recruit for diversity you need targeted strategies for women of different ethnicities, sexualities and so on.

### Challenges

- Given shrinking space for political organising in many contexts, by taking on the issue of getting women elected, a women's organisation can make itself more vulnerable to scrutiny.
- In some political contexts party politics and elections are associated with money and violence which discourages women from participating.

### Lessons learnt

- Create support/solidarity through a community of women who are standing for election.
- Encourage women to create support groups for themselves.
- Work with young women's collectives to create enabling environment for participation and for their communities to support women in the collectives to stand for election.
- Push for legislation against online violence against women and girls.

## Challenges

- There are patterns of shaming women and creating false rumours about women to stop them from standing or undermine them once elected.
- Threat of violence against women who step forward, particularly women from marginalised groups.
- In some contexts there is surveillance of women pushing feminist agendas.

## Lessons learnt

- Monitor threats, including in social media, and engage with the election commission that runs elections to address threats of and real violence.
- Where politically feasible, work with police on how to ensure people standing for election (candidates or politicians) have a simple route for reporting and are protected.
- Protect candidates from threats and shaming including the weaponization of sexual violence as a threat to candidates.
- Offer security training and resources to ensure that women standing for election, and once elected are not subject to physical threats.

## Challenges

- Even where there are spaces designated for women, there often isn't a supportive environment for their participation.
- At times, and particularly when elected through a quota or reservation system, others can demean women's contribution. Political parties at times fill quotas with women who will not speak out rather than using quotas to increase party capabilities.

## Lessons learnt

- Quotas are essential in enabling political participation of excluded groups, such as Dalit women.
- The women's movement needs to seriously reflect on the value versus the damage that quotas can do in terms of women political leaders being taken seriously, and support elected women to maximise their influence, whether they came in on quotas or not.

## Challenges

- Women at times abandon accountability to the women's movement in favour of accountability to their political parties – which may at times be to do with them being at risk or threatened.

## Lessons learnt

- Put feminist practices and the women's and gender agenda at the centre of leadership training so that women interrogate their reasons for standing for leadership and recognise their accountability to this agenda.
- At local level, women's groups can hold elected representatives (including women) accountable, using scorecards and other concrete evidence.

## Challenges

- Despite some political parties' or community groups' support for selecting more women, often they don't set up mechanisms to ensure that it happens and much is dependent on the strength of the internal women's organisations.
- Women who have been supported by Power Up groups have lost to women backed by main political parties who do not have a feminist agenda.

## Lessons learnt

- There is a need to continue conversations at all levels with the political parties to ensure ongoing buy-in to the need for more women.
- Some Power Up groups are focusing on the priority of getting more women elected, in order to shift the overarching norm assuming that this is not women's role or competence. This means not taking a stand on feminist issues, but just focusing on building women's confidence and competence to stand, and encouraging the public to elect women.



## Challenges

- The 'agenda ghetto' where even once elected, women representatives are not allocated responsibility for issues with budget; and for issues beyond those considered 'women's issues'.

## Lessons learnt

- One of the Power Up groups, WIPSU, addresses this by calling meetings of women elected representatives at all levels (from local councillors to MPs from one geographical area) to identify bottlenecks on an issue and who to target (which politicians and officials) to address them, given the women elected leaders are often not positioned on issues involving major budget; and then calling those politicians and officials to the follow up meeting in order to make women's claims clear and hold them accountable.

## Challenges

- Most times women leaders (and also men leaders) lose touch with the constituency that elected them and often do not engage meaningfully and consistently which begs the question of whose agenda they are representing.
- Lack of meaningful consultation means women leaders may push agendas that are not relevant to their constituents which in turn causes voter apathy.

## Lessons learnt

- Women leaders need to harness and analyse collectively the issues most critical for the women they represent.
- Ensure a feedback loop where women leaders give feedback to their constituents about discussions and decisions in policy spaces and then jointly identify and plan for a transformation agenda.

## Challenges

- The feminist or women's agenda can be limited to traditional 'women's issues'. Yet these cannot be addressed if overall systems are not functioning and accountable. In addition, 'women's issues' in women's lived experience are all the issues of poverty, poor services and exclusion.

## Lessons learnt

- In addition to fostering representation by and for women, women's movements with an intersectional lens need to build their agendas with their constituents. This is what a 'women's agenda' means. Issues could range from infrastructure improvement, basic services, land tenure, education, sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice, livelihoods, economic empowerment and justice, environmental justice and climate change; or the rights of particular constituents who experience stigma or discrimination, whether refugees or sex workers or LGBTQI persons or young women.

## Challenges

- Elected women may feel embarrassed to ask for support.
- Elected representatives cannot be experts on every issue or have the information to hand to shape informed arguments.

## Lessons learnt

- Leadership training, ongoing mentorship can increase women's confidence and leadership capacities, enabling their meaningful participation in local and district level decision-making.
- Ensuring that elected representatives get the support of researchers and women's movements on whatever issue they are addressing, not just traditionally defined 'women's issues', with evidence, talking points etc., so they can take on an issue as an expert.

## Challenges

- Lots of funders stay away from this work because of its political nature.

## Lessons learnt

- Funders need to recognise that this is not a party-political initiative. It is key to shifting patriarchy and representation of underrepresented communities.





# 3. Resources

The apolitical foundation is trying to link to other incubators: "Better Leaders, Better Democracies: Mapping the Organizations Shaping 21st Century Politicians" – A report from the Apolitical Foundation (2022)

- Summary of findings: <https://apolitical.foundation/resources-research>
- Full report: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a7c2810b81a40a6b867bc6/t/633c549eecd1e0329c6d7ef/1664898236270/BetterLeadersBetterDemocracies\\_FullReport.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a7c2810b81a40a6b867bc6/t/633c549eecd1e0329c6d7ef/1664898236270/BetterLeadersBetterDemocracies_FullReport.pdf)

# 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 from notes on inputs and discussion during Power Up workshops on 'Getting women elected and holding them accountable': Babita Sinha, CREA, Hannah Stevens, ElectHER and Nalemuta Moisan, Pastoral Women's Council, 19 April 2022; Rumbidzayi Cordelia Machimbirike, Women in Politics Support Unit, 15 June; and Sakhile Sifelani Ngoma, WIPUSU, 23 August 2022; the Annual Reports to Comic Relief of the groups featured in this Learning Brief; plus the specific inputs of the following people in consolidating the opening rationale on why supporting women to get elected is relevant to power and movements, and the 'Challenges and Lessons Learnt' of this Learning Brief:

- Babita Singh, CREA
- Hannah Stevens, Elect-Her
- Laura Brown and Natasha Horsfield, Womankind
- Idongesit Umoh and Emem Okon, Kebetkache
- Nalemuta Moisan and Ruth Kihui, Pastoral Women's Council
- Tutsirai Makuvachuma, WIPUSU

# 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.

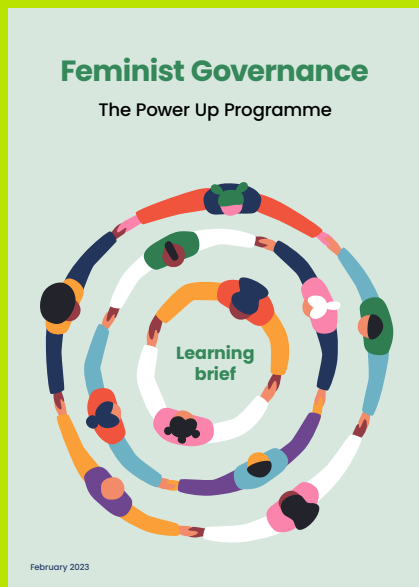
The Learning Briefs form Power Up's Year 3 Report to Comic Relief, and build on the previous reports each of which unpacked questions of power in movement-building and influence:

- [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

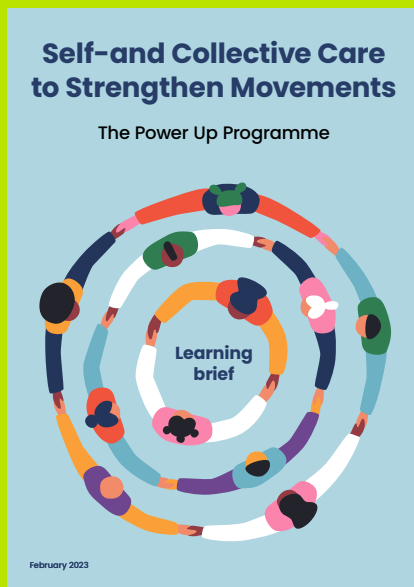
Barbara Klugman, February 2023



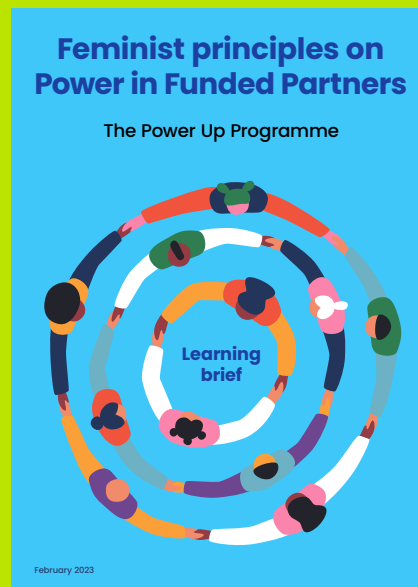
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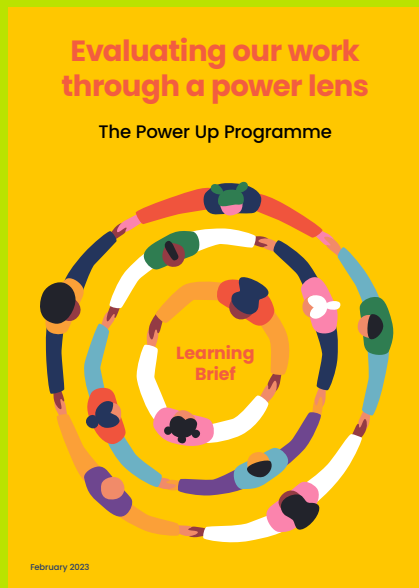
Feminist Governance



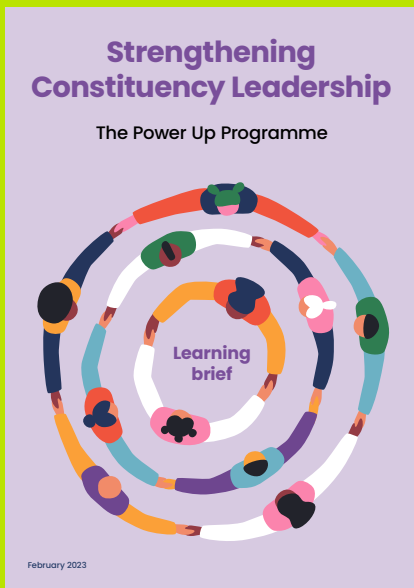
Self- and Collective Care to Strengthen Movements



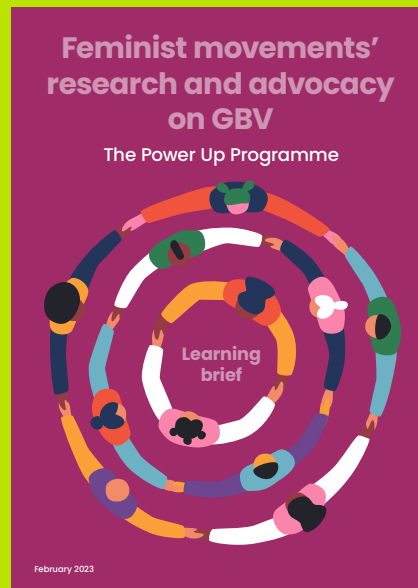
Feminist principles on Power in Funded Partners



Evaluating our work through a power lens



Strengthening Constituency Leadership



Feminist movements' research and advocacy on GBV

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