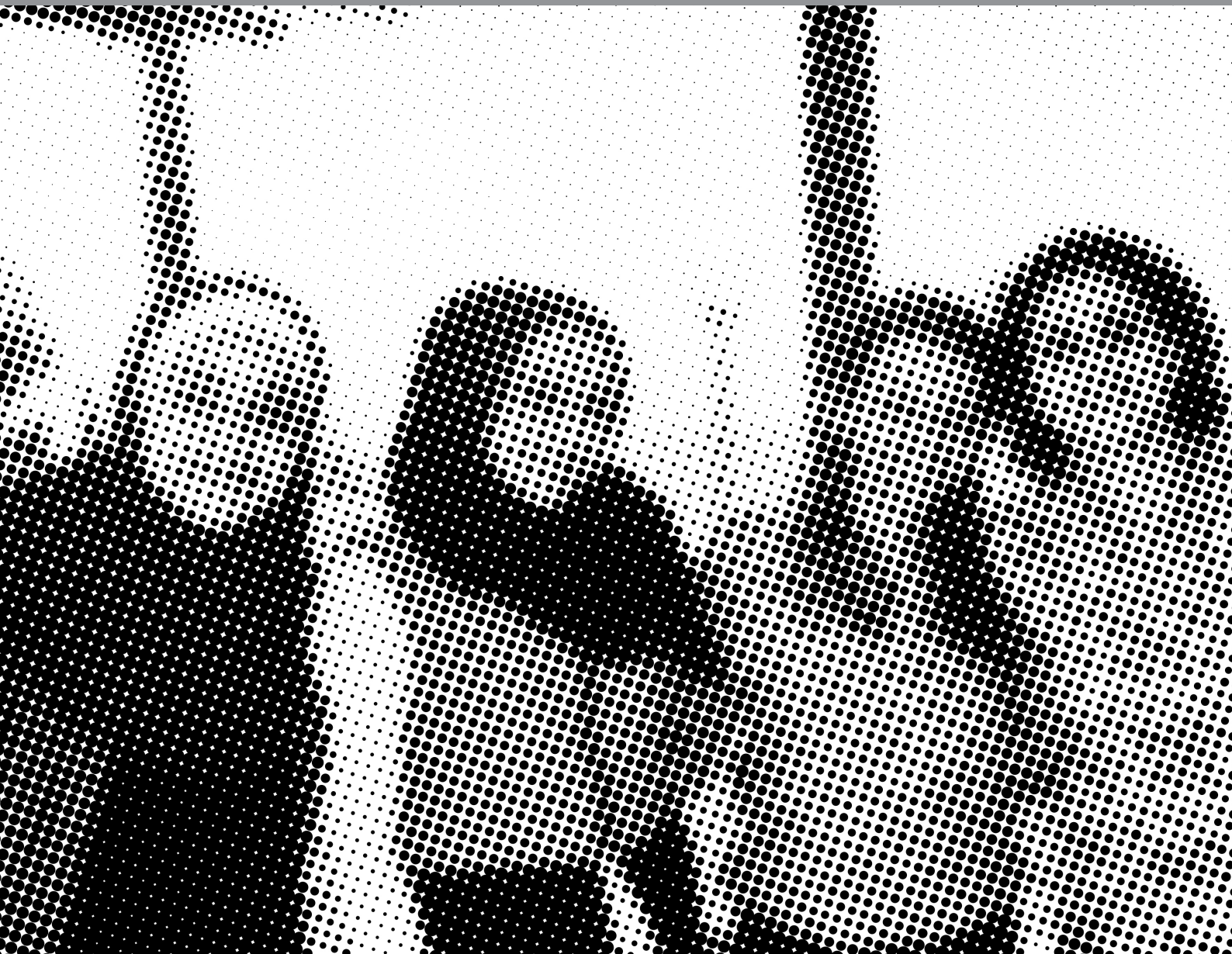


POWER WOMEN

FEMALE LEADERS IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR JORDAN

Experiences of Context Project participants



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INTRODUCTION

Globally, in the humanitarian sector women are still under-represented and have limited access to positions of leadership.¹ This gap of women in humanitarian organisations is also evident within the Talent Development Programme, in which men generally outnumbered women.² In some of the cohorts in Bangladesh and Ethiopia for example, fewer than 10% of participants were female, despite efforts to achieve gender balance.

It was therefore striking that in Jordan, the percentage of female participants exceeded 60% across several cohorts in the Context programme, which is part of the Talent Development initiative. Context is a national staff development programme focussed on mid-level managers as well as entry-level staff, and is implemented by RedR UK in Jordan, Lebanon, Kenya and Ethiopia.

The high percentage of female participants in Jordan is even more striking considering that Jordan continues to have one of the world's lowest rates of female participation in the workforce at only 22%. This is despite having closed or reversed the gender gap in female education at all levels.³

This article therefore looks at the role of women in the humanitarian sector in Jordan, their role in leadership and the challenges that they face as women in their work. It is based on interviews held in Jordan in May 2017 with both female and male participants of the Context Management and Leadership course (cohort 4).

1. Opportunities for women in the humanitarian sector in Jordan

Participants explained that many of the community-based organisations (CBOs) operating in Jordan predominantly have female staff, and are often female-led. This includes organisations working on education, social work, youth programmes. The larger national NGOs and international NGOs in Jordan have more mixed gender profiles. Participants across about ten different organisations gave examples of a broadly balanced gender breakdown in their organisation, including women in Country Director positions as well as other senior management positions. In some cases, participants even felt there was an over-representation of women across levels, such as in Save the Children, while others felt women still lag behind when it comes to the most senior positions.

With a highly educated female workforce and an overall low employment rate amongst women in Jordan, the arrival of international humanitarian organisations has provided new career opportunities for women. Shadin Omar, Emergency Response and Shelter Manager at Medair put it this way: *"I think when the humanitarian crisis happened, it 'open a market' in Jordan, it's sad but it is a fact."* Others echoed this chance to build a career in humanitarian aid. For example, Jumana Suleiman, Community Network Specialist at iMMAP noted: *"I have been able to gain experience through my work in the humanitarian sector due to the hands on, field-based work. I have had the opportunity to meet and learn from people with different professional backgrounds and cultures."*

Another aspect that several of the participants emphasised is equal opportunity. Amal JadAllah, Shelter Officer for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), said: *"I think INGOs provide more space for women to fulfil higher positions..... It is based on standards, and criteria such as qualifications, you can apply and you know you can be invited for an interview regardless of whether you are male or female. You get a chance to compete fairly."*



From left to right: Amal, Nisreen, Rasha, Samer and Shadin

2. A gendered division of labour

As in many countries across the globe, there is a gender division in terms of the thematic areas that men and women work in. In Jordan, this manifests itself in many women taking up positions in health and education, such as nurses and teachers, or working in areas such as livelihoods and social mobilisation. At the same time, men dominate sectors such as IT, logistics and engineering.

Omar Darweash, Information Systems Manager for ACTED gave an example: *"I work on water supply, and I would say the majority of my colleagues, say 99%, are males. This is because the work is so physical, you have to jump over the truck and over the tent and check that everything is clean and so on. It is also quite technical, so you need repair and maintenance skills. Among the 350 staff we have maybe three or four women and they work on the database and the hotline."*

Some positions or tasks were considered particularly difficult for a woman to do, for example working as a government liaison officer, or jobs requiring interaction with manual labourers, as this is culturally less accepted. A Logistician at an INGO⁴ Omar Al-Muhanna (see box overleaf) gives an example of this.

Women in my team say: 'I cannot talk to builders'

Omar Al-Muhanna, Logistics Manager for INGO Save the Children

The Logistics Manager Omar explained he's found it difficult to successfully recruit more women to his team: *"In my team, on logistics, I found there are some limitations on what women are able or willing to do. The operations team has longer working hours, more physical activities. In case of an emergency, women are not willing to go to the camp and spend a weekend in the camp or a hotel, and no one will go down town looking for labourers, it also requires interaction with labourers, technicians, electricians. Women in my team have been uncomfortable to do this, they say 'I cannot talk to them, I cannot talk to builders'. Because of this we lost some females, and have recruited males as we need this [in] the team. Our team got some criticism, why do you not have more women in your team? But they are not able or willing to do what is required."*

At the same time, even in these types of positions participants knew of examples of women who were defying the odds. Certainly, there are also women working in the traditionally male-dominated professions, such as Shadin (see box below). She is not the only one: explained that there are a lot of female architects in Jordan at the moment, though there are fewer women in other types of engineering.

"As a female engineer leading a team, sometimes I need to be tough!"

Shadin Omar, Emergency Response and Shelter Manager at Medair

Shadin has been defying the odds since she started her undergraduate engineering in Egypt, as one of three women amongst a group of 300 engineering students. She has since done her Masters in Jordan and joined Medair. She found that the organisation provides equal opportunities for men and women to develop their career: *"In the humanitarian sector, it is more about the qualities and skills required to be hired. I was one of the first people to get in a management position in Medair, and the fact that I am a female did not stop me from getting that opportunity."*

At the same time, she found working as a female engineer and manager is not without its challenges. "I work as a Shelter Manager in the Shelter and WASH department, in the construction field, it is usually guys, so when I first started at Medair I had a position where I needed to lead a team of 11 engineers, three women and eight men. It was hard, it was not only the gender, it is also the age. It is difficult especially for the older men to accept to be managed by a younger woman."

She explained that because of this, she sometimes needs to be stricter than she would naturally be: "This week I was talking to one of the engineers that I supervise, and the discussion was quite heated, because he had violated rules and procedures. I had to use a high tone when talking to him. He could not take it and ended the call. I think that if I had been a guy, he would have maybe accepted it more. Sometimes I feel like I need to act, to be tough and strict, to send a message 'Don't mess with me' [laughing]!"

Things have improved over time as she settled into the role: "They now know that I deserve this position, and that I am as good as any man."

3. Gender relations in the community

Participants explained why gender-balanced staffing was important for the implementation of humanitarian programmes. Omar Darweash (ACTED) gave an example: *"We do hygiene promotion sessions, in which women and men always go together to visit families since it is in some cases and some families, due to our culture, it not acceptable for men to enter the tent/house if the husband, or the head of the family, is not present and vice versa. We also need to make sure that girls and women are not harassed when accessing water or sanitation. This is why we have the hotline, we need to employ women to access and protect the women and girls in the camp."*

"As a 24 year old woman I was put in charge of managing relations with tribal leaders"

Jumana Suleiman, Community Network Specialist at iMMAAP

Jumana started to work in the humanitarian sector after finishing her studies at the age of 24. Quite quickly, she was assigned management responsibilities and encountered lots of challenges on the way: "You are going to encounter people who will not support you because you are a woman in a leadership role."

She continued: "When I assumed the role to manage a staff of 50 males over 30 years old, there was a huge pushback. They saw me as a child, not as a leader. It took a lot of building trust and standing up in situations to prove myself, but in the end, it went OK." However, managing staff was not her only challenge; "The other major challenge that I faced in my previous job was managing relations with 13 tribal leaders, all above 50 years with their conservative views and practices. I was told 'You cannot talk to me because you are a female, you should talk to my wife.'" The way she got around this was by indeed talking to their wives, building a relationship with them and gaining their trust, before talking to the leaders directly. She continued: "I needed to blend into the culture, but somehow also break the chain by talking to the elders directly. I was considered very young to them and inexperienced. Despite a lot of pushback and a lot of complaints,

I had great support from my managers who have my back. It is finally going much better now, I have established strong relationships with them now."

In the section below, Jumana explains how support from her family members as well as line managers has helped her to persist in this situation and succeed in being accepted as a leader.



Many humanitarian projects depend on building good relationships with the community, and being a female project manager brings extra challenges in this regard, as Jumana experienced (see box).

4. Women's leadership styles

Opinions were divided on whether women have **different leadership styles** and qualities than men. Maher said: *"I feel that women are more passionate about what they are doing. They can be more human, especially in this field."* Others, like Shadin, disagreed: *"For me it was never based on gender, it is about the personality and having management and leadership qualities. A woman or a man can have such qualities."*

At the same time, both female and male participants agreed that it was more difficult for a woman to gain the trust and respect of colleagues. Participants explained that for some men, it is hard to trust women leadership, and noted *"it's cultural"*, traditionally, women are expected to support, not to be a leader and give orders. The stories of the participants showed they have worked hard to gain respect as a leader, and employed various techniques at different times to achieve this, ranging from being strict through showing respect for cultural traditions. All mentioned that they also did a lot of **listening, consulting and working on relationships** with colleagues and team members. It was seen as damaging to be too vocal about women's empowerment or to come across as arrogant, as Jumana said, *"A way women need to lead in order to be accepted: be diplomatic, don't be a snob, as in 'I got this position, now I am going to liberate all women, incessantly promote feminism, and support all women solely because they are women!'. Tangible change happens slowly and takes time, it is important to realize that."*

Despite the evidently very confident women in the programme, a number of participants noted that some women seem to be **less confident** than men and that can hinder them taking on new tasks as well as their careers more broadly. The Omar Al-Muhanna, Logistics Manager of an INGO, observed, *"What I have noticed, and this is very important, when you ask for a volunteer for a particular task, men all say 'Oh yes I can do it, I can do it', even if they do not know anything about it. But the females, even if they know how to do it, they ask you 'Would I be able to do it?' I noticed this. Maybe it is a difference in courage or confidence, I saw it in international as well as national staff."*

Building relations as a volunteer manager in Za'atari camp: "I really tried to understand them, their points, their complaints"

Nisreen Aref Al-Shdaifat, Project Manager, ACTED

Nisreen started working with ACTED five years ago in Za'atari camp, where she started off as the only female project manager alongside five men. *"I was managing 120 staff, mostly volunteers, who were doing hygiene promotion in the camp. Half of them were male, half of them were female, a part were Syrian, others Jordanian, they had different backgrounds and ages. In the beginning, there was a lot of difficulty. Especially because I was even younger, I was 27 at the time. There were a lot of challenges and difficulties. I tried to solve issues through regular meetings, explain to them what their role is, and what my role is. I asked, 'Work with me as a colleague, forget I am female, forget I am younger, we are colleagues'."*

Nisreen explained that the behaviour of her staff improved over time, as their trust in her and their acceptance of her grew: *"After a difficult year, they started to be more comfortable with me, with my management style. Before, a lot of tasks were not done, while they said it was done. I used to do the monitoring of them on whether they are completing the work, and they were angry about this. At the end, after 2.5 years of doing this role in Za'atari camp, now they are friends with me. Even though I have left this project they call me just to say 'Hi, how are you?' They say 'No one will be as good as you'. I really tried to understand them, their points, their complaints."*

She also believes that mentoring can play an important role in supporting women's leadership. She explained how she trained two females and one man as deputies on distribution, hygiene and development: *"Through your work you can see 'This woman she is clever, she has leadership skills', but maybe also still some areas to work on, so you start to advise her on how she can get into a higher position."*

Nisreen has observed that over the past five years, the situation for women in leadership roles has improved: *"I think they still face challenges as female leaders, but not as many as before when I started in 2012. Now nine females are managing a project and there are just three males, now they [the men] are asking for gender balance! [Laughs.] I think after five years of international humanitarian intervention in Jordan, even the picture of how females work has changed."*

5. The double burden: work and family responsibilities

Another challenge that women working in the humanitarian sector have to manage is balancing their career with other responsibilities: participants emphasised that, in Jordan, the cultural expectation is that women take care of the household fully. This is difficult particularly when the work involves extended time away from the home, for residential workshops for example. This would be a concern or obstacle." Day care for children is considered expensive, as Samar explains (see box). Others noted that NGOs are considered more flexible than other employers when you have to take care of family responsibilities, for example when you have a sick child.

"It takes a super woman to be able to work full-time and manage the house"

Samer Jubran, Independent Consultant

"Being a mother is not easy, especially when you are trying to juggle a full-time job with a family life. Herein, and the fact that women perform the extra, unpaid, unappreciated work, that comes in the form of "motherhood". Despite all of that, this did not impede or hamper women from taking the initiative to go for leadership and senior positions. This is carried out by overcoming the challenging environment around them, and with perseverance and the will to do so. Based on that more mothers than ever are in the workforce. Their secret is locating the key to focus on a plan to balance between work/profession and parenthood/motherhood – it takes a super woman to manage all this, kudos to all mothers who achieved this!

6. Working in the field: hardships, travel and security concerns

There are many women as well as men working in the refugee camps in Jordan, despite its difficult working conditions. As Maher observed: *"I met a lot of women who are willing to work in the field and face the hardships of working in the camp. I think it is about passion, people with passion regardless of their gender will come to the field and will handle the hard life conditions in the camp for six to seven hours every day."*

Most of the staff go home in the evening, they do not stay in the camp overnight, explained the participants. However, occasionally the daily travel involved to get to a camp may be an obstacle for women or their families. Participants reported that reactions to women travelling for work vary significantly from family to family. For some, traveling daily to the camp is accepted, but they may not approve of travelling for residential workshops, or staying over at a hotel near the camp for urgent work. Especially when international travel is concerned, or longer periods away, it becomes more of an obstacle, but it still varies per family. For example, Sawsan Oudtallah, Project Manager for Action Contre la Faim says, *"I have been in the NGO sector for 10 years, and I have been sent abroad for many trainings. I went to Sweden for one month. But I think not many other families would support their daughter to go for such a training."*

While a substantial part of the humanitarian response in Syria and Iraq is managed remotely from Jordan, it is much less common to find Jordanian women working in these programmes in the field, or to be selected for deployment to places like Erbil. The security situation was mostly cited as the main reason for this, impacting women disproportionately. Hussam gives an example of the challenges faced in employing women in this setting (see box overleaf).

“In Syria, we have one Syrian female engineer on our team, her husband accompanies her the whole day, every day.”

Hussam Abu Shihadeh, Mercy Corps

Hussam explains that inside Syria almost all their employees are male, despite the recognised need to employ women, and explained some of the difficulties in diversifying the team; *“We try to get more women in our field engineering teams, we need them, for example for conducting focus group discussions with women, but we have many concerns on how they are going to move due to security situation. We have one Syrian female engineer on our team, her husband accompanies her the whole day, every day. She has organised this herself, there is a shortage of vacancies in Syria so it is the only option for the family. He has become her driver.”*

7. Support, mentors and allies

The female participants cited various sources of support that had helped them advance in their work. For most, their line managers (both male and female) were very supportive and encouraging. As Jumana mentioned before, she faced a lot of challenges in her work with traditional leaders and had very supportive managers: *“She said, ‘I know what you are going through, I know what the pushback is like, keep on going, whatever complaints come in, we will support you.’ My other direct managers were Americans, male ones funnily enough, and they gave me these speeches on women’s empowerment, ‘You have to lead the movement, you cannot give up!’ There were times where I was ready to give up, but they were all there for me to get me back on my feet and stay on track. Now after two years, it is going much better.”*

Some participants also took on a **mentoring role** themselves once in management positions. For example, Nisreen was the first woman in a leadership role for ACTED in Za’atari camp, and during her work built the capacity of two females and one male deputies (see box above). The women in the course that talked about their leadership positions all mentioned they had the full support of their **family**. Jumana went further and found family to be the main source for moral support: *“My advice is that, always when you find a person who pushes you back because you are female, rely on your family for that support and encouragement. They can give you options and ideas on how to address it, having somebody that believes in you that you can do it, makes a big difference.”*

Some participants also showed that **male colleagues can be important allies** in creating a work environment that embraces gender equality. The way that women are spoken about in the workplace is an important part of this, as is calling out any derogatory or discriminatory comments, Maher provided an example of this (see box overleaf).

“A partner-colleague blamed problems on women “because they have a small brain” – I had to stand up against him”

Maher Musmar, Social Innovation Team Lead for Relief International

As a team leader, Maher described how he created a balanced team, and felt International Relief as an organisation has good policies in place to support gender equality in the workplace. About his team he said; *“I met a lot of women who are willing to work in the field and face the hardships of working in the camp... One of my most brilliant team members is a female, she is a feminist as well, she enjoys being in the field. Actually, she is stronger than me many times, she is a field person, you those “field persons”!* [laughs]

He found that despite their qualifications, not all men working in the humanitarian sector in Jordan shared the same respect for female colleagues: *“There was this guy I was working with from a partner NGO, and he said ‘It [this problem] is all because of women, they have a small mind’, I went to him and said ‘Man, you cannot say that, if I ever hear you saying that again I will file it against you’. He said, ‘So you think women have the same brain?’ I said, ‘Yes, of course.’ And this guy is educated, has a Bachelor’s degree, and [has] worked in the humanitarian sector for six years.”*

Similarly, he advocated to create a way to employ female teachers in one of the refugee camps, when their families were reluctant. In the refugee camp he worked there was a rule that only one person per family can work in order to equally divide opportunities. He explains: *“Sometimes the women in the family are higher educated and could earn a higher income. We had cases whereby the husband insisted that his wife, a qualified teacher, should stay at home while he takes on a job as a guard which is lower paid. We had to then make exceptions to the rules because we could not accept to lose a qualified teacher for a guard. Men generally don’t want their wife to earn more than they do.”*

Conclusion

The experience of the Context Management and Leadership course participants suggests that the arrival of the international humanitarian sector has created additional opportunities for women in Jordan to develop their careers. As Jordanian women are highly educated - to a level that qualifies them for many roles in the humanitarian sector - they have taken advantage of this opportunity. What may have helped is that a part of humanitarian work is seen as an extension of the traditional more female-dominated domains such as health, education and social work. In addition, a number of humanitarian organisations were credited by participants for their approach to encouraging gender equality.

Women’s work in the humanitarian sector is also enabled to some extent by the fact that the camps where most NGOs operate are not in remote areas of the country, enabling women to work there and travel back and forward within the working day. On top of this, most of the locations where humanitarian work takes place are considered relatively safe. In other humanitarian contexts, both the distance (being away from family) and security concerns have been identified as stronger hindering factors.

The importance of having gender balance amongst the staff was clearly articulated, both as a matter of principle and to enable effective implementation of the programmes in the field. Participants challenged traditional gender roles in various ways, such as by working in male-dominated professions like engineering, liaising with traditional leaders, and creating employment opportunities for female refugees.

Women working in the humanitarian sector in Jordan are climbing up the ladder, and the examples cited here illustrate that they face many challenges along the way in being accepted as leaders. With a lot of determination, strength and skill, they are claiming their place. While there is still a long way to go to ensure true equality and eliminate discrimination, fortunately they also find support in both male and female allies, including line managers, colleagues and family members. Those with the stamina to persist are setting a great example, and may be making it easier for those following in their footsteps.



Context Management and Leadership cohort 4

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Footnotes

- ¹ Black, A., Henty, P. and Sutton, K., 'Women in Humanitarian Leadership', for the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Deakin University, Feb. 2017
- ² Charles Maughan, Talent Development Programme, findings presented at the Disaster and Emergency Preparedness Programme (DEPP) learning Conference, Nairobi, Kenya, 2016.
- ³ World Bank, 'Women in Jordan – Limited Economic Participation and Continued Inequality', 17 April 2014
- ⁴ This individual changed jobs before the article was published and could not be reached for permission to use his name & organisational name.