



Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH) Gender and Leadership Study

IN BRIEF

The [Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire \(DESLH\)](#) is an intensive and challenging postgraduate humanitarian leadership development course. Delivered in French and aimed at humanitarians working in West and Central Africa, the course is taught by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership and accredited by Deakin University.

Through our longitudinal research into the course, its students, and its outcomes we have found that the DESLH is making a unique and tangible contribution to localisation and humanitarian leadership in West and Central Africa—yet the data also uncovered a problematic trend.

There has been a persistent gender imbalance within the DESLH, with on average a 1:3 female to male ratio over the six cohorts. This finding reflects the worldwide underrepresentation of women in leadership roles in the humanitarian system—a major problem when female humanitarian leaders bring unique expertise and skills to the table, particularly in advocating for the most marginalised, affected communities, such as children and women.

We are committed to redressing this imbalance and to working with our partners to increase the intake of women in future cohorts of the course. Our research looked into why this is happening, and what we can change to redress this imbalance both for future cohorts of the DESLH and women in humanitarian leadership more generally.

This is what we found.

- There is widespread support from within the francophone humanitarian system for increasing the number of women in leadership roles but significant barriers—including

pervasive gender norms and a comparative lack of educational opportunity—impede progress towards gender equality in the humanitarian system.

- Women's perceived 'lack of confidence' was one of the most frequently cited barriers to progress towards women's leadership reported in the francophone survey. Male and female respondents alike suggest that women 'under-estimate' themselves and lack the confidence to put themselves forward as—and be recognised as—leaders in their organisations.

Transforming the francophone humanitarian space

We asked DESLH alumni how these barriers can be surmounted, and they suggested a range of options, including quotas and positive discrimination, gender transformative policies such as maternity leave and gender-blind recruitment, political will and advocacy, and interventions to tackle 'toxic masculinity' and misogynistic work cultures.

One of the most frequently cited recommendations for overcoming barriers to women's leadership was providing training and development opportunities for women. Training was recommended partly to address the perceived lack of confidence among women, and to provide formal recognition of women's leadership skills—and that's where the DESLH comes in.

The DESLH aims to provide a learning space in which all participants—particularly women, and those from local and national NGOs—improve their leadership knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

Our monitoring and evaluation data indicate the course is achieving this goal for graduates.

The good news is that once women are enrolled in the program, they are thriving. Female students achieve on average higher grades, and are more likely to graduate, than their male peers.

The DESLH is also improving the knowledge and confidence of participants, including women, with post-course surveys indicating impressive gains in core humanitarian leadership and coordination resources and subjects.

But female graduates also mentioned that financial costs present a barrier to women's participation in the DESLH, not just in terms of course fees but costs associated with childcare during online and residential intensives. Women typically have fewer personal funds and less control over family budgets, particularly those coming from low-income settings, and so report having to justify this additional expense to partners and workplaces.

Our research shows that we need to run more courses, offer more scholarships to support women, and have the resources for better marketing and outreach. For that to happen, we need a concerted effort within and between stakeholders. Leadership development providers, donors, and organisations at all levels of the system must work together to enable equitable access to leadership for all genders in humanitarian response.

Gender inequality is not a 'woman problem,' and nor can it be fixed through a 'woman solution.' Gender equality is a right for all with implications for all: it will not be achieved by telling women to change. Achieving gender equality requires the whole system to prioritise targeted—if incremental—improvements across a range in interventions and levels, **including gender-transformative leadership development**, gender equitable policies and programming, meaningful advocacy and engagement, and a system-wide commitment to tracking and reporting on data on gender outcomes across the system.

The research presented in this report, and across the sector, shows women are deeply effective at engaging with and advocating for highly marginalised people affected by crises, and ensuring gender-based violence and related areas are prioritised in crisis response planning. But without support and investment, the increasing space for women's leadership in the francophone humanitarian sector—with all its inherent importance and practical benefits—may falter and shrink.

Reflections from DESLH Alumni



Marthe Mbengue—Country Director for World Vision International in Burundi

The [DESLH] simulation exercises, personality tests, etc. allowed me to get to know myself better, my leadership style and how to behave as a leader in emergencies, especially when I have to work under pressure. This has helped me to better manage crisis situations and to better manage different group dynamics ... I feel much more equipped and comfortable to face challenges. Because of what I learned in the training, I was able to contribute more to the team when I returned to the field. I challenge the teams. I push them to ask questions, to question what we are used to doing, to improve and also to align with the humanitarian principles and values of the organisation.



Nathalie Nikiema—Country Director, Centre d'étude et de coopération internationale, Burkina Faso

The [DESLH] definitely forged my leadership both professionally and personally. It has enabled me to manage management situations, motivate the team and also position the organisation I work for on a humanitarian level ... As far as I'm concerned, the impact of the curriculum and these exchanges has, in a very short space of time, been visible in the field. For me, the curriculum has had a really visible and immediate impact.

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