SUBLIME SDGs | IMPACT HUB

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The Sublime Toolkit: Leading through a feminist lens

Credits

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Introduction

the toolkit is accompanied by a series of podcasts that can be found here

Feminist leadership principles

Chapters:

Introduction

Why a feminist approach to leadership now?

Women-led organisations and initiatives have long been catalysts for transformative change, challenging entrenched systems of exclusion and injustice.

Across border and grassroots contexts alike, these organisations have pioneered inclusive, collective models of leadership rooted in care, solidarity, and empowerment. Yet despite their groundbreaking contributions, their leadership practices are often marginalised, misunderstood, or undervalued.

In response, this toolkit was developed within the SUBLIME project to support civil society groups promoting women-led projects in climate change, circular economy, and sustainable communities in border regions who are committed to leading differently - anchored in clear values, shared vision, and courageous action.

It offers leaders and teams a reflective and practical framework designed to catalyse not just change within their own leadership practices, but also transformation in the broader systems in which their organisations operate.

Grounded in the lived experiences of feminist organisers and practitioners, this approach calls for leadership that is collective, inclusive, and emancipatory.

What do we mean by feminism?

In this toolkit, we adopt an inclusive and intersectional understanding of feminism. At its core, feminism is a radical political and ethical commitment to dismantling systems of domination — including sexism, patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, ageism, and geographic inequities — that interlock to uphold inequality and oppression. Feminism is not a quest for women to be dominant over men; rather, as bell hooks powerfully asserts, feminism is a movement to end sexism and sexist exploitation of all kinds — centred on justice and systemic transformation (hooks, 2000).

Recognising that no single axis of identity or oppression acts in isolation, this toolkit embraces an intersectional feminist framework first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

Intersectionality illuminates how overlapping systems of power shape individual experiences and collective realities, demanding leadership that reflects this complexity.
Feminist leadership thus refuses one-size-fits-all prescriptions, instead centring those most marginalised, amplifying diverse voices, and confronting unequal power relations.

Feminism also situates self-awareness and personal accountability as inseparable from political struggle. It insists on cultivating leadership that disrupts dominant hierarchies, fosters care over control, and nurtures solidarity over competition.
This means not merely adding women to existing structures, but fundamentally transforming those structures toward collective liberation.

What is feminist leadership?

Feminist leadership transcends gendered assumptions about who leads. It is a leadership practice open to all—women, men, and people of diverse genders—that consciously challenges patriarchal and other dominant power hierarchies, and dismantles exclusionary systems and norms. It is grounded in a political and ethical commitment to dismantling patriarchal and other systems of domination — including those based on race, class, sexuality, ability, age, and geography.

This is not about women leading instead of men, but about fostering leadership grounded in justice, equity, and collective empowerment for everyone. As Srilatha Batliwala teaches, feminist leadership is both deeply personal and inherently political—a way of transforming power by dissolving hierarchies and cultivating collective agency (Batliwala, 2011).

Central to feminist leadership is relationality and ethics: the leader is not positioned as the heroic saviour, but as a co-learner and servant to the community. It prioritises humility, self-reflection, inclusion, and ongoing accountability. Feminist leadership is:

- Transformative, not transactional
- Relational, not individualistic
- Values-driven, not power-driven
- Inclusive, not elitist
- Accountable, not unaccountable

This approach invites continual examination of power and privilege, and challenges entrenched patriarchal norms and toxic leadership cultures marked by competition, perfectionism, and burnout. It fosters spaces for vulnerability, risk, and collective growth, seeking to build organisational cultures and movements that are just, connective, and life-affirming.

Within movements for climate justice and sustainable development, feminist leadership has proven particularly powerful. Women leaders are reimagining how resources, ecosystems, and communities are governed — shifting from extraction and control to care and regeneration. Whether designing circular economy solutions, coordinating local energy cooperatives, or driving community adaptation projects, they model leadership grounded in interdependence and fairness.

Situating feminist leadership within leadership theory

Feminist leadership enriches and challenges a rich ecosystem of contemporary leadership theories:

- Adaptive Leadership emphasises navigating complexity and urgency through learning and resilience. Feminist leadership embeds this orientation while explicitly exposing power dynamics and emotional labour (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).
- Collaborative Leadership focuses on shared influence and trust-building across boundaries; feminist leadership deepens this by rooting collaboration in solidarity and justice (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Austin, 2000).
- Distributed Leadership advocates decentralising power within organisations; feminist leadership similarly nurtures multiple and emergent leaders as core to collective strength (Spillane, 2006).
- Ethical Leadership values integrity and transparency; feminist leadership foregrounds ongoing critique of systemic injustice embedded within organisational ethics (Brown & Treviño, 2006)
- Transformational Leadership aspires to inspire and mobilise change; feminist leadership interrogates who benefits from change and centres marginalized knowledge and accountability (Bass, 1985).

- Servant Leadership places service at the heart of leadership; feminist leadership expands this by integrating intersectional justice and collective empowerment (Greenleaf, 1977).

- Authentic Leadership calls for self-awareness; feminist leadership situates authenticity within relational accountability and political consciousness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

- Relational Leadership foregrounds social processes of leadership; feminist leadership adds a critical lens on power and oppression in relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

- Complexity Leadership recognises adaptive, networked leadership in dynamic systems; feminist leadership amplifies awareness of systemic inequities shaping those dynamics (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Why “feminist lens” and “feminist leadership principles”?

Feminist thought and action are dynamic, diverse, and deeply contextual, resisting any one-size-fits-all model. Reflecting this complexity, this toolkit foregrounds a feminist lens and principles rather than prescribing a fixed “feminist leadership style.” This choice honours the multiplicity of feminist experiences and the need for leadership approaches that can evolve and adapt across different contexts.

Central to this lens is the commitment to centre the leadership of those who have historically been excluded or marginalised, acknowledging their vital perspectives and insights. Feminist principles guide leaders to engage in ongoing critical reflection—continuously questioning how power operates within themselves and their organisations—and to align their actions with values of justice, care, and solidarity.
By applying a feminist lens, leadership practice is not simply about individual leaders or positions of power. Instead, it becomes a transformative force that reshapes power relations into forms that are collective, equitable, and life-affirming. These principles inspire leadership that nurtures shared agency, challenges systemic inequalities, and builds inclusive spaces where diverse voices are heard and valued.

This toolkit draws on the foundational feminist leadership principles developed by ActionAid in the ‘Top ten basics of feminist leadership’ (ActionAid, 2018). These principles provide a core framework grounded in collective values of equity, care, and transformative leadership.
While the toolkit honours and adapts the core ActionAid framework for the purposes of the SUBLIME project, it is equally informed by diverse practical and theoretical insights aimed at advancing feminist leadership in complex grassroots and cross-border contexts.

How to use this toolkit?

This toolkit is designed as a flexible and practical guide to feminist leadership, recognising that no universal blueprint exists. Leadership practices are shaped by diverse contexts, histories, and lived experiences, and the toolkit honours this complexity by offering adaptable principles rather than rigid prescriptions.

Each of the toolkit's ten chapters focuses on one principle, unfolding through rich real-life vignettes, insightful framing rooted in leadership and feminist theories, reflective exercises in form of facilitated activities, and practical tools. This structure invites leaders and teams to engage in ongoing learning, reflection, and collective accountability.

Together, these chapters form a comprehensive framework that supports embodying values of inclusion, care, equity, and shared power, empowering organisations and communities to lead differently—with courage and coherence—in times of intersecting crises such as climate breakdown, rising authoritarianism, and systemic inequality.

To ensure relevance across a wide variety of cultural, organisational, and geopolitical contexts - especially complex border regions where the project is situated - the toolkit encourages facilitators to adapt activities thoughtfully. A detailed Adaptation tips table guides this process, helping tailor the content without complicating delivery or creating unrealistic expectations.

Users are encouraged to explore the toolkit dynamically, adapting its principles and practices to their unique realities, and fostering leadership that unleashes transformative possibilities rooted in justice and solidarity.

Table 1: adaptation tips

Dimension	Adaptation Guidance	Examples
Cultural Context	Adapt language, examples, and norms to align with local culture and values	Avoid idioms; use regionally familiar stories and metaphors
Participant Diversity	Adjust group size, engagement modes, and disclosure to respect participant backgrounds and comfort	Use small groups, anonymous inputs, or alternative communication forms
Time & Format	Modify activity length, pacing, and sequencing to fit available time and participant energy	Shorten sessions; spread activities over multiple meetings
Power & Safety	Establish clear guidelines and safeguards to create psychologically and physically safe spaces	Set ground rules; allow opting out; prepare for emotional support
Language & Accessibility	Provide materials in multiple languages, use plain language, and offer accessible formats	Translators; visual aids; captioned videos
Technology & Setting	Tailor delivery approach to virtual, hybrid, or in-person modes and adapt for participant tech access and familiarity	Test technology beforehand; use breakout rooms and chat tools for engagement
Organisational Context	Choose or adapt case studies, examples, and language that fit sector, roles, and power dynamics of your organisation	Replace NGO-specific examples with those from corporate, government, or grassroots environments

To complement the activities and reflections offered here, the toolkit is accompanied by a series of short podcast conversations.

podcast series link

the toolkit is accompanied by a series of podcasts that can be found here

Each episode focuses on one of the ten feminist leadership principles and features a leader whose experience brings the principle to life in an accessible way.
The conversations were made possible thanks to the ten leaders who kindly volunteered their time and insights.

The **podcast series** can be listened to independently or alongside the chapters that follow.

Feminist leadership principles

01

Self-awareness

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I will practice humility in my leadership by recognizing both my strengths and my limitations. Leading with empathy and openness requires me to accept my vulnerabilities as part of who I am, while also valuing the qualities I and others bring.

Framing
Reflection Prompts
Activities
Outcomes

Framing

Feminist leadership begins with the self. Before we can challenge power outside us, we must recognise how it shows up within us - in our thoughts, reactions, assumptions, and behaviours.

The commitment to self-awareness is not a luxury or an individual indulgence; it is an ethical and political practice. In patriarchal leadership cultures, ego is often rewarded - confidence is conflated with dominance, and vulnerability is seen as weakness.

Feminist leadership turns this model upside down. It recognises that genuine leadership grows from humility, not certainty.

It invites us to examine not only how we treat others, but also how we treat ourselves — including our fears, blind spots, and needs.

Self-awareness requires two movements:

- Looking inward with honesty - acknowledging both strengths and vulnerabilities.
- Looking outward with openness - being willing to learn from others, even when it challenges our comfort.

This balance helps us lead from integrity rather than insecurity, and it enables us to create space for others to thrive instead of centring ourselves as the source of all answers.

As Srilatha Batliwala (2011) notes, feminist leaders must *"continuously question their own power and privileges, reflect on their motivations, and seek alignment between what they believe and what they practice."*

Vignette: The presentation she didn't give

Nadia was leading a women-driven initiative helping smallholder farmers in Southern Italy transition to regenerative practices amid worsening droughts. After months of preparation, she was set to present the cooperative's work to a consortium of donors — a moment that could secure the next phase of funding. She was the natural spokesperson: experienced, articulate, and the main author of the proposal. But three days before the meeting, her father was hospitalised. She tried to keep working from the hospital corridor, balancing calls and edits late into the night. By the eve of the meeting, she knew she could no longer think clearly. Her colleague Marta, who had co-led field implementation, offered to take her place. "You've carried the project this far," she said softly. "Let me speak for us this time." Nadia hesitated. Handing over felt like surrender. Yet as she sat with her unease, she realised her reluctance came from pride - from the quiet belief that leadership meant endurance, not trust. That insight shifted something in her.

That night, she wrote to the donors:
"Due to a serious family health emergency, I will not be able to join tomorrow's

presentation. My colleague Marta, who has been leading field coordination, will represent our team. She brings deep knowledge of the farmers' work and our community engagement model. As I prepared the proposal myself, there may be specific technical questions she cannot address immediately; please feel free to share them with us afterwards, and I will respond in writing. I trust this temporary adjustment will allow our dialogue to remain open and constructive."

The following day, Marta's presentation was thoughtful, direct, and grounded in lived experience. The donors' questions were challenging but respectful — and when the meeting ended, the group expressed appreciation for the team's clarity and professionalism. When Nadia returned a week later, the team greeted her not with sympathy, but with quiet confidence. "You gave us space," Marta said. "That's what leadership looks like."

Nadia understood then that self-awareness was not only about recognising personal limits, but about aligning transparency with trust — and allowing vulnerability to expand, rather than diminish, collective strength.

Reflection prompts:

- What emotions do you imagine Nadia experienced when deciding to delegate the presentation?
- How do societal or organisational expectations around "strong leadership" influence how we deal with personal limits?
- In what ways can acknowledging vulnerability strengthen, rather than weaken, collective trust and credibility?
- How might transparency — about our boundaries, mistakes, or needs — model a healthier culture of leadership in your own context?
- Think of a time when you felt pressure to "push through." What would have changed if you had allowed yourself to pause or ask for help?

Activity 1 - The Mirror of Truth
(Individual version)

Objective:

Time: 45-60 minutes

To cultivate deeper self-awareness by recognising both strengths and vulnerabilities, understanding how they influence leadership behaviour, and reframing vulnerability as a source of connection and learning.

Materials:

- Paper/journal
- Pen or markers
- Optional: small mirror
- Quiet space
  (can be done individually or in a group setting with individual reflection time)
- A time or phone
  (to support paced reflection)

Steps to take

1. Settle into the space (5 minutes)

- Find a comfortable position.
- Take a few deep breaths, focusing on your inhale and exhale.
- If comfortable, place a hand on your heart to signal to yourself that this is a moment of honesty and care.

2. Look into the mirror (or close your eyes if preferred) (5 minutes)

- Gaze gently at your reflection, or imagine it in your mind.
- Ask yourself: *"Who am I beyond my role or title?"*

- Notice what emotions arise. No judgement — simply observe.

3. List your leadership strengths (10 minutes)

- Write down at least five strengths that you bring to your leadership (e.g., empathy, decisiveness, creativity, humour, persistence).
- For each, note one recent moment when you used that strength to positively impact others.

4. Name your vulnerabilities (10 minutes)

- Write down three to five vulnerabilities, fears, or personal challenges that show up in your leadership (e.g., fear of conflict, perfectionism, self-doubt, impatience).
- For each, note how it tends to influence your decisions, relationships, or communication.

5. Reframe and embrace (10 minutes)

- For each vulnerability, write down:
  a) What this vulnerability teaches me or reminds me of
  b) One way I can work with it constructively instead of hiding it
- Example: “Fear of conflict” → reminds me that I value harmony → I can prepare for difficult conversations with empathy rather than avoiding them.

6. Integration and commitment (5 minutes)

- Write one affirmation that honours both your strengths and vulnerabilities.
- Example: “I lead with courage and care, knowing my strengths are powerful and my vulnerabilities are teachers.”
- Share your affirmation with a trusted colleague or keep it somewhere visible.

Outcome:

By naming both strengths and vulnerabilities, participants normalise imperfection, deepen self-compassion, and learn to lead with authenticity. Vulnerability shifts from being a flaw to being an asset — a doorway to connection and trust.

Activity 2 - Group Variation: The Leadership Lens Exchange

Objective:

Time: 40-50 minutes

To encourage reflection on strengths and vulnerabilities in a supportive environment, building mutual understanding and empathy without forcing personal exposure.

Materials:

- Two different colours of sticky notes (e.g., yellow for strengths, pink for vulnerabilities)
- Pens / markers
- Large wall space or flipchart paper

Steps to take

1. Individual reflection – strengths (5 minutes)

- On **3 yellow sticky notes**, write one strength you personally bring to leadership per note.

2. Individual reflection – vulnerabilities (5 minutes)

- On **3 pink sticky notes**, write one vulnerability you personally bring to leadership per note.

3. Anonymous exchange (5 minutes)

- Fold your notes in half and place them in two baskets or boxes.

4. Random pick & read aloud (10 minutes)

- Each participant picks 1–2 notes from each basket (not their own) and reads them silently.
- Volunteers read some aloud to the group; facilitator clusters similar notes on the wall.

5. Group reflection (10 minutes)

- Which strengths appear most often?
- Which vulnerabilities are common?
- How might these commonalities shape our collective leadership style?
- How can we support one another?

6. Closing affirmation circle (5 minutes)

- Each person states one collective strength they feel proud of and one way they will support the group in addressing a vulnerability.

Outcome:

- Builds a shared understanding that vulnerabilities are normal and often shared.
- Encourages team empathy without singling anyone out.

Activity 3 - Meeting Your Leadership Shadow

Objective:

Time: 45-60 minutes

To help leaders identify and work with the "shadow" aspects of themselves — traits they tend to deny, suppress, or project onto others — in order to reduce reactivity and increase authenticity.

Background:

"Shadows" refers to hidden or denied aspects of our personality that unconsciously influence behaviour. They are parts of ourselves we have disowned, often because they conflict with how we want to be seen.

Diane Musho Hamilton, drawing on Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, describes the shadow as "the part of us we can't see, but that others can" (Hamilton, 2016). By exploring our shadows, we uncover hidden vulnerabilities that influence our decisions and relationships.

Steps to take

1. Identify triggers (10 minutes)

- Think of situations or people that reliably frustrate or anger you in leadership contexts.
- Write down a few examples.

2. Look for the mirror (10 minutes)

- For each example, ask: Could this be reflecting a quality I also have but find hard to accept?

3. Name your shadow quality (10 minutes)

- Choose one quality you often judge in others.
- Recall a time you expressed this quality yourself.

4. Reclaim and reframe (10 minutes)

- Ask: What positive potential could this quality have if expressed consciously?

5. Integration step (5 minutes)

- Write a sentence acknowledging the shadow and how you'll use it constructively.

Outcome:

By meeting their shadows, leaders reduce unconscious reactivity and transform disowned traits into conscious strengths.

See also: **Chapter 03, "Dismantling Bias,"** *for practices that complement self-awareness by uncovering hidden assumptions and systemic influences.*

Do’s and Don’ts
for Practicing Self-awareness

Do:

Pause and notice
when you feel defensive.

Acknowledge both overconfidence
and self-doubt.

Listen more than you speak.

Invite ideas that challenge
your thinking.

Approach situations with curiosity.

Learn from the strengths
of your team.

Don’t

Let ego override goals.

Demand perfection from
yourself or others.

See yourself only as a victim.

Assume you must have
the best idea.

Judge ideas only through
your existing knowledge.

Surround yourself
only with agreement.

Closing thought:

Self-awareness is not about perfection. It is about cultivating the courage to see ourselves clearly, own our impact, and choose to lead from integrity rather than ego. When leaders embrace their vulnerabilities — including the ones hidden in the shadows — they model a form of leadership that is both human and transformative.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

02

Self-care and caring for others

“

I will take care of myself and others so that we can sustain our leadership for the long haul. This means paying attention to our physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and creating a culture where rest, balance, and mutual care are valued and practiced.

Framing
Reflection Prompts
Activities
Outcomes

Framing

In feminist leadership, self-care is not self-indulgence — it is a political and ethical act. Audre Lorde reminds us that caring for ourselves "is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

When leaders neglect care, they risk reproducing the same extractive patterns they seek to dismantle.

Especially for women and those in marginalised positions, self-care is often framed as a luxury — this toolkit frames it as essential.

Care in this sense has two layers:

- **Personal:** tending to our own well-being so we can sustain our energy, clarity, and compassion.
- **Collective:** shaping team and organisational cultures that respect boundaries, avoid burnout, and make room for rest without guilt.

Scholarly research supports this view: work–life balance correlates strongly with job satisfaction, mental health, and organisational commitment (Kalliath & Brough, 2008; Haar et al., 2014). When leaders model care, they legitimise it for others, creating healthier and more equitable spaces.

This chapter explores self-care through three interconnected domains:

1. **Physical health** — sustaining the body that sustains the work.
2. **Mental health** — building clarity, calm, and stress management.
3. **Psychological health** — aligning values, boundaries, and self-worth.

Vignette: Care under pressure

Farah directed a regional network of women's cooperatives involved in climate-resilient farming across the Balkans. When lockdowns began, donors demanded weekly "continuity reports," and ministries asked for data on food security. Farah's inbox became a map of competing urgencies.

Her team — mostly women balancing work, households, and community duties — began sending messages at all hours. Farah answered them all. The gesture felt protective, almost maternal: if I stay responsive, the system won't collapse.

Three months in, she received a donor email copied to half a dozen officials, noting "delays in field verification." The language was cold but familiar. That night she rewrote the report herself, erasing traces of staff uncertainty to "keep confidence high."

The next morning, her programme officer, Jelena, called. "You corrected my data," she said quietly. "If we hide the strain, we can't fix it."

Farah wanted to defend herself — she had only wanted to shield the team — but the words caught. Hiding vulnerability from power was the reflex she had spent years criticising in others.

Over the following weeks, she began small experiments. Reports to donors now included a new section: “Team Well-Being and Field Constraints.” She shared the task of drafting them, even when it meant revealing mistakes. Predictably, one donor replied that “operational details were unnecessary.” Another, unexpectedly, thanked her for the transparency and offered to fund digital training.

The internal shift was slower but deeper. Staff meetings started including open check-ins not about emotions, but about capacity — who had time, who needed rest. Farah stopped measuring leadership by endurance and began treating self-care as governance: a collective contract for sustainability. When she later reflected on that year, she wrote in her notebook: We wanted resilience. What we built was honesty.

Reflection prompts:

- What unspoken expectations about leadership surfaced in Farah’s behaviour — both her instinct to protect and her reluctance to disclose strain?
- How does the tension between transparency and credibility appear in your own organisation’s relationship with funders or partners?
- In what ways can “care” be institutionalised — not as emotional support alone, but as an ethical practice of accountability and truth-telling?
- What risks arise when leaders conceal organisational fatigue in order to appear competent or resilient?
- How might reporting frameworks or donor communication be redesigned to include human sustainability alongside financial and technical results? have changed if you had allowed yourself to pause or ask for help?

1 **Physical health** - Sustaining leadership energy

Framing

Physical well-being is the foundation for sustained, effective leadership. It affects mental clarity, emotional stability, and the capacity to respond creatively to challenges.

Feminist leadership understands physical health not as a personal luxury, but as a collective responsibility — if the leader is burnt out, the team's capacity suffers.

Caring for one's body is part of resisting systems that expect constant productivity at the expense of human needs

(Kalliath & Brough, 2008).

Activity 4 - The Energy Audit

Objective:

Time: 45-60 minutes

To help leaders become aware of how their daily routines, habits, and work environments affect their physical energy, and to create realistic, context-sensitive changes that enhance stamina and resilience.

Materials:

- Paper or journal
- Pen or markers
- Optional: fitness tracker, smartphone health app, or printed daily schedule template

Steps to take

1. Baseline reflection (10 minutes)

- Think about last week. How often did you feel energized, neutral, or drained?
- On a sheet of paper, create three columns: Energizing, Neutral, Draining.
- List daily activities or patterns in the appropriate columns.

2. Pattern spotting (10 minutes)

- Look for trends — for example, do long virtual meetings leave you tired? Does a short morning walk boost your mood?
- Mark any surprises.

3. Body signals check-in (10 minutes)

- Note any recurring physical signs: headaches, back pain, shallow breathing, restless sleep.
- Ask: What are these signals telling me about my current pace and habits?

4. Small shift planning (10 minutes)

- Choose *one* habit that drains you and plan a concrete change.
- Example: Replace two back-to-back meetings with a 15-minute break and light stretching.

5. Commitment step (5 minutes)

- **Write a one-sentence intention:** *"I commit to making [specific change] for the next [X] days to sustain my energy and leadership presence."*

Facilitator tip:

If done in a group, participants can share only their planned changes (not their full lists) to maintain privacy while building accountability.

App suggestions (free):

- **My Fitness Pal** track nutrition and hydration.
- **Map My Walk** encourage regular walking breaks.
- **Insight Timer** guided stretching or mindful movement.

2 **Mental health** - Protecting clarity and emotional balance

Framing

Mental health underpins a leader's capacity to think clearly, make sound decisions, and maintain healthy relationships.

In feminist leadership, mental well-being is a political issue as much as a personal one — it challenges the systems that normalise overwork, emotional suppression, and self-sacrifice.

Caring for our minds is an act of resistance against burnout culture and a step towards modelling humane, sustainable workplaces.

Mindfulness-based interventions improve leaders' emotional regulation and reduce stress (Good et al., 2016).

Research shows that even short, guided mindfulness meditations delivered via smartphone can significantly improve well-being, reduce job strain, and enhance workplace social support, with effects sustained for weeks after the practice ends

(Bostock et al., 2019).

Activity 5 - The Mind Declutter

Objective:

Time: 45-60 minutes

To help leaders recognize mental overload, reduce cognitive clutter, and create space for focused, creative, and emotionally balanced leadership.

Materials:

- Paper or journal
- Pen or markers
- Optional: digital task manager or note-taking app

Steps to take

1. Mental load dump (10 minutes)

- Write down everything currently occupying your mind — work tasks, personal errands, unresolved conflicts, even “shoulds” that you’re carrying.
- Don’t edit; aim to get it all out of your head.

2. Sort into categories (10 minutes)

- Draw three columns: Urgent & Important, Important but Not Urgent, Not Important.
- Place each item into one column.

3. Release the unnecessary (5 minutes)

- Cross out items that are Not Important.
- Ask: What would happen if I simply let this go?

4. Plan next steps (10 minutes)

- For the urgent/important items, assign a next action.

- For the “important but not urgent” ones, schedule a realistic timeline.

5. Daily micro-practice (5 minutes)

- Choose one 5–10 minute practice to reset your mind each day:
  - Deep breathing exercises
  - Short walk without your phone
  - Journaling one “release” thought

Facilitator tip:

In group settings, avoid sharing full lists. Instead, have participants reflect on one thing they can let go of immediately to lighten their mental load.

App suggestions (free):

- **Headspace** or **Insight Timer** guided meditations for stress relief.
- **Todoist** or **Trello** organise tasks into priority lists; task management.
- **Daylio** mood tracking to notice patterns and triggers.

3 **Psychological health** - Building inner strength and healthy boundaries

Framing

Psychological health relates to our sense of self-worth, the boundaries we set, and our capacity to respond to challenges without being consumed by them.

For feminist leaders, it also involves dismantling internalised oppression — the ways we may unconsciously absorb and reproduce harmful power dynamics

(Freire, 1970; Batliwala, 2011).

A psychologically healthy leader knows that care for self and others is not in conflict; rather, it is through a secure sense of self and clear boundaries that we can engage with courage and generosity.

Activity 6 - The Boundary Compass

Objective:

Time: 45-60 minutes

To help leaders identify their personal and professional boundaries, understand how those boundaries support their leadership, and develop strategies to maintain them without guilt.

Materials:

- Paper or journal
- Pen or markers
- Optional: coloured pens for visual mapping

Steps to take

1. Identify your non-negotiables (10 minutes)

- List situations where you feel your values, time, or emotional energy are most at risk of being compromised.
- Example: Being contacted for work late at night, accepting projects misaligned with your principles.

2. Map your current boundaries (10 minutes)

- Draw a circle representing your safe space.
- Inside the circle: write what you are comfortable allowing in.
- Outside the circle: write what you need to keep out to protect your well-being.

3. Spot your boundary challenges (10 minutes)

- Identify where your boundaries are often crossed — and by whom (colleagues, clients, yourself).

- Reflect: What makes it hard to enforce your boundaries? Fear of conflict? Desire to please?

4. Script your boundary language (10 minutes)

- Write short, clear phrases to assert boundaries without apology.
- Examples:
  - "I can respond to this first thing tomorrow."
  - "This doesn't align with our agreed priorities, so I can't commit."

5. Commitment to reinforcement (5 minutes)

- Choose one boundary you will actively maintain for the next month and note the specific steps you will take.

Facilitator tip:

If done in a group, participants can pair up to role-play boundary-setting conversations. Keep scenarios relevant to the leadership context (e.g., resisting scope creep, declining inappropriate requests, no emails after 7pm unless urgent).

App suggestions (free):

- **Moodfit** track emotional well-being and stress levels.
- **Reflectly** journaling app for self-reflection on daily boundaries and triggers.
- **ThinkUp** record and replay affirmations for self-worth and confidence.
- **Apple Journal** integrated journaling, with expressive writing shown to improve psychological well-being

Do's and Don'ts
for practicing self-care

Do:	Don't
Schedule regular breaks and protect them as non-negotiable time.	Wear exhaustion as a badge of honour.
Talk openly about workload and well-being with your team.	Skip meals or sleep for prolonged periods to meet deadlines.
Recognise early signs of burnout and act before they escalate.	Assume others will "just cope" because you did.
Support others in taking rest without guilt or judgement.	Blur work–life boundaries without clear agreement.
Use tools and systems that reduce mental load and support healthy routines.	Treat self-care as a privilege rather than a right for everyone.

Closing thought:

Self-care in feminist leadership is the ground on which everything else is built. By tending to physical, mental, and psychological health, leaders create the conditions for clarity, courage, and compassion to flourish. When leaders model care for themselves and others, they make collective well-being a shared practice rather than an individual struggle.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

03

Dismantling bias

> “I will recognize how privilege and bias influence my behaviour and workplace practices. I will work to challenge discrimination, reflect on my own advantages, and act in ways that ensure all colleagues are treated as equals.

Framing

Bias is not simply an individual flaw — it is a set of ingrained mental shortcuts, cultural narratives, and structural patterns that shape how we perceive and interact with the world.

Everyone carries biases, many of which operate unconsciously. In leadership, unexamined bias influences who is trusted, whose expertise is valued, and whose needs are overlooked.

Feminist leadership approaches bias not as a one-off training topic, but as an ongoing practice of unlearning — deliberately questioning inherited assumptions, dominant cultural narratives, and our own "common sense."

This means replacing the reflex to act from habit with the courage to pause, reflect, and make choices that align with justice and inclusion. Unlearning is not comfortable; it asks us to give up ways of thinking that may have once felt safe or rewarded.

An intersectional lens, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is central to this process. Bias is rarely experienced along a single dimension — gender bias intersects with race, class, sexuality, disability, age, and other factors, producing layered barriers and privileges. Without attending to these intersections, well-meaning leaders risk reinforcing inequalities even while attempting to dismantle them.

Research shows that awareness of bias, while necessary, is not enough to change behaviour. Effective change comes from consistent, structured actions such as perspective-taking, exposure to counter-stereotypical examples, redesigning decision-making processes, and creating feedback loops that surface blind spots (Devine et al., 2012; Paluck & Green, 2009). For feminist leaders, these strategies must be grounded in accountability — inviting others to challenge our biases and responding without defensiveness.

As Srilatha Batliwala reminds us, paraphrasing Audre Lorde, "We cannot dismantle the master's house if we carry the master's tools inside our own heads." The work of unlearning bias is therefore not only about fairness to others, but also about freeing ourselves from limiting beliefs that prevent genuine solidarity and transformation.

Vignette: The hiring decision that almost repeated history

Nadia chaired the hiring panel for a new programme officer role.
The shortlist included three candidates: Ahmed, a young man with years of field experience but no formal degree; Priya, a mid-career professional from a rural community with a track record in grassroots organising; and Lisa, a recent graduate from a prestigious university with polished presentation skills.
As the panel discussed the candidates, Nadia noticed the conversation kept returning to Lisa. Words like "professional," "articulate," and "impressive" flowed easily. When Priya's name came up, comments focused on whether she would "fit in" with the existing team culture. Ahmed was praised for his energy but dismissed as "not ready for this level."

At first, Nadia agreed — Lisa did present exceptionally well.
But later that evening, she reflected on the discussion. Why had the panel valued a certain accent and presentation style over years of lived, community-based experience? Why had "fit" been used to sideline someone from a different background? The next day, Nadia reopened the conversation.

She asked the panel to consider what kind of expertise the organisation most needed, and whether their criteria were unintentionally reproducing privilege. This time, they looked again at Ahmed's and Priya's applications with fresh eyes. Priya was eventually hired — and her deep community relationships soon became one of the team's greatest assets.

Reflection prompts:

- What subtle cues in the panel's discussion revealed implicit bias? How were ideas like "fit," "professionalism," or "readiness" connected to privilege or exclusion?
- How can recruitment processes unintentionally reward familiarity and confidence over competence and lived experience?
- In your own organisation, what criteria might unconsciously reproduce privilege or narrow definitions of merit?
- What practices could make decision-making spaces more self-aware and accountable when evaluating candidates from different backgrounds?
- How can feminist leadership encourage team members to challenge bias collectively, without turning the conversation into personal blame?
- After Priya's hiring, what changes might the organisation need to make to ensure that inclusion goes beyond recruitment and into daily culture?

Activity 7 - The crash test dummy moment: Seeing bias in design and data

Objective:

Time: 25-30 minutes

To illustrate how systemic bias can be embedded in design, policy, and data - often unnoticed - and how such bias creates unequal outcomes.

Materials:

- Short description of the crash test dummy case:
  For decades, car safety tests used dummies modelled on the average male body (1.77m height, 76kg weight). As a result, vehicle safety features like seatbelts and airbags were optimised for male physiology. Women, on average, are shorter, lighter, and have different neck and torso structures, leading to higher risk of injury. Research shows that women are 17% more likely to die and 73% more likely to be seriously injured in car crashes than men — not due to driving behaviour, but due to testing bias.
- Printed or projected statistics from SDG 5 and WHO transport safety data.
- Flipcharts or sticky notes.

Steps to take

1. Identify triggers (10 minutes)

- Think of situations or people that reliably frustrate or anger you in leadership contexts.
- Write down a few examples.

2. Look for the mirror (10 minutes)

- What assumptions may have led to this design choice?
- How does this example show that “neutral” systems can produce gendered harm?
- What assumptions do we make in our own work that might unintentionally exclude?

3. Groups share examples; facilitator notes parallels on flipchart.

Outcome:

By naming both strengths and vulnerabilities, participants normalise imperfection, deepen self-compassion, and learn to lead with authenticity. Vulnerability shifts from being a flaw to being an asset — a doorway to connection and trust.

Activity 8 - Bias mapping in our work
(using the Intersectionality Mapping Sheet 1)

Objective:

Time: 45 minutes

To identify patterns of inequity within organisational data by applying an intersectional lens. (Works best in teams with access to HR or participation data; otherwise, adapt using hypothetical cases)

Materials:

- Real or anonymised organisational dataset (e.g., recruitment, promotions, pay, training participation, client access).
- Intersectionality Mapping Sheet (printed or digital).
- Coloured pens/highlighters for coding patterns.

[1] An Intersectionality Mapping Sheet is a visual tool that helps uncover how different aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race, class, age, sexuality, disability, migration status) intersect to create unique experiences of advantage or disadvantage. To create one, draw a central circle with the individual, group, or case you are analysing in the middle. Around it, add other circles for each relevant identity dimension. Use lines or arrows to connect dimensions that interact in ways that amplify privilege or oppression. Annotate connections with short notes or examples. The aim is not to list identities in isolation, but to visualise how they overlap and influence each other in specific contexts, guiding more nuanced analysis and action.

Steps to take

1. Introduce the Intersectionality Mapping Sheet and explain rows/columns.

2. Provide dataset; ask groups to fill in the sheet with observed disparities.

3. Discuss:

- Where are the largest gaps?
- What identity intersections (e.g., gender × age) show the sharpest disparities?
- What systemic factors may be producing these patterns?
- How might these patterns affect participation in climate, circular, or community sustainability projects?

4. Groups propose one short-term and one long-term intervention.

Outcome:

Leaders practise structural bias detection and intervention planning grounded in their own operational reality.

Activity 9 - The Bias Johari: An unlearning exercise

Objective:

Time: 60 minutes

To use the Johari Window framework as a tool for identifying, reflecting on, and unlearning personal and organisational biases — especially those that may be hidden or normalised.

Materials:

- Flipchart or whiteboard with a Johari Window grid drawn (four quadrants)
- Sticky notes in two colours (e.g., blue for "known biases," yellow for "possible blind spots")
- Pens or markers

Steps to take

1. Explain the adapted Johari Window (5 minutes)

- **Open area:** Biases I recognise in myself and that others also see.
- **Hidden area:** Biases I recognise in myself but rarely disclose.
- **Blind spot:** Biases others see in me but I am unaware of.
- **Unknown area:** Biases neither I nor others readily see — often embedded in systems or culture.

2. Identify known biases (10 minutes)

- On blue sticky notes, participants write 2–3 biases they are aware they hold (e.g., favouring certain communication styles, undervaluing younger voices, assumptions about education levels).

3. Explain the adapted Johari Window (5 minutes)

- In pairs or small groups, participants exchange constructive observations about possible blind spots. These are written on yellow sticky notes and placed in the "Blind spot" quadrant.

4. Identify known biases (10 minutes)

- For each bias identified (in any quadrant), participants ask:
  a) Where might this bias have come from?
  b) Who benefits from it?
  c) How can I actively unlearn or counter it?

5. Explain the adapted Johari Window (5 minutes)

- Each participant chooses one bias to address over the next month, identifying one concrete action (e.g., redesigning a recruitment question, diversifying reading sources, seeking feedback from underrepresented colleagues).

Outcome:

By making both visible and hidden biases explicit, participants create a shared language for ongoing reflection and accountability. The unlearning frame helps shift from guilt or defensiveness towards intentional change.

Facilitator tip:

Model vulnerability by sharing one of your own blind spots, to set the tone for honest feedback *See also:* **Chapter 04, "Inclusion"** *to explore how recognizing bias supports creating genuinely inclusive spaces.*

Do's and Don'ts
for dismantling bias

Do:	Don't
Seek feedback from diverse perspectives and respond without defensiveness.	Assume good intentions cancel out impact.
Challenge "culture fit" as a criterion — focus on "culture add."	Avoid difficult conversations about bias.
Examine processes and language for hidden barriers.	Tokenise individuals to appear inclusive.
Use an intersectional lens in decision-making.	Rely only on gut instinct in high-stakes decisions.
Model openness to changing your mind.	Treat bias awareness as a one-time training.

Closing thought:

Dismantling bias begins with humility and grows through practice.
It is the willingness to see differently, to unlearn old assumptions, and to welcome accountability as a path to growth. Each time leaders question their own privileges and patterns, they make space for fairer systems and for solidarity that is genuine rather than symbolic.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

04

Inclusion

> “I will actively create and protect spaces where all voices can be heard, respected, and valued — especially those of people and communities most affected by the issues at hand.

Framing Reflection Prompts Activities Outcomes

Framing

Inclusion in feminist leadership is not about simply “making room at the table” — it is about reshaping the table itself.

It asks leaders to go beyond token representation and to ensure that decision-making processes, organisational cultures, and resource allocation actively remove barriers to participation.

Research in organisational psychology shows that when people experience inclusion — not just diversity in numbers — they are more likely to share ideas, challenge the status quo, and collaborate effectively (Shore et al., 2011). In this sense, inclusion is a relational and structural commitment, not a one-off event. It requires continual reflection on who is present, who is absent, and why. From a feminist lens, inclusion demands an intersectional approach. It is not enough to invite more women into leadership if the women included are only from dominant social groups. Power dynamics related to race, class, disability, sexuality, migration status, and other factors shape whose voices are amplified and whose remain marginalised. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality reminds us that without this analysis, inclusion efforts can inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities.

True inclusion also challenges the idea of assimilation — expecting individuals from marginalised groups to adapt to existing norms. Instead, feminist leaders create spaces where multiple ways of knowing, communicating, and leading are recognised as equally valid. This requires a shift from “fitting people in” to “transforming the environment” so that diversity of identity, thought, and experience is genuinely valued as a collective strength.

Vignette: The roundtable

At a regional policy consultation in Brussels on the European Green Deal, delegates from across the EU gathered to discuss funding priorities for the next cycle. The official seating chart placed representatives from large, well-established environmental NGOs and industry associations at the main roundtable. Smaller organisations — many from Eastern and Southern Europe — were seated at a side row of chairs, ostensibly to "accommodate the numbers."
As the meeting progressed, those at the roundtable dominated the conversation. They set the tone, introduced proposals, and referred to each other by name, while those in the side row were invited to speak only during the final 15 minutes, when the schedule was already overrunning. When a delegate from a Roma women's cooperative in Bulgaria raised a concern about how proposed clean-energy subsidies might bypass rural communities, the facilitator acknowledged her point but quickly moved on to "more pressing items."
The organisers insisted the process was inclusive because all attendees had "equal opportunity" to contribute. Yet the seating arrangement, order of speaking, and subtle cues — interruptions, direct eye contact, follow-up engagement — revealed who was truly part of the decision-making circle.
One participant from a small Greek climate-action network felt torn. Speaking up about the inequity in the process might jeopardise her network's chances in future funding calls, yet remaining silent would leave the exclusion unchallenged.
As she left the meeting, she wondered: Had she participated in shaping a just policy process, or simply validated an unequal one by being present?

Reflection prompts:

- What structural or procedural factors shaped who had influence in this meeting?
- In what ways did "inclusion" exist in form but not in substance?
- How might those with more power in the room have acted differently to ensure meaningful participation from all?
- If you were in the position of the Greek participant, how might you balance the risk of speaking up with the responsibility to challenge exclusion?

Activity 10 - Who is not in the room?

Objective:

Time: 15 minutes

To cultivate the habit of noticing absent voices at the start of any decision-making process and reflecting on how their absence shapes outcomes.

Materials:

- Paper or sticky notes
- Pens
- Flipchart or whiteboard

Steps to take

1. Silent reflection (5 minutes)

- Invite participants to close their eyes for a moment and visualise the people most affected by the issue at hand.
- Then, ask them to write down:
  a) Who is represented in this room?
  b) Who is not here, but will be impacted by our decisions?
  Encourage participants to name at least one concrete community or demographic not represented.

2. Pair sharing (5 minutes)

- In pairs, participants compare their lists.
- Encourage them to discuss:
  - How might the absence of these people affect the direction of the conversation?
  - What assumptions might we make without their input?

3. Plenary capture (5 minutes)

- Invite 2–3 volunteers to share key insights.
- Note these on a flipchart and keep them visible throughout the session as a reminder.

Outcome:

Participants develop the reflex to ask "Who is missing?" at the outset of meetings, ensuring inclusion becomes a conscious and regular practice rather than an afterthought.

Activity 11 - The Empty Chair

Objective:

Time: 30 minutes

To practice integrating the perspectives of marginalised or excluded stakeholders into decision-making discussions, making their voices present even when they cannot be in the room.

Materials:

- One empty chair placed prominently in the room
- Flipchart/markers
- Cards with short profiles of excluded stakeholders (e.g., undocumented migrant worker, single parent working shifts, person with a disability, rural elder, young activist)

Steps to take

1. Set the context (5 minutes)

- Explain that the empty chair represents those whose voices are not present but who will be directly affected by the decisions made.
- Draw attention to how easily absence can be mistaken for irrelevance.

2. Assign a profile (5 minutes)

- Select one stakeholder profile card and place it on the chair.
- Read it aloud so all participants understand who is represented.

3. Bring the voice in (15 minutes)

- During the discussion, any participant can choose to “speak” on behalf of the empty chair.
- They must do so by imagining the perspective of the stakeholder, grounding their intervention in empathy, evidence, or lived experiences they may know (but avoiding stereotypes).
  Remind participants to avoid stereotypes when role-playing missing voices; draw on real stories or evidence where possible.

4. Debrief (5 minutes)

- Reflect as a group:
  - How did including this perspective change the discussion?
  - Did it shift priorities or challenge assumptions?
  - How might we integrate such perspectives more systematically in real-life processes?

Outcome:

Participants experience the shift that occurs when absent or marginalised voices are actively integrated, learning that inclusion requires deliberate action, not symbolic gestures.

Activity 12 - Inclusion systems audit

Objective:

Time: 75 minutes

To critically examine organisational systems and everyday practices for hidden exclusion points, and to create actionable commitments for more inclusive structures.

Materials:

- Inclusion Audit Checklist (covering recruitment, meeting facilitation, communication, budgeting, accountability)
- Organisational/project data (e.g., demographics, participation statistics, feedback forms, representation in leadership)
- Flipchart and markers

Steps to take

1. Review the data (15 minutes)

- In small groups, participants examine organisational data and feedback related to participation and representation.
- If real data is not available, use anonymised or hypothetical datasets to illustrate.

2. Audit practices (30 minutes)

- Using the checklist, groups identify exclusion points in different domains.
- Example prompts:
  - Do our job descriptions use inclusive language?
  - Are meeting times accessible for those with care responsibilities?
  - Are our materials accessible to people with disabilities or lower literacy?
  - Do our budget allocations create barriers for grassroots partners?

3. Prioritise actions (15 minutes)

- Each group selects two short-term (within a month) and one long-term (this year) action to improve inclusion.
- Actions should be realistic, measurable, and assignable to specific roles.

4. Report back (15 minutes)

- Groups present findings and proposed actions.
- Facilitator notes recurring patterns and encourages peer accountability.

Outcome:

Organisations move from abstract commitments to inclusion toward concrete, evidence-based changes embedded in their systems and processes.

Facilitator tip:

If resistance to the audit emerges, prompt with: 'We're here to learn—not to blame.

Related principle: **Chapter 05, "Sharing Power"** *which enhances inclusion by distributing decision-making authority.*

Do's and Don'ts
for practising inclusion

Do:	Don't
Ask regularly: Who is not in the room, and why?	Confuse diversity in numbers with genuine inclusion.
Make inclusion part of the process design, not an afterthought.	Expect marginalised individuals to adapt to dominant norms without change from the majority.
Provide multiple ways to participate (written, oral, visual, online, in person).	Tokenise participation by inviting people only for appearance, without real influence.
Recognise and value different forms of expertise, including lived experience.	Assume "equal opportunity to speak" guarantees equal power to shape decisions.
Adapt meeting times, language, and formats to reduce barriers.	Treat inclusion as a box-ticking exercise instead of a continuous practice.
Create feedback loops that allow marginalised voices to shape utcomes.	

Closing thought:

Inclusion is the practice of building spaces where every voice carries weight and every perspective shapes outcomes. Far from diluting leadership, it deepens it — anchoring decisions in the wisdom of the many rather than the few. When leaders commit to genuine inclusion, they transform participation into shared power and create cultures where belonging is not conditional but guaranteed.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

05

Sharing Power

> “I understand that my leadership is measured by the space I create for others to lead. I will work with my team to set shared goals, build trust, and distribute leadership, while remaining open to being guided by others in service of our mission.

Framing
Reflection Prompts
Activities
Outcomes

Framing

Sharing power shifts leadership from the model of "the strong individual" to one of collective agency.

The **PowerCube** framework (Gaventa, 2006) reminds us that power is not only concentrated in formal authority but circulates across **forms** (visible, hidden, invisible), **spaces** (closed, invited, claimed), and **levels** (local, national, global). Leaders who cling to "power over" tend to reinforce closed spaces and hidden agendas. Leaders who share power, however, open spaces for participation, acknowledge invisible dynamics, and create pathways for collective influence.

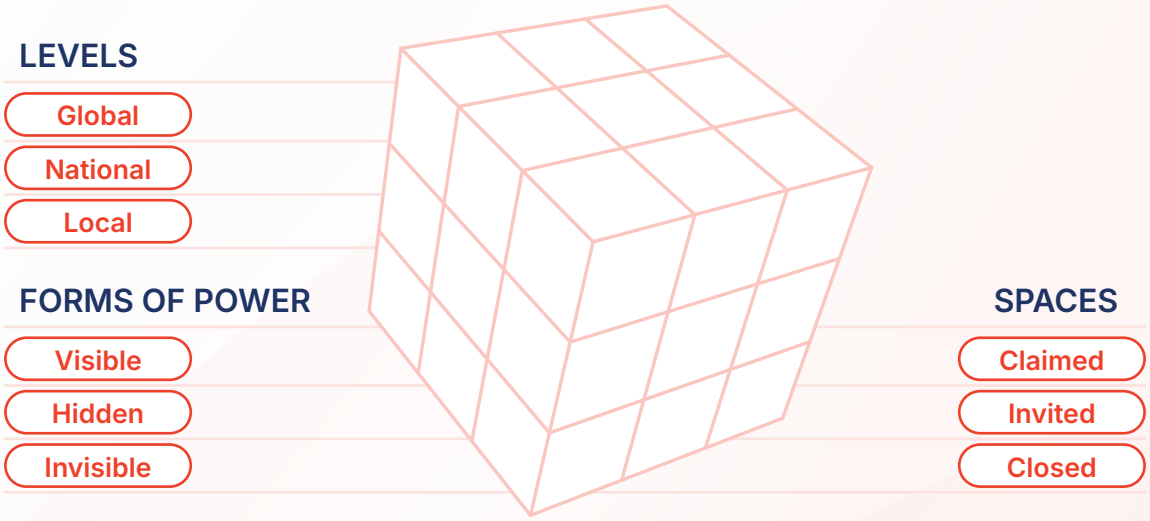
The feminist lens reframes power as something generative rather than zero-sum. The JASS's framework (Clark et al., 2011) of "**power with, power to, and power within**" complements this approach:

- **Power with**: building solidarity and collaboration.
- **Power to**: enabling others to act and decide.
- **Power within**: cultivating inner confidence to speak and lead.

True sharing of power is neither abdication nor control — it is the art of co-creation, where leadership expands instead of concentrates.

Dimensions of power

The Powercube Framework



Based on John Gaventa's Powercube framework (IDS)

Vignette: The rotating chair

In a women-led cooperative in rural Spain, the leadership team noticed that board meetings were dominated by two long-standing members. While not intentionally excluding others, their confidence and experience meant they often steered discussions and set priorities.

To address this, the cooperative introduced a rotating chair system: each month, a different member would chair the meeting, set the agenda with the secretary, and guide the conversation. At first, newer members were hesitant. But as they took on the role, they began to contribute fresh perspectives, particularly on digital tools and youth engagement.

The more experienced leaders found that by stepping back, they gained new insights and energy. Decision-making became richer, and members reported feeling more ownership of the cooperative's direction. Sharing power not only strengthened trust within the group but also made the cooperative more adaptive to change.

Reflection prompts:

- What risks did the experienced leaders take in stepping back?
- How did the rotating chair system change the dynamics of participation?
- What structures could you introduce in your own context to ensure leadership is genuinely shared?

Activity 13 - Mapping External Power with the PowerCube

Objective:

Time: 75 minutes

To analyse how power operates in external contexts (policy spaces, advocacy arenas, partnerships) by examining forms, spaces, and levels of power, and to design strategies for making these spaces more participatory.

Materials:

- Large PowerCube diagram on flipchart (forms: visible/hidden/invisible; spaces: closed/invited/claimed; levels: local/national/global)
- Sticky notes and markers

Steps to take

1. Context setup (10 minutes)

- Present a real external challenge the organisation faces (e.g., influencing a policy process, gaining access to funding, community consultation).

2. Analyze power (25 minutes)

- In small groups, map the challenge using the PowerCube:
  - **Forms:** Which aspects of power are visible (e.g., formal rules), hidden (who sets the agenda), or invisible (cultural norms, narratives)?
  - **Spaces:** Are these decisions made in closed spaces, invited spaces, or claimed spaces?
  - **Levels:** At what level does the challenge occur (local, organisational, national, international)?

Sustainability dimension: How does this challenge relate to environmental priorities, circular practices, or the sustainability of the community you work with? Whose voices and interests shape these decisions, and whose are overlooked?

3. Re-envisioning (20 minutes)

- Groups discuss how to share power more effectively:
  - **Opening** closed spaces.
  - **Making** hidden power visible.
  - **Challenging** invisible assumptions and narratives.
  - **Building** bridges across levels.

4. Share & commit (20 minutes)

- Groups present one concrete action for shifting external dynamics to allow more inclusive participation.

Outcome:

Participants learn to see external challenges through the lens of power relations and design strategies to democratise access, influence, and outcomes.

For complementary reflection on responsibility and transparency, see **Chapter 06, "Responsible Use of Power."**

Activity 14 - Mapping Internal Power: Over, With, To, and Within

(Inspired by the Young Feminist Leadership Toolkit, AWID 2023)

Objective:

Time: 60 minutes

To reflect on how power is expressed within the team or organisation — through "power over, power with, power to, and power within" — and to identify practices that foster shared, generative power internally.

Materials:

- Four flipcharts labelled: Power Over, Power With, Power To, Power Within
- Sticky notes and markers

Steps to take

1. Introduce the framework (10 minutes)

- Explain the four expressions of power:
  - **Power over:** domination, control, coercion.
  - **Power with:** collaboration, solidarity.
  - **Power to:** individual capacity to act, decide, create.
  - **Power within:** confidence, dignity, self-worth.
- Emphasize that these can co-exist in the same organisation.

2. Mapping exercise (20 minutes)

- Divide participants into small groups.
- Each group writes examples from their organisation/team under each category (e.g., where do we see “power over”? Where do we practice “power with”?).

3. Gallery walk (15 minutes)

- Groups rotate to read the notes on each flipchart.
- As they walk, they add ideas on how to reduce “power over” and strengthen the other forms.

For remote workshops use online whiteboarding or shared docs.

4. Collective discussion (15 minutes)

- Facilitator guides reflection:
  - **Where** do we see unhealthy concentrations of power?
  - **Which** practices already show power being shared well?
  - **What** can we commit to shift internally?

Outcome:

Participants gain awareness of how power manifests within their team/organisation and identify practical ways to cultivate *power with, to, and within*, reducing reliance on power over.

Do's and Don'ts
for sharing power

Do:	Don't
Create structures that distribute decision-making (rotating chairs, shared agenda setting).	Hoard decision-making authority or information.
Recognize and celebrate others' contributions visibly.	Assume empowerment happens automatically without structures to support it.
Practice listening more than speaking.	Tokenize participation by "inviting" others but ignoring their input.
Be willing to be guided by colleagues or partners with more expertise in specific areas.	Confuse abdication (stepping away entirely) with sharing power.
Encourage leadership at all levels, not only from formal positions.	Treat leadership as a scarce resource that diminishes when shared.

Closing thought:

Sharing power is not a loss but an expansion. Each time leaders open space for others to contribute, they multiply creativity, ownership, and resilience. Feminist leadership transforms power from a tool of control into a collective capacity for change — one that grows stronger the more it is shared.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

06

Responsible and Transparent Use of Power

> “I will be clear, timely, and transparent in making the decisions entrusted to me, consulting appropriately and keeping our mission at the centre. In allocating resources and choosing partners, I will ensure these choices reflect our values and aspirations, and I will communicate decisions — and the reasons behind them — openly.

Framing

Power that is entrusted to leaders carries responsibility: not only to decide, but to decide **fairly and transparently.** In feminist leadership, accountability is not an administrative formality — it is a moral commitment to those most affected by our choices.

A helpful frame comes from outside the leadership field: the concept of **Accountability for Reasonableness (A4R)**, first developed by Norman Daniels and James Sabin (1997, 2008) in the context of healthcare resource allocation.

Faced with tough questions of who gets what when resources are scarce, they proposed that fairness in decision-making is guaranteed not by perfect outcomes, but by a transparent and participatory process.

The A4R framework outlines four conditions:

1. **Relevance**: Decisions must be based on reasons that all stakeholders can recognise as fair and relevant.
2. **Publicity**: Decisions and their rationales must be made public.
3. **Appeals**: There must be a way to revisit and challenge decisions when new evidence or perspectives arise.
4. **Enforcement**: There should be mechanisms to ensure these standards are upheld.

While born in health policy, these principles resonate strongly with feminist leadership. Leaders must consult inclusively, explain decisions openly, remain responsive when concerns emerge, and hold themselves accountable through structures that ensure follow-through. Feminist leadership expands A4R by insisting that the voices of the most marginalised are central to what counts as "relevant reasons." Transparency and responsibility are not just procedural safeguards but expressions of solidarity, care, and justice.

Vignette: The delayed decision

Amira directed a cross-border reforestation programme funded through an EU-supported climate initiative. Her team, based between Albania and North Macedonia, worked with local cooperatives to restore degraded land and create women-led micro-enterprises around tree nurseries.
As the first round of sub-grants approached, pressure mounted.
Among the shortlisted applicants was GreenRoots, a well-connected environmental NGO led by an old colleague of Amira's — someone who had once mentored her early in her career. Their proposal was technically sound, but questions had surfaced during due diligence: overlapping budgets, unclear community ownership, and vague commitments on gender inclusion.
Several members of the consortium quietly assumed GreenRoots would win the contract. "It will save time," one partner said. "They know how to deliver reports that please Brussels." Another reminded her that the director's support could be "strategically useful" for future funding rounds.
Amira felt the weight of expectation.

She also knew that a rejection could sour professional relationships she had relied on for years. Yet approving the grant without full clarity would compromise the very accountability framework she had insisted on when the project began.

She chose delay — an unpopular move. The announcement was postponed for two weeks, officially "to ensure compliance checks," though everyone knew what that meant. Behind closed doors, Amira requested an independent review of all proposals, conducted by two evaluators with no personal or institutional ties to the consortium.

The reaction was swift: irritated emails, polite rebukes about "bureaucratic overreach," even a warning from one senior colleague that "trust is also a resource." But when the results came back, the independent reviewers ranked another, smaller women-led cooperative highest — one whose proposal had been previously dismissed as "too local in scope."
Amira announced the decision publicly, sharing the evaluation summary with all applicants. The criticism quietened, though some relationships cooled. Weeks later, a field officer from the winning cooperative sent her a short message: "For the first time, we felt the process was clean."
Amira kept that message. It reminded her that leadership is often tested not in the choices we make, but in the time we take before making them — the pause between convenience and integrity.

Reflection prompts:

- What competing forms of loyalty did Amira face - to colleagues, to procedure, to the project's principles, and to her own sense of integrity?
- How do personal relationships and professional accountability intersect in your own leadership context? Where do boundaries become blurred?
- In Amira's position, would you have made the same choice to delay the decision? What factors might have influenced you differently?

- How can transparency be practiced without eroding trust - especially in contexts where hierarchy or patronage are part of institutional culture?
- What mechanisms could organisations put in place to reduce reliance on individual moral courage when ethical dilemmas arise?
- Think of a time when delaying a decision felt riskier than acting quickly. What did that experience reveal about your own relationship to power?

Activity 15 - The Funding Dilemma: A Transparency Simulation

Objective:

Time: 75 minutes

To practise transparent and accountable decision-making using a realistic NGO scenario, and to reflect on how openness affects trust and collective ownership.

Materials:

- Case study handout (see below)
- Decision-making criteria worksheet (fairness, mission alignment, impact, equity)
- Flipcharts and markers

Case Study: The Funding Dilemma

Your organisation has been shortlisted for a €100,000 grant to run a new community programme. However, the donor stipulates that you must choose one of three possible focus areas: The leadership team must decide which proposal to pursue. Staff and partners have differing opinions, and there are risks of disillusionment or loss of trust if the decision feels imposed from above.

Steps to take

1. Present the case (10 minutes)

- Facilitator explains the scenario and distributes the handout.
- Emphasize that these can co-exist in the same organisation.

2. Set transparent criteria (10 minutes)

- As a group, agree on 3–4 fair and transparent criteria for decision-making (e.g., alignment with mission, equity impact, feasibility, sustainability).

3. Deliberate and decide (25 minutes)

- Divide into small groups. Each group applies the criteria to the three options, debating which is strongest.
- Groups record both their choice and the reasoning behind it.

4. Communicate the decision (15 minutes)

- Each group drafts a short communication (like a staff memo or community update) explaining:
  - **Which** option they chose
  - **Why**, based on the agreed criteria
  - **How** feedback will be gathered going forward (e.g. anonymous survey, open meeting etc.)

5. Debrief (15 minutes)

- Discuss together:
  - **How** did setting clear criteria change the discussion?
  - **How** would staff/partners feel receiving your communication?
  - **What** could be improved to ensure accountability and trust?

Outcome:

Participants experience how structured transparency builds fairness and trust in decision-making. They practise moving from hidden or unilateral choices to open, accountable leadership aligned with feminist values.

Activity 16 - The ethical mapping exercise: Navigating pressures and principles

Objective:

Time: 60-75 minutes

To practise transparent and accountable decision-making using a realistic NGO scenario, and to reflect on how openness affects trust and collective ownership.

Materials:

- Flipchart paper or large sheets
- Coloured pens or post-it notes
- Optional handout: "ethical forces grid" template (can be created easily with four quadrants)

Steps to take

1. Define a real dilemma (10 minutes)

- Ask participants to recall a leadership situation where they faced competing pressures — such as donor expectations vs. community needs, friendship vs. fairness, or speed vs. due diligence.
- They should choose a dilemma that involved a power decision, not just a procedural one.

2. Draw the ethical map (15 minutes)

- Divide a sheet into four quadrants labelled:
  - **Institutional pressure** (rules, deadlines, funder requirements)
  - **Relational pressure** (colleagues, partners, allies)

  - **Personal values** (beliefs, integrity, empathy, fear of conflict)
  - **Public accountability** (transparency, justice, social impact)
- Participants map their dilemma by writing post-its or phrases under each quadrant.

3. Analyse the intersections (15 minutes)

- Divide a sheet into four quadrants labelled:
  - Which forces dominated their decision?
  - Which values were compromised or silenced?
  - Where could they have introduced more consultation or transparency?)

4. Reframe and rebalance (15 minutes)

- Individually or in groups, participants draw a second version of their map — an "ideal balance" — noting what mechanisms or conversations could bring decisions closer to their values.

5. Analyse the intersections (15 minutes)

- Facilitator guides discussion on:
  - How do we distribute ethical responsibility across a team, so decisions do not depend only on personal integrity?
  - What structures (policies, peer review, ethical committees) can embed fairness and accountability into the system itself?

Outcome:

Participants visualise ethical complexity rather than simplifying it. The exercise highlights that responsible use of power requires awareness of the invisible pressures shaping our choices — and that transparency begins long before the decision is announced.

See also: **Chapter 06, "Responsible Use of Power."** on practical systems to support shared responsibility and trust.

Do's and Don'ts
for sharing power

Do:	Don't
Create structures that distribute decision-making (rotating chairs, shared agenda setting).	Hoard decision-making authority or information.
Recognize and celebrate other's contributions visibly.	Assume empowerment happens automatically without structures to support it.
Practice listening more than speaking.	Tokenize participation by "inviting" others but ignoring their input.
Be willing to be guided by colleagues or partners with more expertise in specific areas.	Confuse abdication (stepping away entirely) with sharing power.
Encourage leadership at all levels, not only from formal positions.	Treat leadership as a scarce resource that diminishes when shared.

Closing thought:

Responsible power flourishes in transparency and accountability.
When leaders share the reasoning behind their choices, invite dialogue,
and remain open to revision, they strengthen trust and collective ownership.
By grounding decisions in reasons that are relevant, visible,
and open to challenge, feminist leaders transform power from something
feared into something shared — a resource for justice and collaboration.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

07

Accountable Collaboration

> I will work to ensure that goals are clear, jointly owned, and supported by strong mutual accountability. I will measure my leadership not by individual achievement but by the success of the team, recognizing contributions fairly and addressing challenges openly when collaboration falters.

Framing

Collaboration is often celebrated in leadership discourse, but in practice it can be fragile.

Teams may fall into patterns where responsibility is unclear, work is unevenly distributed, or conflict goes unaddressed. Feminist leadership approaches collaboration as more than "working together."

It requires clarity of purpose, equitable distribution of roles, and accountability to one another.

Research in organisational behaviour shows that teams are most effective when they combine psychological safety — a climate where people feel safe to contribute without fear of humiliation — with mutual accountability (Edmondson, 1999). In other words, collaboration must balance care with rigour.

Accountable collaboration also challenges hierarchical norms that privilege individual heroism over collective achievement. Success is measured not by who shines, but by how well people enable one another to thrive.

At the same time, feminist leadership refuses to romanticise collaboration. It acknowledges that addressing poor performance fairly and decisively is part of sustaining trust: accountability is an expression of respect, not punishment.

By holding ourselves and others accountable to clearly defined, mutually owned goals, leaders foster collaboration that is both compassionate and effective.

Vignette: The coalition crossroads

In Valencia, a women-led cooperative had joined a coalition of NGOs, designers, and small manufacturers working to promote sustainable textiles and circular production models across the Mediterranean.
The partnership was ambitious — to transform local textile waste into reusable materials while creating dignified jobs for migrant women.

As the months passed, however, tensions began to build. The larger organisations were steering discussions on funding and visibility, while smaller, community-based partners felt their voices were increasingly marginalised.

During a coalition meeting to finalise a proposal for the Urban Green Transition Fund, a corporate foundation representative argued that the project's primary goal should be scaling up production, claiming, "If we can't show numbers, we can't show impact." A cooperative leader from a local social workshop disagreed, reminding the group that "impact is not only growth — it's transformation."

The room fell quiet. All eyes turned to Lucía, the cooperative's coordinator, known for her calm presence and integrity in mediating conflicts.

She paused before speaking. "If we're serious about sustainability, we must also be serious about justice. That means everyone here — large or small — needs to have a real voice in how this proposal is shaped."

Lucía suggested postponing the submission for one week to co-create a collaboration charter — a short agreement defining shared goals, transparent decision-making, and mutual accountability. Some partners resisted, fearing delays, but Lucía stood firm. "We can't build a circular model on linear power," she said quietly.

The group agreed. A week later, they reconvened with the new charter in place. The proposal was submitted jointly, this time with all partners named as equal contributors. When it was approved, the celebration felt collective — not only because of the funding secured, but because the process itself had embodied the feminist values they claimed to champion.

Reflection prompts:

- What dynamics of power and voice emerged in this coalition?
- How did Lucía's approach balance assertiveness with inclusivity?
- What risks did she take in delaying the proposal, and why were they justified?
- How can feminist leadership translate principles like justice and equity into collaborative structures?
- What lessons from this case could inform your own partnerships or alliances?

Activity 17 - Collaboration Charter

Objective:

Time: 60 minutes

To practice creating a shared "Collaboration Charter" that defines goals, roles, and accountability mechanisms for a joint project.

Materials:

- Flipcharts and markers
- Template with prompts (Goals, Roles, Decision-making, Accountability, Recognition)

Steps to take

1. Form small groups (5 minutes)

- Each group imagines they are starting a new project.

2. Define shared goals (10 minutes)

- Groups identify 2–3 goals they all agree are critical.

3. Assign roles and responsibilities (15 minutes)

- Write down who will do what, ensuring all contributions are visible.

4. Agree on accountability mechanisms (15 minutes)

- Decide how progress will be tracked, how feedback will be given, and how underperformance will be addressed fairly.

5. Recognition and celebration (10 minutes)

- Plan ways to celebrate contributions and milestones as a team.

6. Recognition and celebration (10 minutes)

- Groups present their “Collaboration Charters” to the plenary.

Outcome:

Participants learn to formalise collaboration in ways that balance clarity, fairness, and mutual recognition.

Activity 18 - The Web of Accountability

Objective:

Time: 45 minutes

To visualise how accountability flows in a team, and to identify gaps or blockages that undermine collaboration.

Materials:

- A ball of yarn or string
- Chairs arranged in a circle

Steps to take

1. Form a circle (5 minutes)

- Each participant represents a team member.

2. Pass the yarn (15 minutes)

- One person states a responsibility they feel accountable for, then throws the yarn to someone they depend on to fulfil it. Continue until a web is formed.

For small groups, if fewer than five people, have participants take on 2–3 roles to complete the 'web'.

3. Analyse the web (10 minutes)

- Discuss: Where are the strongest connections? Where are the weak or missing links? Who is overly centralised? Who is left out?

4. Strengthening the web (15 minutes)

- Groups brainstorm how to redistribute accountability to make the web more balanced and resilient.

Outcome:

Participants gain a concrete picture of accountability dynamics and explore ways to make collaboration more equitable and effective.

For building constructive dialogue and mutual growth, see **Chapter 08, "Respectful Feedback."**

Do's and Don'ts
for sharing power

Do:	Don't
Define goals clearly and ensure they are owned by all.	Assume collaboration will "just happen."
Establish explicit roles and responsibilities from the outset.	Let unclear responsibilities lead to blame-shifting.
Create systems for feedback and course correction.	Avoid addressing conflict or poor performance.
Celebrate contributions collectively, not only individual achievements.	Reward only individual success at the expense of the team.
Address underperformance fairly and promptly.	Treat accountability as punitive rather than constructive.

Closing thought:

Collaboration thrives when trust and accountability go hand in hand. Leaders who celebrate contributions while also ensuring clarity of responsibility create conditions where teams can achieve more than the sum of their parts. Accountable collaboration is not about avoiding conflict but about facing it together, guided by fairness, transparency, and mutual respect.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

08

Respectful Feedback

> “I will treat feedback as a continuous, two-way exchange that supports learning and growth. I will offer and invite constructive feedback in all directions — across, upwards, and downwards — and use it to strengthen relationships, resolve conflict with respect, and build a culture of listening and non-violent communication.

Framing

Feedback is one of the most powerful tools for learning, yet it is also one of the most resisted. Many people feel anxious when receiving it, while managers often struggle to provide it constructively, fearing conflict or discouragement.

These challenges lead to avoidance, vagueness, or delayed conversations, which weaken trust and stunt growth. At its best, feedback is a developmental process. It is the practice of noticing behaviours, sharing observations, and engaging in dialogue that strengthens performance and relationships. When framed this way, feedback becomes less about correction and more about building clarity, confidence, and mutual accountability.

Research shows that effective feedback must be timely, specific, and actionable to foster motivation and learning (London & Smither, 2002).

Research shows that effective feedback must be timely, specific, and actionable to foster motivation and learning (London & Smither, 2002).
It also requires a climate of psychological safety, where individuals feel able to give and receive input without fear of humiliation or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999). This makes active listening and respectful communication essential: leaders must be willing to hear feedback with openness, offer it with care, and use it to cultivate trust.
Through this lens, feedback is not a hierarchical mechanism of control but a shared practice of growth — one that supports both individual development and collective flourishing.

Vignette: The same message, two ways

In Wrocław, a women-led environmental organisation had just concluded a circular fashion project that trained young designers to turn textile waste into new collections. The final showcase was a success — the hall was full, local press attended, and a major brand expressed interest in future collaboration.

After the applause faded, project manager Joanna felt both exhilarated and drained. She knew she had spoken longer than planned during the presentation, leaving little time for the designers' own voices — but she brushed the thought aside, convincing herself that "someone had to frame the project properly."

Two days later, she received feedback from two colleagues.
The first, Marta, caught Joanna in the corridor, her arms crossed. "Honestly, Joanna, you always take over. You talk too much in meetings and events. It's exhausting. You should really learn to step back."
The words hit like a slap. Joanna's throat tightened. She forced a smile, muttered that she had been under pressure, and walked away — heart pounding. All she heard was judgment, not care. For the rest of the day, she avoided Marta entirely.

That afternoon, Ewelina, another colleague, asked softly, "Do you have ten minutes for a quick debrief? I'd love to talk about the event while it's fresh."
They sat down with coffee. Ewelina began by acknowledging what went well:
"The story you opened with about the factory waste was brilliant — it drew everyone in. You held the audience's attention the whole time."
Then she paused, maintaining gentle eye contact. "I noticed we ran a bit over time, so the designers only got to show two of the collections.
I wonder how we could make sure next time their voices are more central — maybe you could still open the session, but then one of them could share their creative process right after?"

Her tone was calm, curious, and specific. She focused on the situation and impact, not Joanna's personality. She asked questions instead of assigning blame, and she linked the feedback to a shared goal: stronger community engagement.

Joanna felt her shoulders relax. “You’re right,” she admitted. “I got carried away trying to make it perfect. I’ll plan the next one with them from the start. Could you help me design a run sheet that balances both parts?”
Three weeks later, at a follow-up exhibition, Joanna spoke for just three minutes before inviting two young designers to present their work.
Their authenticity captivated the room. When applause filled the hall again, Joanna met Ewelina’s eyes across the crowd — and smiled. Feedback, she realised, was not about fault-finding. It was a practice of shared accountability, trust, and growth.

Reflection prompts:

- What key differences in tone, timing, and wording shaped how Joanna reacted to each colleague’s feedback?
- How did Ewelina’s approach turn a potentially tense exchange into a constructive dialogue?
- What does the vignette reveal about the link between psychological safety, empathy, and accountability in giving feedback?
- How can feedback shift from evaluating the past to co-creating future improvement — a true “feedforward” process?
- When have you experienced feedback that inspired growth rather than defensiveness, and what made it effective?

Activity 19 - The OSCAR Feedback Model

Objective:

Time: 45 minutes

To practice giving and receiving feedback using the OSCAR model (Outcome, Situation, Choices, Actions, Review), developed by Andrew Gilbert and Karen Whittleworth.

Materials:

- Handout with OSCAR steps
- Pre-prepared scenarios (e.g., colleague missing deadlines, manager interrupting, team member not conatributing)

Steps to take

1. Introduce OSCAR (10 minutes)

- **Outcome**: clarify what you want to achieve with the feedback.
- **Situation**: describe the context and specific behaviour.
- **Choices**: explore possible alternatives or responses.
- **Actions**: agree on concrete steps forward.
- **Review**: revisit later to reflect on progress.

For small groups, if fewer than five people, have participants take on 2–3 roles to complete the 'web'.

2. Role-play (30 minutes)

- In pairs, one plays feedback-giver, the other receiver, using a prepared scenario.
- Switch roles.

3. Debrief (20 minutes)

- Discuss: How did the OSCAR model affect the tone and effectiveness of the feedback?
- Reflect: Which part of feedback is hardest and why? (giving, receiving, acting)

Outcome:

Participants learn a structured and solution-focused approach to feedback that fosters accountability and growth.

Complementary to feedback practice, **Chapter 9, "Courage"** *explores the vulnerability and conviction that effective communication requires.*

Activity 20 - Feedback Spectrum: Effective vs. Ineffective

Objective:

Time: 40 minutes

To identify behaviours that make feedback constructive or destructive, using real-life examples.

Materials:

- Two flipcharts labelled “Effective Feedback” and “Ineffective Feedback”
- Sticky notes and pens

Steps to take

1. Brainstorm examples (15 minutes)

- In small groups, participants write examples of effective and ineffective feedback they have given or received.

2. Cluster on spectrum (10 minutes)

- Place sticky notes on the spectrum between “Effective” and “Ineffective.”
- Discuss patterns.

3. Cluster on spectrum (10 minutes)

- What practices make feedback safe, specific, and constructive? Discuss patterns.
- What habits or assumptions undermine its effectiveness?

Outcome:

Participants become more aware of the subtle factors that shift feedback from threatening to developmental, helping them refine their own practice.

Activity 21 - Feedforward Circles

Objective:

Time: 20-25 minutes

To practice feedforward — focusing on future possibilities rather than past mistakes — as a way of cultivating constructive, solution-oriented dialogue.

Materials:

- No special materials required, just enough space for participants to work in small groups or circles

Steps to take

1. Introduce the concept (5 minutes)

- Explain Marshall Goldsmith's idea of feedforward: instead of dwelling on what went wrong, we ask others for suggestions that could improve future behaviour or outcomes.

- Example: instead of *"You didn't listen in the last meeting,"* try *"Next time, it would help if you gave everyone space to finish before responding."*

2. Form circles (10 minutes)

- Divide participants into small groups (4–6 people).
- Each person shares one area they would like to improve (e.g., "I want to run meetings more efficiently" or "I want to give clearer instructions").
- The others offer 2–3 forward-looking suggestions each, phrased positively and without criticism.
- The recipient only listens, thanks the group, and takes notes — no defending or debating.

For cross-team sessions, encourage pairing with someone they rarely work with.

3. Reflection (5–10 minutes)

- Return to the full group. Discuss:
  - How did it feel to receive suggestions without judgement of the past?
  - What was easier or harder compared to traditional feedback?
  - How can feedforward be incorporated into team culture alongside feedback?

Outcome:

Participants experience an energising, future-focused way of giving developmental input. Feedforward complements feedback by reducing defensiveness, emphasising agency, and reinforcing a growth-oriented culture.

Do's and Don'ts
for respectful feedback

Do:	Don't
Be timely and specific.	Generalise ("You always...").
Use "I" statements and take responsibility.	Delay feedback until frustration builds.
Connect feedback to observable behaviours.	Criticise in public when it can be addressed in private.
Listen actively and confirm understanding.	Treat feedback as one-directional.
Ask for feedback as often as you give it.	Use sarcasm or irony as a substitute for honesty.

Closing thought:

Respectful feedback is a practice of care and accountability. When offered with clarity and received with openness, it strengthens trust and turns everyday interactions into opportunities for growth. In feminist leadership, feedback becomes not a performance tool but a shared commitment to learn and evolve together.

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

09

Courage

“

I will embrace change with openness and persistence, seeing mistakes as opportunities to learn rather than reasons to retreat. I will encourage teammates to take risks, nurture trust where there is fear, and reignite passion where energy has waned, so that together we remain committed to transformative change.

Framing
Reflection Prompts
Activities
Outcomes

Framing

Courage in feminist leadership is not about fearlessness or heroic posturing. It is about the willingness to take risks for the sake of justice, even when those risks carry discomfort, resistance, or personal cost.

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002) describe this as adaptive leadership: staying true to values in the face of conflict, holding steady under pressure, and mobilising people to confront uncomfortable truths.

Such courage is not the absence of fear but the decision to act despite it. Leaders encounter cynicism, defeatism, and complacency both within themselves and in their organisations. Courage enables them to restore belief, challenge the status quo, and persist in the pursuit of transformative change.

At the same time, courage is inseparable from vulnerability. Brené Brown (2012) reminds us that daring leadership emerges not from invulnerability but from the willingness to be seen, to risk failure, and to admit imperfection. In feminist practice, this means creating space for others to take risks too — building trust so that experimentation, creativity, and even mistakes become part of the collective journey toward justice.

Courage, then, is both moral and relational: it resists injustice, renews energy where hope has faded, and empowers others to step into leadership alongside us.

Vignette: The coalition under pressure

In Portugal's Alentejo region, Sofia coordinated a coalition of women-led associations advocating for a just energy transition. The area, long dependent on cement production and intensive agriculture, was now attracting major solar and hydrogen investments. Local officials hailed this as "green progress," yet few women or small producers had a voice in the new energy plans.
The coalition's campaign began modestly — public meetings, community workshops, and an open letter calling for retraining programmes and citizen oversight of renewable projects. At first, the initiative drew curiosity and polite encouragement. But when Sofia questioned the environmental and social terms of a multimillion-euro solar farm contract, the tone changed.

Anonymous social media accounts accused the group of "blocking innovation." A regional newspaper ran an editorial calling them "well-intentioned amateurs." Behind closed doors, a deputy mayor advised Sofia to "stay constructive" if she wanted to preserve future partnerships.
Inside the coalition, doubts grew. Some members wanted to soften their stance to avoid losing influence. "We can't risk alienating everyone," said one. "Let's focus on small community projects instead."
That night, Sofia reread the coalition's founding statement: participation, justice, transparency. Courage, she realised, did not mean loud defiance — it meant refusing to dilute principle for convenience.

The next day, she proposed publishing a joint position paper reaffirming their demands for fair participation and transparency in energy contracts. She invited allies from unions, youth climate groups, and local cooperatives to co-sign. A few declined — too political, too risky. But others joined.

When the paper appeared, reactions were mixed: criticism from local officials, but also attention from national media and support from university researchers. Within months, regional authorities opened a public consultation process — the first of its kind in the area.
Reflecting later, Sofia wrote in her journal: "Fear doesn't vanish when you act with courage — it changes direction. It stops pointing inward and starts pointing toward change."

Reflection prompts:

- What different kinds of risk did Sofia face — professional, relational, political, personal? Which of these forms of risk do you most identify with in your own work?
- How do power relations (e.g. between civil society and institutions, or between genders within advocacy spaces) shape the experience of courage?
- In what ways can courage coexist with care? How can a leader challenge injustice without replicating adversarial dynamics?
- What role did solidarity play in sustaining Sofia's courage? How can leaders intentionally cultivate networks of trust before crises occur?
- Think of a moment when you or your organisation softened a position to preserve access or goodwill. What values were gained or compromised?
- How can feminist leadership frameworks help transform "bravery" from a personal virtue into a collective, regenerative practice?

Activity 22 - The “Red Line” Debate

Objective:

Time: 60 minutes

To practise identifying personal and organisational “red lines” (non-negotiables) and experience the tension of defending them in a contested space.

Materials:

- Tape on the floor (to create a literal red line) or a rope
- Scenario cards with dilemmas (e.g., a donor pressures you to downplay gender in your messaging; a coalition partner excludes migrant voices to “streamline” work)

Steps to take

1. Introduce the red line (5 minutes)

- The red line represents values or principles you are unwilling to cross.

2. Present dilemma (10 minutes)

- Participants receive a scenario card describing a leadership dilemma.

3. Decision point (20 minutes)

- Participants move physically: Step forward across the line if they would compromise; stay behind it if they would hold firm.
- In small groups, they discuss: Why did you stand where you did? What risks or fears influenced your decision?

Mention before starting that any "stepping forward or staying" is a learning exercise, not a test, and that "no-shame"/"no-judgment" ground rules are critical.

4. Plenary debrief (20 minutes)

- Facilitator leads discussion:
  - When is compromise pragmatic?
  - When does it undermine our mission?
  - What does courage look like in these choices?

Outcome:

Participants physically and emotionally experience the weight of standing by values vs. compromising. It generates honest dialogue about risk, pragmatism, and conviction.

Activity 23 - The “Letter from the Future”

Objective:

Time: 45 minutes

To cultivate collective courage by imagining a successful future achieved because of bold choices made today.

Materials:

- Paper, envelopes, pens

Steps to take

1. Visualisation (10 minutes)

- Facilitator guides participants: Imagine it is five years from now and your organisation has achieved a transformative victory (e.g., a policy win, a cultural shift, or community empowerment). This success only happened because you and your colleagues took courageous actions.

2. Write the letter (15 minutes)

- Each participant writes a letter “from the future” to their current self, describing the courageous action they (and their organisation) took that made the breakthrough possible.

3. Sharing (15 minutes)

- In pairs or small groups, participants share excerpts from their letters.
- Discuss: What risks were taken? How did courage make the difference?

4. Closing (5 minutes)

- Invite participants to seal their letters and keep them as reminders of their commitment to courageous leadership.

Outcome:

This imaginative exercise reframes courage not as reckless risk-taking, but as a necessary step toward a compelling, justice-centred future.

Do's and Don'ts
for courageous leadership

Do:	Don't
Speak truth to power even when it feels uncomfortable.	Confuse courage with recklessness or individual heroics.
Acknowledge fears and doubts instead of hiding them.	Avoid difficult conversations out of fear of conflict.
Encourage experimentation and stand by your team when risks don't succeed.	Punish mistakes instead of using them for collective learning.
Challenge cynicism and defeatism with vision and conviction.	Let pragmatism or short-term security eclipse core values.
Celebrate acts of courage, big or small, to build a culture of bravery.	Stay silent when injustice or exclusion undermines your mission.

Closing thought:

Courage in feminist leadership is the steady commitment to act for justice despite resistance, fear, or uncertainty. It is not about being fearless, but about choosing integrity over silence, conviction over complacency, and collective resilience over individual heroism. When leaders embody courage as both vulnerability and strength, they create spaces where transformative change becomes possible.

For guidance on establishing safe and just cultures, see **Chapter 10, "Zero Tolerance: Confronting Discrimination and Abuse of Power."**

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

10

Zero tolerance

> “I will actively confront discrimination, harassment, and abuse of power whenever I encounter them. I will create conditions where others feel safe to speak up, and I will hold myself to the same standards of integrity, ensuring that my behaviour models respect and dignity in every interaction.

Framing
Reflection Prompts
Activities
Outcomes

Framing

Zero tolerance in feminist leadership means drawing clear ethical boundaries that protect dignity and equality.

It requires leaders to confront harassment, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse of power in all their forms, while ensuring that accountability processes are safe and trusted.

Research shows that cultures of silence allow abuse to persist, while organisations with transparent reporting channels, leadership commitment, and survivor-centred approaches build higher levels of trust and well-being (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Willness et al., 2007). Zero tolerance therefore functions as both a protective principle and a proactive strategy for shaping just organisational cultures. From a feminist perspective, this principle demands attention to power dynamics.

Gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability shape who is most at risk, who feels able to speak out, and who is believed when they do. Zero tolerance therefore requires leaders not only to respond to incidents but also to cultivate everyday practices that challenge microaggressions, encourage bystander intervention, and make respect the norm rather than the exception.

For leaders, commitment to zero tolerance means going beyond compliance with policies. It calls for modelling respectful behaviour, creating safe structures for disclosure, and addressing harmful conduct decisively while supporting learning and change.

Vignette: The “harmless joke”

During a team meeting, a senior staff member made a joke about a colleague’s accent. Some people laughed nervously; others looked down. The colleague forced a smile but remained quiet. The meeting moved on, but an uncomfortable silence lingered.

Maria, the team leader, noticed the unease. At first, she considered addressing it privately later, but she realised that silence in the moment could be interpreted as complicity. She paused the meeting: *“I want to stop here. That comment about the accent is not acceptable. We respect each other’s identities and contributions in this team. Let’s be mindful of how we speak.”*

The room fell quiet, but the message was clear. After the meeting, Maria checked in with the colleague to ensure they felt supported, and later initiated a discussion on inclusive language at the next staff training. Her intervention was uncomfortable, but it set a precedent: discriminatory remarks, however “harmless” they seemed, would not be ignored.

Reflection prompts:

- What risks did Maria face in addressing the situation immediately?
- How might silence have affected the team culture?
- What structures or norms can help leaders respond consistently to discrimination or abuse?
- How can we balance calling out harmful behaviour with supporting learning and change?

Activity 24 - Bystander Intervention Role-Play

Objective:

Time: 60 minutes

To practice safe and effective ways of intervening when witnessing discrimination, harassment, or abuse of power.

Materials:

- Scenario cards (e.g., sexist comment, racist "joke," dismissive interruption, inappropriate physical contact)
- Flipcharts and markers

Steps to take

1. Introduce the 5Ds framework (10 minutes)

- This model was originally developed and popularised by Right To Be (formerly Hollaback!), an organisation working globally to end harassment in public spaces.
- The 5Ds include:
  - **Direct**: address the behaviour.
  - **Distract**: shift focus to interrupt the situation.
  - **Delegate**: seek help from others.
  - **Delay**: check in with the person affected afterwards.
  - **Document**: record details if safe to do so.

2. Role-play scenarios (30 minutes)

- In groups, participants act out scenarios and practice at least two of the "Ds." If participants feel uncomfortable, they may observe rather than act in the first round.
- Rotate roles: target, bystander, person causing harm.

3. Debrief (20 minutes)

- Which interventions felt natural? Which were difficult?
- How can bystander strategies be adapted to different power dynamics?

Outcome:

Participants leave with practical tools for intervention, learning that silence reinforces harm but that there are multiple safe ways to act.

Activity 25 - The Grey Zone: Spotting and responding to microaggressions

Objective:

Time: 60-70 minutes

To develop sharper awareness of subtle forms of discrimination ("grey zone" behaviours such as microaggressions or coded language) and practise strategies for addressing them constructively, while reflecting on the role of humour and spontaneity in team culture.

Materials:

- Pre-prepared case cards with short real-life inspired scenarios (e.g., "She's too emotional for leadership," "Your English is so good, where are you really from?", repeatedly interrupting someone in meetings).
- Flipcharts and markers

Steps to take

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Facilitator explains: Zero tolerance applies not only to overt abuse, but also to subtle everyday behaviours that normalise exclusion or disrespect. These can be harder to identify and address, yet they shape culture profoundly.
- Emphasise that this does not mean eliminating humour or spontaneity, but learning to distinguish between humour that builds belonging and humour that reinforces stereotypes or exclusion.

2. Case analysis in groups (20 minutes)

- Each group receives 2–3 scenario cards. For each: • Discuss: *Is this acceptable, questionable, or harmful?*
  - Brainstorm immediate responses: What could a bystander say or do?
  - Consider long-term actions: What structural changes (policies, norms) might prevent this from recurring?

3. Addressing Humour: Balancing Inclusion and Spontaneity (10 minutes)

- Facilitate a focused group discussion on the nuanced role of humour in organisational culture:
  - How can humour build a sense of belonging and connection?
  - When does humour cross the line and reinforce stereotypes, exclusion, or harm?
- Invite participants to share experiences where humour either fostered inclusion or unintended offence.
- Emphasise that humour is a powerful social tool that requires ongoing attention and care to ensure it aligns with feminist values of respect and inclusion.

4. Role-play responses (20 minutes)

- Groups select one scenario, ideally including examples involving humour or microaggressions, and role-play two versions:
  - An unhelpful interaction where the behaviour is left unchallenged or intensified.
  - A constructive response demonstrating effective intervention aligned with feminist leadership principles.

5. Reflection (10 minutes)

- Facilitator asks:
  - How do we distinguish humour that heals from humour that harms?
  - What organisational practices can foster a culture where laughter strengthens relationships without perpetuating stereotypes or exclusion?
  - What commitments can we make as leaders to uphold inclusive humour and address harmful jokes or comments promptly?

Outcome:

Participants practice recognising and addressing subtle discrimination while also reflecting critically on the place of humour in organisational life. The activity fosters discernment: zero tolerance is about protecting dignity without erasing joy, connection, or spontaneity.

Do's and Don'ts
for zero tolerance

Do:	Don't
Intervene when discrimination or harassment occurs.	Excuse harmful behaviour as "just a joke."
Create safe and confidential reporting channels.	Rely only on formal policies without modelling respectful conduct.
Support those affected with empathy and respect.	Retaliate against or blame those who speak up.
Challenge microaggressions as well as overt abuse.	Ignore power dynamics that silence some voices.
Hold yourself accountable to the same standards.	Assume one-off training is enough to change culture.

Closing thought:

Zero tolerance is a commitment to building workplaces where dignity, respect, and safety are non-negotiable. By addressing harm promptly and modelling accountability, leaders signal that abuse of power has no place in their organisations. When combined with structures of support and a culture of everyday respect, zero tolerance becomes a foundation for trust and collective strength.

See also Chapters 3 and 6 for interrelated work on **bias awareness** *and* **accountable leadership.**

You can explore this principle further in the corresponding podcast episode

Listen to it here

Taken together, these ten principles invite women leading initiatives in climate action, circular economy, and sustainable community building to connect inner strength with outer transformation.

Feminist leadership, in this sense,
is not an abstract concept but a living practice — one that ensures sustainability efforts are inclusive, compassionate, and deeply human.

ANNEX

Evaluation Framework for the Feminist Leadership Toolkit

Purpose

This framework supports teams and facilitators in assessing the impact, relevance, and application of the Feminist Leadership Toolkit.
Evaluation is understood as an ongoing, participatory process—central to accountability, learning, and continuous improvement.

Principles for Evaluation

- Participatory: Involve all relevant stakeholders, especially those most affected by leadership decisions.
- Context-sensitive: Adapt evaluation to local realities and priorities — there is no one-size-fits-all.
- Transparent: Share results and findings openly, inviting dialogue and feedback.
- Learning-oriented: Treat evaluation as an opportunity for growth, unlearning, and collective action — not judgement or control.

Suggested Steps

1. Define Outcomes

- What does effective feminist leadership look like for your context?
- Which principles are high priority for your group/team?

2. Select Practical Indicators (examples)

- Participation rates and diversity in meetings and activities

- Feedback quality and frequency (e.g. open dialogue, upward and peer feedback)
- Observable changes in decision-making (shared power, inclusive practices)
- Well-being indicators (reduced burnout, improved self-care, psychological safety)
- Evidence of action on bias and zero tolerance commitments

3. Collect Baseline and Follow-Up Data

- Use short surveys or group reflections before and after toolkit activities.
- Tools: Self-assessment checklists, anonymous feedback, group discussions, testimonial stories.

4. Review and Reflect Together

- Discuss findings in facilitated sessions: What worked well? What challenges remain?
- Invite perspectives from marginalised voices.

5. Act on Findings

- Use results to adapt practices, celebrate progress, and set new goals for growth.
- Commit to re-evaluating at regular intervals.

Evaluation focus	Key question
Relevance	Are the principles and activities meeting our real needs?
Inclusion	Are all voices in the group/team being heard and valued?
Effectiveness	Are leadership practices or culture changing as intended?
Accountability	Is responsibility shared and transparent in decisions?
Well-being	Has self-care and mutual support increased?

Suggested tools:

Self-assessment sheets - Group feedback sessions - Story circles - Inclusive surveys - Visual mapping (e.g. Intersectionality Map, Accountability Web) - Confidential suggestion box

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