



toolkit



unpacking power:

a practical introduction to feminist horizontal structures



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this toolkit is a collective creation, shaped by the contributions of many inspiring individuals and communities who have shared their insights and experiences along the way.

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please do not hesitate to reach out for support.

if you need a different format, or have any concerns, please contact us at info@changengo.org

we are more than happy to make accommodations that will allow you to engage with our work in a way that meets your needs.

we are committed to listening to and learning from our community, and we know that there is always more work to do.

if you have feedback or suggestions, please get in touch.

in solidarity,



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opening door

in the pursuit of a more just world, the feminist movement has long challenged hierarchical systems that perpetuate inequality.

one of the most radical and transformative shifts in feminist practice is the move towards horizontal structures - models that reject traditional top-down power dynamics. instead, these structures emphasize collective decision-making, shared responsibility, and the belief that power should be distributed equitably among all participants.

this toolkit is not intended to be a comprehensive or advanced guide to feminist horizontal structures. instead, it offers foundational tools and basic principles to help you understand and begin implementing non-hierarchical practices.

we have kept it accessible and introductory, recognizing that building horizontal structures is a journey that requires ongoing learning, adaptation, and growth.

if you are looking for more in-depth resources or case studies, we encourage you to explore additional readings, and community spaces that dive deeper into these practices.

we also invite you to reach out if you have questions, need further support, or would like to share your experiences in applying these concepts.

building collective wisdom is an ongoing process, and we would love to hear how these tools work in your context or any ideas you have for strengthening horizontal structures in our communities

what is a feminist horizontal structure?

a feminist horizontal structure challenges patriarchal norms, dismantles traditional hierarchies and replaces them with inclusive, intersectional, non-hierarchical models where everyone holds equal power and decision-making responsibilities

in this structure the power is distributed equally, with no one person or group holding a higher position of authority

feminist horizontal structures are built on feminist principles, which inform how decisions are made, how power is shared, and how the group functions.

a central principle is the rejection of hierarchical, top-down leadership. instead, power is shared and distributed among all members.

this collective empowerment ensures that everyone has a voice and decision-making authority.

intersectionality is essential

it acknowledges that oppression is multifaceted and interconnected and emphasizes the inclusion of persons from diverse backgrounds in decision-making

in these structures persons prioritize the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of group members. care and community-building are central values with a focus on collective support and creating safe spaces for all.

moreover, persons prioritize working together as a team instead of focusing on individual competition. it encourages a culture of mutual support and shared responsibility.

the language of feminist horizontal structures

language is a critical tool in shaping how we understand power, authority, and relationships within group

traditional organizations often use hierarchical titles that reinforce power dynamics.

in a feminist horizontal structure, titles are non-hierarchical and reflect collective ownership of responsibilities. using inclusive and non-oppressive language also mean using the language that respects diverse identities and experiences. this includes:



- using gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) or asking for person's pronouns
- avoiding ableist or exclusionary language
- ensuring language around issues like race, gender, and class is conscious of intersectionality and reflects the group's commitment to anti-oppression

feminist horizontal structures also work to decolonize the language they use by rejecting terms rooted in colonial, patriarchal, or capitalist ideologies.

in a traditional hierarchical organization, positions like “ceo,” “executive director,” and “board president” signal power concentrations.

feminist horizontal structures redefine or eliminate these roles, creating positions that promote collaboration, equality, and shared leadership.

to avoid rigid power structures, groups collaborating within horizontal structure often implement rotating roles. this helps distribute power and prevents individuals from accumulating too much authority. for instance:

-  **rotating facilitators: instead of having a permanent chair or leader, different members can take turns facilitating meetings or coordinating projects**
-  **task forces or working groups: instead of assigning leadership roles, small, rotating task forces or working groups take responsibility for specific projects or campaigns, ensuring the responsibility is shared**

budget and salaries in horizontal structures

one of the most critical areas of a feminist horizontal structure is how budgets and salaries are managed.

ensuring equitable distribution of financial resources is a reflection of the group's commitment to feminist values.

budgeting is conducted transparently and collaboratively. members collectively decide on how funds are allocated, ensuring that everyone understands the financial resources and priorities.



regular financial updates and open discussions ensure that everyone has access to budgetary information

involving all members in budgeting decisions promotes accountability and fairness

financial sustainability is a shared responsibility, with members collectively overseeing resource allocation

feminist horizontal structures strive for salary equity. many teams adopt a flat wage system or at least limit salary differentials to a small ratio.

**transparent salary structures
foster trust and reduce
power imbalances**

non-monetary benefits, such as flexible working hours, mental health support, or professional development is also part of supporting working environment that different groups may have.

fundraising decisions are also important. these decisions should be made collaboratively, ensuring that all members have a voice in how resources are allocated. funds should be used to prioritize projects that align with feminist and intersectional values.

transparency and ethical decision-making

transparency and ethical decision-making are critical to ensure that all members feel informed and empowered in the group's direction

transparent communication channels, such as open meetings, shared documents, and regular updates, help ensure that all members are informed about decisions and have the opportunity to contribute

collaborative communication is essential in feminist horizontal structures. using the right tools can foster transparency and equality in decision-making processes.

ensuring that the technology used is inclusive and accessible is a vital part of creating equitable participation. it is important to ensure that digital tools (e.g., communication platforms, websites, and collaboration tools) are accessible to persons with disabilities and those from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

this might involve using easy-to-read formats, tools with text-to-speech functionality, ensuring that websites meet accessibility standards, and providing training on digital literacy.

in a horizontal structure, all members should have equal access to the technology needed for participation. groups should provide access to necessary tools and offer support for those who may face barriers to accessing technology.

conflict resolution and restorative justice

in any collective, conflicts are inevitable. however, feminist horizontal structures approach conflict with care, accountability, and a commitment to restorative justice

restorative justice in conflict resolution

restorative justice offers an alternative to punitive approaches to conflict. it focuses on healing harm, accountability, and repairing relationships rather than punishment. in feminist horizontal structures, restorative practices are at the heart of conflict resolution processes

non-hierarchical conflict resolution

conflict resolution should be non-hierarchical, with all members involved in the process. tools like mediation circles, facilitated dialogues, and conflict resolution workshops can help address interpersonal conflicts without reinforcing power dynamics

the role of boards in horizontal structures

in traditional civil society organizations, boards often hold significant authority. however, in feminist horizontal structures, the role of boards is fundamentally different, as they serve a more consultative and supportive function rather than a governing one

in feminist horizontal formal groups, boards act as a resource for guidance rather than as decision-makers. the board's role is to provide strategic input, support learning, and help with external relationships, such as funders or legal matters

rather than a hierarchical relationship, where boards govern the organizations, feminist formal groups establish mutual accountability between the board and members. the board's role is to support the mission and values, not to impose decisions

monitoring, learning, and evaluation in feminist horizontal structures

monitoring and evaluation (m&e) are crucial in any formal group, but in formal groups with feminist horizontal structures, they align with the values of collective learning, accountability, and inclusivity.



in a feminist horizontal structure, m&e involves all members in the process, ensuring that learning is collective and that feedback mechanisms reflect the needs of everyone.

participatory m&e ensures that power over evaluation is not held by a small group but is shared across the group



feminist groups foster continuous learning. this can be done by holding reflective sessions where the group reviews its work, goals, and values.

feminist principles usually guide the learning process, focusing on collective improvement rather than individual blame



in horizontal structures, accountability extends beyond internal stakeholders to the broader community. community feedback loops are integrated into the m&e process, ensuring that the group remains aligned with its feminist and intersectional mission

external relations and advocacy

feminist formal groups often work with external entities, many of which operate hierarchically. navigating these relationships while maintaining feminist values is crucial.

engaging with donors

when engaging with donors, feminist horizontal structures remain clear about their commitment to non-hierarchical organizing and ensure that donor expectations align with their values. open communication with funders about the group's feminist principles can help maintain autonomy

advocacy and coalition building

groups with horizontal structures can engage in advocacy by building coalitions with other feminist and social justice groups (both formal and informal).

these partnerships usually reflects shared values and ensure that power dynamics are not replicated in cross-group collaborations

mental health

mental health of persons is directly influenced by their working environment.

feminist horizontal structures prioritize collective well-being and shared responsibility, aiming to create supportive environments. however, these structures also come with their own challenges. by comparing horizontal and hierarchical structures, we can understand how these models impact mental health and well-being.

mental health in hierarchical structures

hierarchical organizations typically operate with a top-down leadership model.

in this structure, decision-making power is concentrated at the top, and lower-level employees have less autonomy.

this type of structure can lead to specific mental health challenges:



pressure from authority and power imbalances

burnout due to lack of control

unhealthy competition and individualism

● individuals in hierarchical organizations may experience pressure from supervisors or managers. the top-down approach often leads to rigid expectations and deadlines, with little input from lower-ranking staff, which can cause stress, anxiety, and even feelings of powerlessness.

power imbalances can contribute to feelings of isolation, and staff may be less likely to raise concerns about overwork, mental health, or toxic work environments due to fear of retaliation

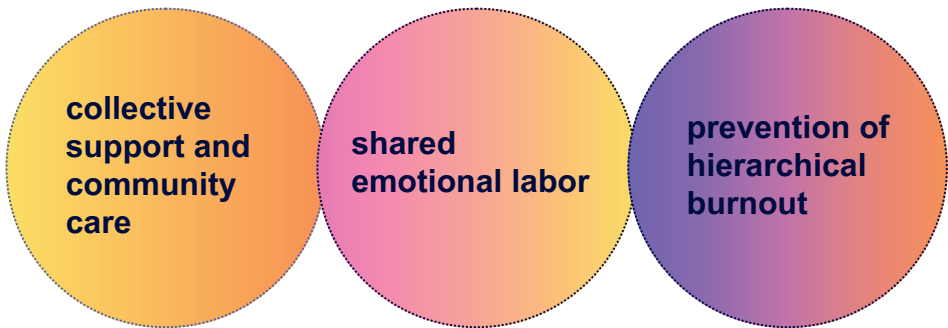
● in a hierarchical setting, workers may experience burnout from a lack of control over their workload or from being constantly subject to the decisions of those higher up. the inability to influence organizational decisions can lead to frustration and chronic stress, diminishing employees' mental well-being

● hierarchical organizations often foster a culture of competition and individualism. employees may feel pitted against one another for promotions or recognition, which can lead to a toxic workplace environment where mental health concerns are ignored in favor of performance metrics

**mental health
in horizontal
structures**

**feminist horizontal structures
seek to create an environment
where all members are valued
equally and share in decision-
making.**

**these structures offer several
mental health benefits but also
present specific challenges**




- horizontal structures prioritize community care, where emotional support, well-being, and mutual aid are woven into the fabric of the group.**


this culture of care reduces the stigma around mental health and encourages members to share their experiences openly.

collective decision-making allows for greater autonomy and a sense of ownership, which can alleviate stress.

members in these structures are more likely to feel empowered and supported by their peers

 emotional labor - often disproportionately carried by women - can be distributed even in horizontal structures. groups that actively create mechanisms to share emotional support, such as rotating roles for conflict resolution or well-being check-ins, foster healthier environments.

however, emotional labor can also become overwhelming if not managed properly. members of feminist groups may experience emotional exhaustion from continuous participation in consensus-building processes and managing conflict without clear authority figures

 since decision-making power is not concentrated at the top, members of horizontal structures are less likely to experience burnout caused by feeling powerless. instead, members are encouraged to participate in decisions that affect their work and well-being, creating a healthier work dynamic

challenges for mental health in horizontal structures

burnout from collective responsibility

while horizontal structures distribute power, they also distribute responsibility.

members may feel the weight of collective responsibility, especially in times of crisis.

without clear leaders or authority figures to take charge, some members might struggle to manage their workload, leading to burnout

emotional labor in consensus-driven processes

reaching consensus requires extensive dialogue, reflection, and often compromise, which can be emotionally and mentally taxing.

the responsibility of managing relationships, conflicts, and communication can disproportionately fall on women, even in horizontal structures

**pressure for
perfection**

feminist groups often have a deep commitment to their values, which can lead to pressure on members to “get it right” in terms of intersectionality, inclusivity, and non-hierarchy.

this pressure, while rooted in positive goals, can sometimes feel overwhelming, especially when addressing complex, systemic issues

challenges in feminist horizontal structures and potential solutions

despite the benefits of feminist horizontal structures, they also come with unique challenges. understanding these challenges and addressing them with feminist tools is crucial for building a resilient and inclusive environment.

time-consuming decision-making

consensus-based or participatory decision-making, while more equitable, can be slower than top-down processes.

reaching consensus often requires extended discussions, deep reflection, and compromise, which can frustrate members and delay urgent decisions

potential solutions

- using time-sensitive decision-making frameworks, where urgent decisions can be delegated temporarily to smaller working groups or task forces
- having pre-agreed decision-making protocols to avoid lengthy debate on procedural matters

**power imbalances
despite
non-hierarchy**

even in horizontal structures, power dynamics can still emerge, often unconsciously. certain members may take on more visible or vocal roles, while others may feel disempowered or unheard

potential solutions

- regularly assessing power dynamics within the group using participatory reflection exercises
- implementing strategies like rotating roles, and organizing discussions on power, privilege, and intersectionality

**burnout and
emotional labor**

without clear hierarchies or designated roles, responsibilities in horizontal groups can become overwhelming for certain members. this is particularly true for emotional labor

potential solutions

- establishing shared responsibility for emotional and care work
- ensuring that workload distribution is fair and that members are supported with mental health days or shared projects to prevent burnout

external pressure to conform

formal groups operating under horizontal structures often face pressure from external entities, such as donors, governmental bodies, or partner organizations, to adopt more traditional hierarchical structures. this can challenge the group's feminist and non-hierarchical principles

potential solutions

- clear communication with external stakeholders about the group's commitment to feminist horizontal practices
- building relationships with like-minded donors or partners who respect and support these values.
- developing transparent decision-making processes that outsiders can understand without sacrificing horizontal principles

maintaining accountability without hierarchies

without designated authority figures, maintaining accountability can be challenging. members may feel unclear about who is responsible for certain tasks, or there may be difficulty addressing underperformance or conflict

potential solutions

- establishing peer accountability mechanisms, where members collectively agree on responsibilities
- implementing non-hierarchical conflict resolution practices

transitioning from hierarchical to horizontal structure

transitioning to a horizontal structure often involves cultural shifts, both within the team and in how it engages with the broader society. resistance to these shifts can arise, but feminist strategies can help navigate this resistance.

transitioning from a hierarchical structure to a horizontal one requires intentional effort and a commitment to feminist values. below are some steps to help guide this process:

1

engage in feminist self-reflection

begin by assessing your current structures and identifying how power is distributed.

reflecting on existing inequalities within the team, including how decision-making processes are structured, is the first step

2

decentralize decision-making

decision-making should be decentralized and collective. this involves creating decision-making bodies such as working groups that operate without top-down authority

3

focus on collective care

the process of restructuring a team requires attention to the emotional and physical well-being of everyone involved. collective care practices, such as regular check-ins, mental health days, and creating a culture of care, are vital

a feminist future through horizontal structures

feminist horizontal structures are not just a rejection of traditional hierarchies but a reimagining of how groups (both formal and informal) can operate in alignment with feminist values of justice, care, and collective empowerment

by redistributing power, and fostering solidarity, feminist groups can create sustainable, inclusive, and transformative systems of organizing

these structures challenge the patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial forces that perpetuate inequality and offer a path toward a more just world!

