Feminist Hiking Collective

Building We: for Feminist Democracies

Methodology and key questions for researching feminist democracies


CONTENTS

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Through grounding and analysis work that creates tools for system transformation, **Building We for Feminist Democracies** seeks to document practices of collective, horizontal and feminist governance, organisational structures and decision-making tools as an alternative to traditional forms of power and governance in collective spaces. During the second phase of Building We, after our **literature review publication**, we reviewed the resources below to guide our research process and to define the research questions for Building We. This formed the groundwork for developing a research methodology and identifying key informants which was the primary focus of this third phase:

- Transdisciplinary Feminist Research: Innovations in Theory, Method and Practice, Taylor, C., Ulmer, J., & Hughes, C. (2020)
- Feminist Methodologies, Experiments, Collaborations and Reflections, Wendy Harcourt, Karijn van den Berg, Constance Dupuis, Jacqueline Gaybor (2022)
- Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods, Shawn Wilson (2008)
- Contemporary Feminist Research from Theory to Practice, Patricia Leavy and Daniel X. Harris (2018)
- Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences, Second Edition, Joey Sprague (2016)
- Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context. Kovach, M. (2009)
- Indigenous Pathways into Social Research - Voices of a New Generation, edited By Donna M Mertens, Fiona Cram, Bagele Chilisa (2013)
- Applying Indigenous Research Methods Storying with Peoples and Communities, edited by Sweeney Windchief, Timothy San Pedro (2019)

The identification of key informants involved the research of informal groups, organisations, movements, networks collectives, communities from diverse geographies. Now that we have identified the key informants and defined a research methodology, the next phase will focus on doing formal outreach and holding the dialogues for the project and some of the key informants are partners with whom we have built relationships in the past few years. Information gathering and analysis will be conducted following a research methodology based on interviews and dialogues and reflection sessions across 2025.
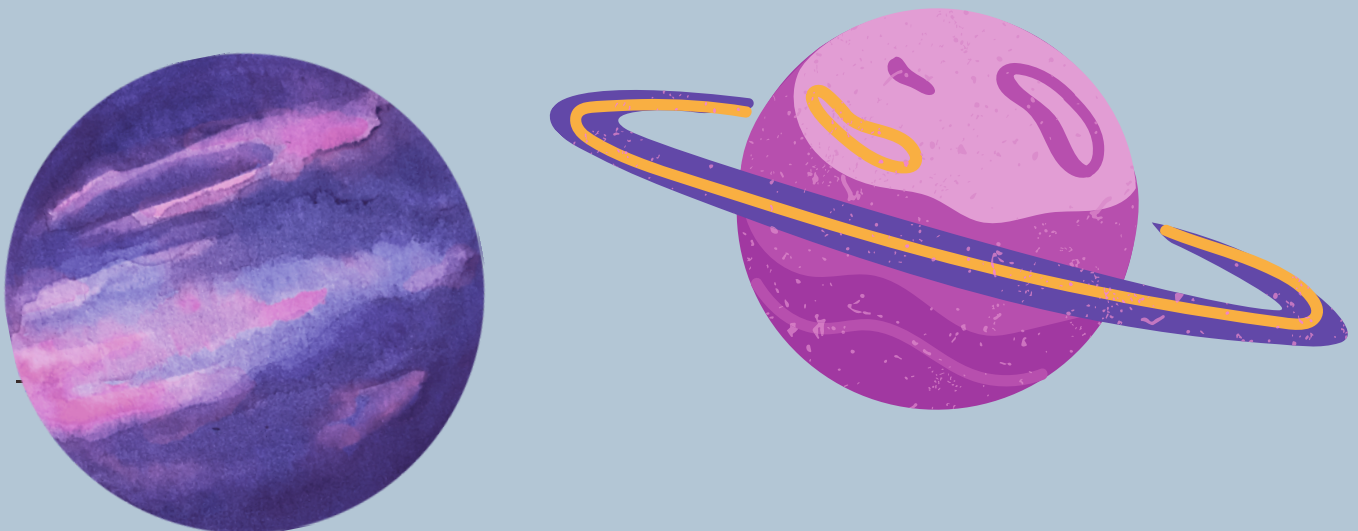
Research approach

The work of FHC is grounded in a reflection-action and FPE (feminist popular education) praxis: our programmes and strategies for change are informed by our collectivised experiences, analyses and learnings, reflections and research work. We honour the collective knowledge and practice of intersectional feminist groups, movements and organisations that have inspired and informed our work.

Research methodology

FHC research methodology aims to follow a feminist non-extractive research model, including dialogue-based research that is rooted in horizontal and reciprocal relationships. Our research approach is grounded in collectivising experiences and knowledge, co-creating knowledge and research content, as well as co-creating tools for advocacy and change. The research process is guided by the people interviewed and not by extractive agendas of researching institutions. The research process should be as horizontal and relational as possible - conducting research with an interviewer/interviewee dynamic is not horizontal as we would be bringing our own agenda, leaving less room for the co-creation of knowledge and sharing ideas. We need to ensure we create a space that allows for a shared research and knowledge process. .

We believe this approach is possible in many different research contexts, however this requires a shared commitment by all stakeholders, adequate training to all those involved in the research process, enough time and resources, restitution and co-creation of advocacy strategies and asked for by those sharing their knowledge and experience. Research needs to be adaptive and not establish a hierarchy or binary dynamic between the researcher and the interviewed – the researchers need to belong to or at least be connected with the communities or movements where research is taking place and be part of a common agenda, a shared goal. One-on-one dialogues as well as reflection circles are useful tools for feminist research. Surveys and questionnaires can be useful if they are developed and disseminate purposefully, with co-created questions that involve the community.

Research needs to follow feminist non-extractive principles both for on-site research and online or remote research. Researchers also need to have a clear understanding of research ethics and safeguarding procedures to be implemented during the research, and any other procedures, including for situations that risk the safety of all those involved. Support mechanisms need to be in place during field research to help researchers manage their wellbeing and to monitor progress and quality of the research.
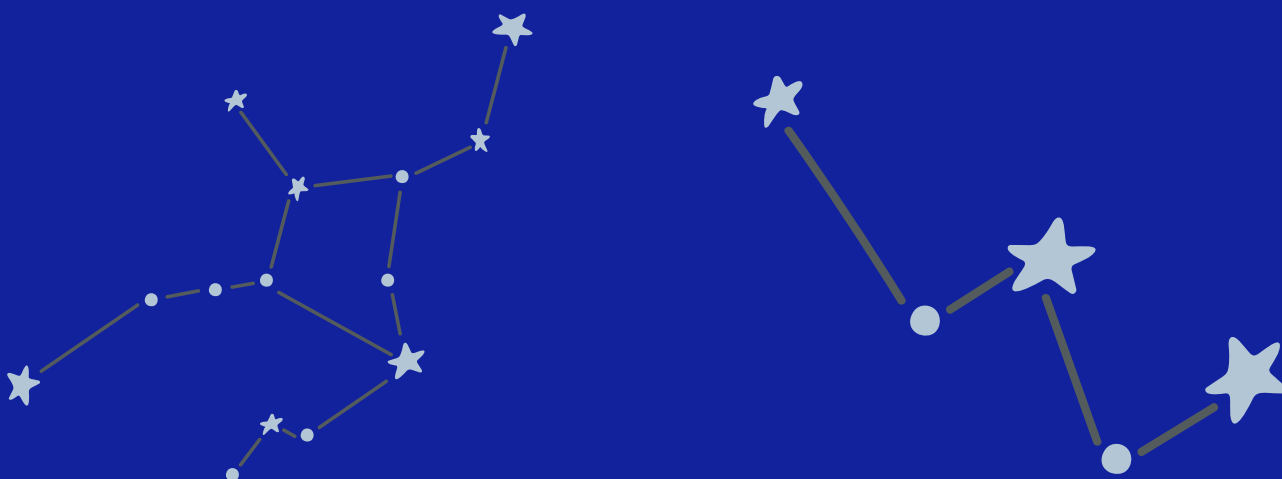
The guiding principle for the interviews should be building a collective space. The interview should be a space where the dialogues feel equal, and everyone feels included. Everyone must aim to create a respectful, compassionate and kind space where everyone can be themselves, express their views and ask as well as answer questions.

Researchers should be aware that differing views and ideas may arise from the research process depending on the participants lived experiences, identity and beliefs. Researchers should endeavour to give equal space to diverse ideas and perspectives and facilitate an equal chance for such ideas to be shared. If any form of discrimination arises in conversations it should be dealt with appropriately.

During the process we must build solidarity with the participants. If a research process builds alliances through the varied involvement of different actors, or if the evidence is disseminated widely, then it can build solidarity across different levels to ensure collective action for change. The research must shift power dynamics from the researchers to the participants. The participants must actively inform and transform the evidence-gathering and are well represented throughout the research outputs and attribution. Their voices must be amplified through analysis, perspectives, quotes, pictures, and stories.

The research needs to recognise and engage the power relations evident in traditional research practice such as the notion of researcher/researched and seeks to subvert traditional practice. The researcher needs to recognise creativity and non-traditional and indigenous research processes as authentic tools of resistance and transformation.

The way space is used should be acknowledged; researchers need to avoid creating a teacher/student/classroom dynamic when arranging themselves in a space, group reflection circles, collective storytelling and one on one dialogues can be useful in creating a shared conversation and knowledge sharing.

Where possible, pilot training will be carried out to test the methodology and research questions. This might involve, for example, test interviews and test focus groups followed by feedback from all those involved, on whether the questions were clear, the time allocated was sufficient, the setting was appropriate, and all ethical questions are dealt with appropriately.

Information about the participants should always be recorded in a secure manner, drawing on a feminist analysis and paying attention to any risks of harm to participants during the research process. This means transcribing and coding interviews and focus group data.

Evaluation will be part of our ongoing reflection-action processes. However, it will be more formalised at the end of the research process. At the same time as the final reflection, a meeting with the research participants to find out whether the research met its objectives will be conducted where appropriate.

Whenever possible, it is a critical part of feminist research that findings are validated by the participants first, before sharing it widely. Research participants need to be given the space to reflect on the findings before the final draft is prepared. It should be validated by participants not representatives.

Safeguarding

Safety must be the researchers' first concern. Always make sure everyone, participants and team, are feeling safe in the space, on site and online. A safeguarding point person should be allocated, and the participants should be made aware of who this is and where they can go if they require additional support.

Researchers must be trained to identify concerns and issues and offer support and information to participants where safeguarding concerns are expressed.

Safeguarding policies should be streamlined, simplified and made fully accessible to all participants and volunteers. Safeguarding guidelines should be regularly revisited to ensure that these are constantly according to our experiences, contexts and rhythm.

At all stages of the research, all participants must be respected and fairly treated. Everyone must take ownership of the responsibility to safeguard participants' welfare, minimise risks and assure that benefits outweigh risk.

There is always a risk of trauma and triggering conversations arising. This will be managed by considering what sorts of questions might be triggering for the participants and risk re-traumatising a participant. Trigger warnings must be given where appropriate and participants must be made aware of who to contact and support services that are available if they need further support. Researchers must be aware of the risks of being involved in research processes for some participants. Participants must be aware of the additional risks of being involved and should be made aware that they are free to exit the research at any time.

The researchers must be aware of the political context in which the research is conducted and how this may affect the participants. This includes but is not limited to changing political situations or threats to the territory. The safety of everyone must always be prioritised. A full ethics check, and a basic risk assessment must be completed, on-site and remotely. It must be ensured that permissions have been granted to the researchers from the country where the research is taking place where relevant. It must be ensured that the participants to the research are going to be safe when the research is published and that their safety is not at risk as they participate. The repercussions of the research and its findings must be considered not just during the research process but also after it is concluded and publicised.

Confidentiality and anonymity are key aspects of informed consent and should be maintained throughout the research, including during analysis and reporting. Confidentially implies non-disclosure of information altogether; a research team might hear others' views but must not publish the views in any circumstances. Anonymity is where a research team hears others' views, and those people give consent for the views to be published as long as their name is not published. The researcher may use an alias, if consent is given. In all cases it is good practice to try to ensure privacy during interviews so that people feel comfortable to answer questions, particularly questions of a sensitive nature. At the same time, ensure that participants feel safe being in a private space, and ensure participants can ask for support if they feel vulnerable speaking unaccompanied. Participants should be asked beforehand if they would feel more comfortable interviewing alone, as part of a group or with someone accompanying the, their preferences should be prearranged in this process.

Local support mechanisms should be in place before the research on the ground starts. Every researcher should discuss possible risks before one-to-one interviews or group interviews and make sure to keep an eye during the process if a situation escalates.

If a situation arises where a participant is triggered or finds a situation or dialogue emotionally challenging the researcher or facilitator should immediately stop the interview and support the participant. The interviewer should first stop the interview if it's a one-to-one interview or allow the person who needs support to leave the group if it is a reflection circle if they wish. After this, the interviewer should provide comfort to the person in need and give space to accommodate the participant's choice. The researcher or facilitator should never be pushy and only continue if the participant wishes.

Information and data

An agreement on intellectual property should be agreed on before the interview or facilitation process, unless this is already defined by a grant agreement. Ensure that all data collection processes follow local and international data protection laws when gathering, storing, or sharing any data relating to individuals involved.

Researchers will not use Google documents. If it is needed for a specific purpose, then they will make sure that after all the material will be permanently deleted from Google Drive. Researchers will not store information which identifies specific people. After gathering information about the participants on their phone or on site, the researcher will put everything together and send it to a FHC appointed person. After this the researcher should delete all the information from any devices.

Researchers should minimise the use of Apps like WhatAapp, Google Drive and email to share information, especially photos and videos. Written material can be shared on outlook. If Videocalls or WhatsApp messages are recorded, these should be shared with a Feminist Hiking Collective appointed person and then deleted from the original device. Material can be shared safely on Telegram but should be deleted from it after.

Always check that consent is in place. Make sure participants have signed the consent form and that facilitators and researchers know what they have given us consent for. If a participant opts to be anonymous, we need to make sure to never mention their real name or use an alias throughout the whole process.

Photos and videos safety

- Consent forms should be signed by participants ahead of the research or facilitation.
- Ideally photos and videos will be taken once trust has been built between the photographer and the 'photographed', who may play an active part in what the photo looks and feels, particularly when a digital camera is used.
- Ensure that the photography and video experience is positive for the 'subject' - they should have choice around how they are photographed or videoed in a way which shows their strengths and qualities.
- Photos and videos should be empowering, where possible, and not showing the participants as victims.
- Ensure informed consent is understood and signed by all interviewees. The consent form is provided by as a separate document. The consent form will include:
- Agreement with the objective of the research;
- Consent to take photos of videos of the participants and use of it;
- Consent to use all the data gathered from the research for the publication;
- Consent to utilise names of organisations and individuals in the research project; Do not share any photos or video footage with any outside parties.
- If photos or videos contain people that did not give consent to be photographed or recorded, the person that took the photograph or video should blur out the person from the material and send everything to Feminist Hiking Collective appointed person and then delete everything from their devices.
- Photo and technical guidance for videos will be on a separate document generated by the video lead and will be shared with researchers to help guide the photo and video documentation to ensure there is consistency.

Key research questions

- **In a feminist pluralist world grounded in our interconnectedness and belonging to nature, how are we organised in our societies?**
- **How are communities coordinated and sustained; (how) are they self-organised?**
- **How is collective accountability, responsibly sustained and coordinated?**
- **How do we make decisions?**
- **How do we face conflict and solve issues?**
- **What tools, processes and structures do we need?**
- **How do we co-create?**
- **How do we sustain, heal and care for ourselves, personally and collectively?**
- **How do we collectively thrive and build collective joy?**
- **How could democracy be re-signified as actual collective power and collective leadership?**
- **How do we co-create and sustain new and existing feminist realities?**
- **How do we connect the micro to the macro spaces of change?**
- **Which practices across geographies self-identify as feminist democracies, or can inspire feminist democracies frameworks and be sources of non-extractive learnings on tools, processes, structures, etc.?**

- How do we share knowledge?
- What can we learn from leaderless and anarchic movements, organisations and groups?
- Which tools and structures can we learn from and which ones can we co-develop to imagine new and feminist democracies together?
- How can we organise societies so that they adopt and practice with a more horizontal structure which allows for collective decision making?
- What we can learn from rural and indigenous ways of living and how their way of living practices harmony with nature? What can we learn from mountain communities? Maybe adding here: how can we learn to live by these practices in a non-extractive manner?
- How can we organise society so that power is decentralised?
- How can we transform societal structures and organise ourselves to achieve personal and collective freedom?
- How can we reorganise the way we practice governance and democracy in a way that centres and foregrounds our connection with nature and the wellness of the Earth?
- What are the processes and structures that we can use to decolonise governance?
- What can we learn from the way that plants, animals, fungi and the universe around us are interdependently organised and thrive in harmony with each other?

Key questions for dialogues

- Could you introduce your group/organisation/movement/community/other space - if you are comfortable, share any useful information about when it was formed and how it came together.
- [PURPOSE] Why was this group formed? Do you define as being feminist? Why/why not? What is the specific form of oppression, violence, discrimination or dominance (including towards the earth/nature) that you are seeking to resist? What are your goals?
- [BW team to explain feminist democracies framing from publication – common understanding – can align even if not wish to see themselves to be feminist democracy] Would you define your experience as a form/practice of feminist democracy. Why or why not?
- What are the challenges posed by your context and the broader societal structures and system in which you are located?
- Have you been attacked/criticised/co-opted by political parties or other actors? How have you learnt from these experiences?
- [POWER] How has your group tried to transform the way power is shared and used in the group? How has power been redistributed/shared/used to both empower each member of the group as well as to advance the purpose for which you have created your collective? And how power is made accountable to your larger community? Could you give at least one concrete example?
- [PRINCIPLES] Based on all that you have shared so far, what are the core values and principles that your group believes in/embraces? How do these reflect a feminist vision of power, justice and living in connection with the wellness of the Earth?
- [PRACTICES] How does your group organise/ structure itself? How is collective leadership practiced in your daily decision making/work/activism? Please share one concrete example.
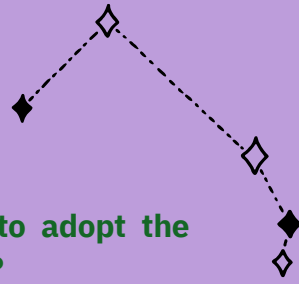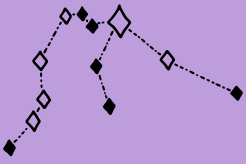
- **What does the practice of feminist democracy mean within your context?**
- **What have been the main challenges your group has faced in trying to adopt the practices of feminist democracy? How have these been tackled/overcome?**
- **What is the place and role given to self-care, inner transformation, collective care and radical healing in your collective? Please give one concrete example of how individuals are supported in these aspects by the collective.**
- **How do you work on transforming the self and dismantling ego/nurturing interconnectedness and interdependence between all beings?**
- **How do you define the common good, collective care and the good living?**
- **What are some key insights/learnings and any tools/processes that you would like to share with others who are also trying to advance feminist democracies?**
- **Based on your collective experience, to wrap-up with one paragraph, how can we organise ourselves within society in a way that grounds our interconnection with nature?**