COFEM

Feminist Project Management
Learning Brief

Setting the Scene

Project management is an approach and process that has been around since early civilisation, however the way we understand project management in its modern format was shaped during the 20th century within areas of construction, defence, aerospace[1] and more recently software development and tech companies[2]. It has been taken on by many charities and civil society organizations (CSOs) as good practice, however in this learning brief we argue that instead of uncritically adopting existing project management approaches that are rooted in mainstream, western, and patriarchal structures, there is a need to challenge and transform the concept of project management in order to adopt an intersectional feminist approach to project management.

Project management is not a neutral practice because of its origins in the Global North and within male-dominated fields. Masculine language is woven throughout- for example in corporate sectors a type of project management called 'agile' is widely used, which includes traditionally male sporting phrases like "kick-off meeting"[3] and "scrum master"[4]. Often in carrying out a project, we can maintain and even reinforce structures that mimic existing power imbalances, privileges, inequalities, and structures of oppression including (but not limited to) heteronormative patriarchy, ableism, and racism - all of which are intertwined with one another.

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[1] Management Help. (2022, May 1). The History of Project Management.

[2] Microsoft. (2021). History of project management.

[3] Kick-off refers to a kick that puts the ball into play in football. Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). Kick Off.

[4] A scrum (short for scrummage) is a method of restarting play in rugby football that involves players packing closely together with their heads down and attempting to gain possession of the ball. Wikipedia. (2022, May). Scrum (Rugy).

Intersectionality:

"The theory developed to highlight the intertwined experiences of racism and sexism specifically for Black women… Intersectionality addresses the myriad of ways inequities occur and are experienced given one's race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, abilities, immigration status, and other historically excluded identities, which all operate together and perpetuate violence against women and girls".

-Coalition of Feminists
for Social Change[5]

Organisationally we may also reinforce existing structures that are based on mainstream/masculine leadership models, e.g. one single leader with power concentrated in the hands of a few. Project management often comes with set ways of running projects such as Prince2[6] or PMBOK[7] that are often bureaucratic, focused on outcomes and models for organising that leave little space for designing project management differently.

Instead of shoehorning women into male-dominated project management fields or using approaches that replicate oppressive structures, we offer an alternative way of working- intersectional feminist project management. In this brief, we explore the link between feminist project management and feminist leadership, highlight key elements, and finally offer a series of questions that can help you consider an approach to practising project management in a more inclusive, values-driven way.

"Many organisations in our sector work to provide access to services, knowledge, and skills for the most marginalised communities, but don't focus enough on dismantling the systems and structures that contribute to marginalisation and oppression in the first place — including within our own organisations"
(Harper & Albrectsen)[8]

[5] Coalition of Feminists for Social Change, COFEM Learning Brief: Feminism, Racism and Intersectionality, 2022.

[6] PRINCE2 stands for PRojects IN Controlled Environments, and is a UK-created method for project management. Prince2.com. (n.d.). What is Prince2?.

[7] PMBOK stands for A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, and is a US-created book with guidelines and best practise for Project Management. Jessica Everitt. (2022, May 9). Demystifying the PMBOK Process Groups.

[8] Harper, M. & Albrectsen, A. (2020, March 2). Opinion: Why feminist leadership is essential to achieve gender equality.
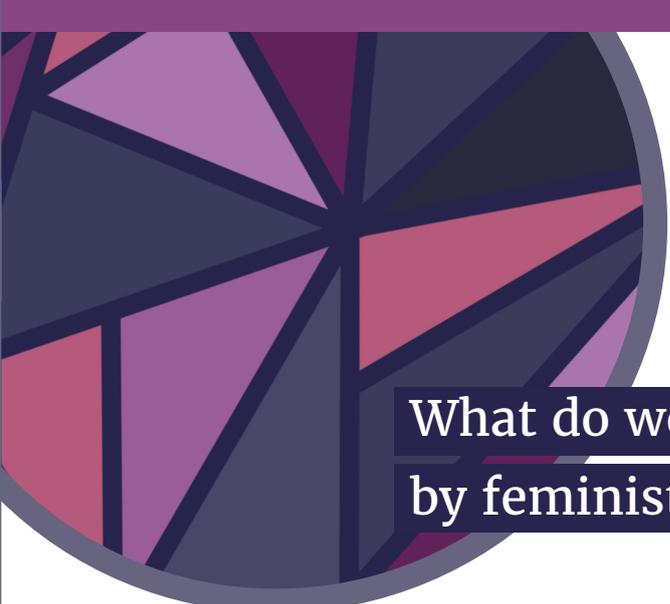
What do we mean by feminist project management?

Feminist project management is informed by the concept of feminist leadership, which has gained more attention in recent years.

This approach offers different ways of being leaders by providing space to organise, facilitate, and govern in ways that challenge and subvert the mainstream leadership models[9]. An explicit focus on power within leadership - from how it shows up within organisations and individuals to how power is defined - allows feminist leaders to focus on its redistribution, with the goal of building power together.

> *"Feminist leadership provides concrete strategies to better understand, appreciate and respond to multiple, intersecting power structures and inequalities and how these affect all of us within our organisations and networks". You can read more about Feminist Leadership in this* *learning brief by COFEM.*[10]

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[9] Throughout the development of this learning brief different conversations arose about the use of terms like 'traditional". We thank our COFEM editors for highlighting that a colonial lens has turned anything 'traditional' into something backward and negative. Therefore we have used 'mainstream' here instead

[10] Coalition of Feminists for Social Change, COFEM Learning Brief Series: Feminist Leadership, 2021

Feminist leadership is characterised by values such as[11]:

ACCOUNTABILITY

COLLABORATION

EMPATHY

SELF- & COLLECTIVE CARE
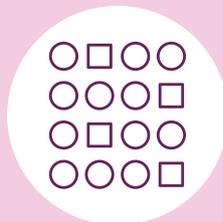
DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT & REPRESENTATION

INCLUSION

RESPECT

EQUITY

REFLEXIVITY AND SELF-AWARENESS

MUTUAL LEARNING

How these values can be practiced and brought to life through feminist project management is described in the next section.

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[11] These values are gathered from different resources on feminist leadership referenced to throughout this learning brief.

In the same way that feminist leadership pushes for change in our approach to leadership, feminist project management offers us a transformative way of facilitating project delivery that prioritises our ways of working just as much as meeting milestones. Feminist project management can guide us in transforming project management, realise feminist leadership in practice, create systems and structures that work for all people involved, and allow for different ways of developing project management depending on the context in which the work is situated.

Key elements informing feminist project management

1
Guides project delivery in a transformative way

2
Realises feminist leadership in practice

3
Creates setups that work for all people involved

4
Allows for different ways of developing project management

5
Situates the context
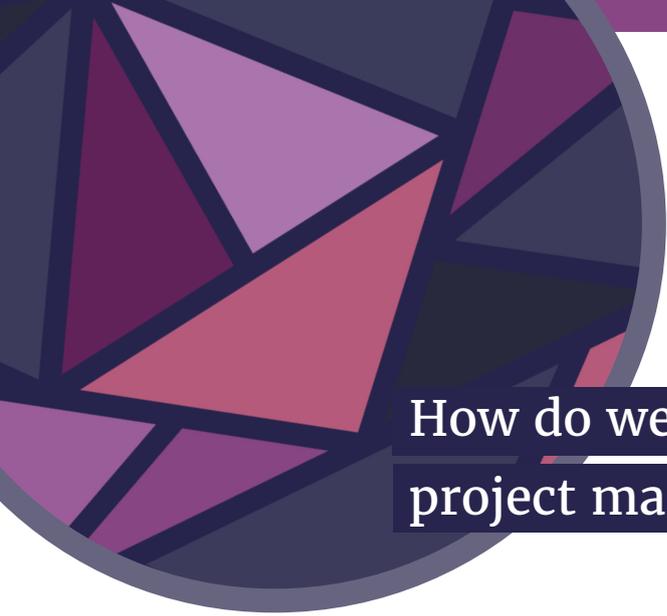
How do we practise feminist project management?

Anyone can practise feminist project management, whether their project is a small personal endeavour or an ambitious national programme of transformation.

There is no one set-in-stone approach to feminist project management, rather it is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, both individually and collectively. Below we offer three overarching feminist project management practices which can support you in starting to purposefully apply the approach into your projects.

1. BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT THE PROCESS

Feminist project management is not only about the outcomes! In the rush to deliver, the focus is often placed on outcomes, and little attention is paid to 'how' we meet them. Feminist project management stresses the importance of being conscious about the process of a project AND challenging oppressive productivity culture, including but not limited to: spaces for self-and collective care, ensuring a healthy life-work balance, realistic plans around resourcing (e.g. time, people, money) in order to achieve the outputs promised, building in time for reflection and learning, developing a culture of appreciation and celebration of success, undoing cultures of perfectionism and valuing both visible and invisible labour[12] which often falls to the most marginalised group members.

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[12] Journalism Institute. (2022, February 28). Managers: To be truly inclusive, put an end to 'invisible work'.;

According to the writers of this learning brief, invisible labour goes beyond DEI to processes like admin, caretaking, etc. For further reading we suggest: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK453218/

Reflective questions for practise

- Is the timeline of a project designed in such a way that it works for the project team? Is well-being and life-work balance taken into account in the timeframe and deadlines?

- Is there equal attention for and value placed on both 'visible' and 'invisible' tasks of managing a project?

- Are different support mechanisms for project staff being taken into account?

- Are there spaces to reflect on process as well as progress?

2. BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY AND COLLABORATION

Designing models for collaboration in which everyone can participate within a project and creating shared accountability is crucial. Feminist project management recognises that projects can be successfully led as a collective, including systems of support throughout that invite all of those involved in a project to jointly define their own responsibilities, communication preferences and levels of input. This will not only be beneficial for creating more agency for collaboration, but also contributes to building shared accountability and allows each participant to define their commitment themselves. Feminist project management acknowledges that accountability can foster transparancy and responsibility[13], but it also sometimes requires us to be uncomfortable, vulnerable and flexible to change.

Reflective questions for practise

- How are decision-making processes designed within the project? Is there one person responsible for sign-off or is this a joint responsibility?

- Who is consulted (both internally and externally)- and how- when decisions need to be made?

- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that the most marginalised voices are centred in the project process?

- How is accountability used to adhere to feminist values? How do you hold yourself as well as the collective accountable in a way that is respectful and kind, while also mindful about power and privilege?

- Are those involved in the project regularly consulted on their preferred ways of feedback and reporting

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[13] Billing, L. (2021). Nothing tastes as good as feminist accountability feels.

3. BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT SHARED DECISION-MAKING AND POWER

The way decision-making is organised has the potential to challenge unequal power structures and relationships in the context in which a project takes place. Feminist project management centers models of shared decision-making, intersectionality and building power with others.

Reflective questions for practise

- Is there transparency from the beginning around how decisions are made, and by whom?

- Are strategies in place to deal with conflict before it occurs?

- How are brave[14] meeting spaces developed as a project team, including an environment where each voice can be heard, inviting louder voices to step back and less frequently heard voices to step in?

- How can staff role model self-awareness and responsiveness to feedback?

- How do partnerships consider who is at the table and who is missing?

- What inclusive spaces are available to reflect on the above as a project progresses?

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[14] Arao, B. & Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Braver Spaces.
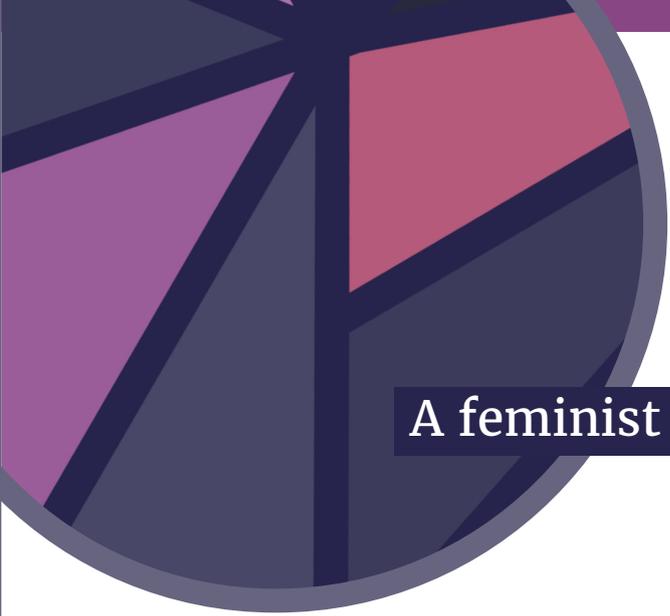
A feminist way forward

We believe a feminist approach to project management is the future, and this is echoed by some within mainstream project management frameworks who have an appetite for change to ensure project management centres more "human", interpersonal skills rather than solely frameworks and processes[15].

As demonstrated in this learning brief, intersectional feminist project management fulfills this desire, yet practising it requires an ongoing process of questioning, learning, unlearning and intentional application. Regardless of the context in which you are positioned, we hope this learning brief helps you to start reflecting on your own practice and think about managing projects differently. In this spirit, we leave you with another question which unfolded for the authors whilst authoring this brief- could feminist project management in fact be re-designed as feminist project leadership? Would this shift from managing by authority to leading by influence be the change we wish to see?

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[15] Capterra, A. (2017, July 13). The History of Project Management and Predictions for the Future.

Further reading

We actively encourage you to read and share the following resources which assisted in our thinking to create this learning brief:

ActionAid - ActionAid's Ten Principles of Feminist Leadership

Ascent imkaan - Good Practice Briefing: uncivil partnerships? reflections on collaborative working in the ending violence against women and girls sector Association of Chairs - How ActionAid implemented feminist leadership principles

Coalition of Feminists for Social Change, COFEM Learning Brief Series: Feminist Leadership, 2021.

Coalition of Feminists for Social Change, COFEM Learning Brief: Feminism, Racism and Intersectionality, 2022.

Devex - Opinion: Why feminist leadership is essential to achieve gender equality

Dismantling Racism Works adapted by The Centre for Community Organizations - White Supremacy Culture in Organizations

Fair Share of Women Leaders - Feminist Leadership

We Rise - Feminist Leadership: Key Definitions

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