



# **Bringing Feminist Practices into Online Work Sessions**

Twenty examples of how you can improve online meetings - in Zoom and elsewhere -- by putting feminist values into practice.

CV Harquail  
cv@feministsatwork.com  
May 2020





## **Bringing Feminist Practices into Online Work Sessions**

At this point in our Covid-induced shift away from face-to-face interactions, there are a zillion resources for how to use real-time online spaces for group work. These resources generally assume that how we already work in groups is good enough, and that all we need to do is transfer our work processes from the old location to the new one.

The problem is that when we shift our work automatically and without reflection to a new place or a new medium, we just drag old-fashioned practices and dynamics with us. Thus, the new workplace inherits all the biases and dysfunctions of the old workplace. Conventional advice for the online world or the offline one just won't be enough for folks who want to transform how we work together.

What I aim to offer here are just a few concrete practices that challenge oppressive power dynamics, establish equality, equity and justice in the experience, and help to create a situation where everyone can flourish. These practices promote a feminist agenda while demonstrating key feminist values.

To be sure, you may see tips elsewhere that look quite similar to ones on this list (e.g., use simple tech, take breaks). Remember that the same behavior can reflect a whole range of motivations and mindsets. A designated facilitator can reflect a concern for supporting every member's engaged participation or it can reflect a concert to get results fast.

The motives behind the tips matter, which is why I'll not only offer the tip but also explain the feminist thinking behind what I'm suggesting. At the end of this guide, I've added an overview of five feminist values for business so that you can experiment with your own ways of putting feminist principles into practice as you work together.





1. The #1 feminist group practice is to **establish working agreements for the group & session using a democratic, participatory process.** Agreements should include your vision for working together, how you will manage participation challenges, and more.

Working agreements are group norms that are explicitly, deliberately created by the whole gathering. They are guidelines for what behavior is to be encouraged or discouraged in the group, how values are to be demonstrated, and how conflicts might be approached. They help us create the conditions for our best work and help us demonstrate in the here and now our visions for our future.

For an example, check out these [working agreements from the 2018 Entrepreneurial Feminist Forum team](#). Lex Schroeder led us in creating these agreements and then stewarded the list so that it was always available to us and to other EFF participants as different people joined and took on different contributing roles.

(<https://www.feministforums.com/our-event-agreements.html>)

The process of crafting the EFF agreements together helped our team explore how we wanted to interact with each other. It also helped us commit to certain behaviors (e.g., a brave space) even when it might have been easier to slip into conventional habits that would re-enact privilege and subordination.

The conversation and agreements also helped us create a sense of ourselves not only as individual contributors but also as a team and an organization that had capabilities and identity beyond the sum of our individual parts. They helped us create, interindependently, what would help us flourish.



**2. Host a check-in** where every participant gets to speak and share their name. Let every voice be heard once at the start, to set a practice of inviting all in the gathering to participate.

Check-ins can address a specific question (e.g., what do you want to experience in today's meeting? What one word expresses how you feel right now?) or they can be a simple hello— as long as they give everyone a chance to speak and be heard. This practice lets everyone establish their own presence and can help members find their voice. It also treats everyone's participation as valuable.

Even more, having a check-in round lets each of the participants hear something about how others are feeling as they join the group. They offer everyone the opportunity to welcome people where they are, rather than assuming that everyone is joining the meeting with the same energy or the same things on their minds.

**3. Build in time for interaction and process,** not just for “getting things done”. The collective as a whole and each individual in it needs to be cared for. This care takes time.

The quality of our interactions with each other and the quality of our collective presence determines the kinds of results we get in our work as well as the overall experience we have together. If we prioritize “doing” and the accomplishment of tasks, we often diminish or ignore what it takes to “be” ourselves and to “be” together.

Just as our offline, in-person interactions give us a chance to get to know each other, so must our online interactions. If our online interactions aren't designed to give us the time and space to share who we are with each other, or listen carefully to each other, or take time to intuit or inquire how we all are doing, we will not develop the kinds of interpersonal familiarity and trust that allow us not only to do our best work but also to be our best selves. What might look like chit-chat or pleasantries could actually be the tendrils of relationships developing among group members. We need to give this time.



**4. Rotate the roles** of host, conversation leader, and facilitator from meeting to meeting. **Share opportunities** for note-taking, reporting out, tech management, welcoming members, etc. among participants.

Conventional meetings replicate organizational power dynamics. Most conventional meetings have a “leader” — the person in charge who sets the agenda, makes sure the conversation moves forward, and works to achieve the goals of the gathering. This person often occupies a high status organizational role and/or a privileged identity.

In a feminist meeting, there are many more roles that group members can hold and these roles aren't attached to status. For example, the conventional “leader” would be replaced by a ‘host’ or a ‘convener’ — a person given the authority by the group to organize the basic elements of the meeting and help the group create an agenda, etc.

Because feminist principles ask us to attend carefully to equity, justice, agency, power dynamics, conflicts, and tensions, feminist meetings often have a designated “facilitator” responsible for supporting interpersonal interactions. Facilitators help to guide the group through conversations (e.g., asking questions, inviting reflections, pausing the conversation to help work out disagreements or tensions, etc.). Having a facilitator who is not the convener shares organizing power across more than one person.

In an environment with new, unfamiliar technology, it can be especially helpful to have a person dedicated to managing the different tools, the chat box, the breakout rooms, etc. This role helps to smooth out any inequities caused by tech glitches. Other group tasks like note-taking, facilitating breakout groups, or recapping discussions can all be taken on by different group members, helping to share the work of caring for the group.

Rotating who takes these roles lets the power and responsibilities of different roles get shared equitably. Rotating roles also gives all participants a way to contribute and grow their power-with leadership skills. Meetings become opportunities for everyone to learn, to create, and to be generative.



**5. Craft a land acknowledgement** that reflects where folks are coming in 'from'. It helps you focus on what you are creating in the virtual space together.

A land acknowledgement in a virtual meeting asks us to recognize that we are (still) occupying space on land that (for most non-indigenous members in North America) is not the land of their own ancestors but rather land taken from other people. Nearly every member is benefiting from a legacy of settler colonialism. Acknowledging this truth is an important step towards creating justice and equity.

(For more info on land acknowledgments, here's a useful FAQ from the Art Institute of Chicago: <https://www.artic.edu/about-us/land-acknowledgment> .)

A land acknowledgement also asks us to reflect on our physical presence together— perhaps noting where we are all dialing in 'from'. This geographic physicality recognizes where our bodies are and reminds us of the whole humanness of the group.

At another level, the land acknowledgement offer invites us to consider how we all come to 'be' in this virtual place. What privileges enable this? What resources enable this? Whom do we thank and remember? We might remember that the online space is "made possible" by huge corporations who sell our privacy, by tech workers who barely make life-sustaining wages, by Amazon Web Services, by coal-burning plants or by solar & wind farms.

Our shared virtual space is also made possible because our group has devoted resources to creating it, which reminds us that this space requires our care and should reflect our agency. We can ask "What do we want this online place to be, for us?" We don't have to accept the default behaviors and feelings that the technologies have been designed to support. Instead, we can decide what we want to make this space feel, be, and do for us.

The virtual space is not neutral. It is structured and biased by power, resources, limitations, opportunities, and legacies that we should acknowledge. Then, we can redesign this space to make liberation possible.





**6. Create a group gesture**— a hand motion, a facial expression, a shout— that members can use together to open and close meetings. This can be surprisingly fun since it creates not only vivacity but also a physical sense of community across the interwebz.

Feminists practice an awareness of the body and our embodiment as individuals and as a collective. Bodies require our mutual care and respect, not the least because bodies receive and hold on to trauma. Bodily work and especially somatic work are important for shaking off the feeling of being controlled. Bodily work literally helps shift us into active agents who are creating our own experience.

(See GenerativeSomatics.org <https://generativesomatics.org/our-strategy/>, the Irrepressible Podcast (formerly Healing Justice) and <http://www.somaticsandtrauma.org/approach.html>.)

Group gestures invite us deliberately to put our bodies into motion in service of the group (while not asking them to do a lot of work). Visually, seeing everyone doing the same gesture we ourselves are doing shows us that we are acting together. Seeing others move as we feel ourselves moving gives us a feeling that we are together. And, moving together helps to promote other forms of interaction.

All of this happens before we even consider the symbolism of the gesture— what it is, what it means, how it was created, and by whom. We have a group gesture we call the ‘feminist fist bump’ that I nudged us to create for the first FBMC workshop in 2016 when Lex Schroeder and I met Petra Kassun-Mutch and Barb Orser. We’ve taken this feminist fist bump online and in-person to celebrate accomplishments and to end meetings. With the Fifth Wave Feminist Business Accelerator, we have a different group gesture for our closing moments that creates a similar shared, lighthearted feeling.



- 7. Choose the simplest tech** for the tasks at hand. Remember that the simplest tech is often the easiest for everyone to use. Simpler tech reduces the demands for all kinds of resources, and equalizes access for those who have less.

Tech access reflects and can compound income and other kinds of inequality, since folks with older equipment, less bandwidth, or less skill find them hard to access and use. Simpler tech can help the group and individual members conserve time, energy and money.

Let's not get too enamored of the digital technology and use its various bells and whistles simply because they are there. Focus on the core needs we're asking the tech to help us solve.



- 8. Open up other channels** of communication to run in parallel with the conversation, to expand the possibilities for many kinds of contributions and for many different voices to join in.

Platforms like Zoom make additional channels of access easy to create, with features like the chat box or the group whiteboard. Another tactic is to open up Slack or other external chat tool (like WhatsApp) so that folks can participate textually, in concert with the actual conversation. This tactic expands possibilities for different contribution styles, moments, and capabilities and helps draw on the agency of every group member.

Folks who might have been distracted for a moment and missed a point might see it captured several seconds later in a written recap. Folks who lose track of the thread might find it again in a graphic recording on the whiteboard, and so on. And, having a real-time text portion of the meeting can make the process more accessible for people who are neurotypically diverse.





9. Before moving to a break, invite a one-minute **meditation**. Use this moment to ask people to reflect on what they most need to do during the break to take care of themselves z physically, emotionally, and cognitively.

The one-minute meditation reminds us to check in with our bodies and feelings to acknowledge whole humanness. The reflection asks us to be deliberate about taking care of ourselves (an act of generativity). The break itself gives us time to fulfill these tasks.



10. Put together a **shared, collective, open-access, online document** for the group that has the agenda, any pre-reading or information, slides, diagrams, reference lists, bio & contact information about participants, previous group agreements, and any other information that might be helpful. Invite everyone to contribute to it. Make the document available before, during, and after a meeting to support group conversations.

A shared, open-access online document offers a one-stop location for any and all materials related to the meeting. Making the necessary material available to everyone can help to ease disparities in information and preparedness. An open-access, real-time document makes meeting notes and sharing more transparent, since it is open to everyone who has something to contribute to the record of the meeting.

You can even organize a real-time transcription of the conversation into these notes. Thanks to Sarah Saska of Feminuity for this page of Strategies for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (<https://connect-hear.com/>) for all kinds of online tools.



- 11. Add a gift** to the closing page of Zoom or to a followup email -- not just a link to the meeting's notes but also a little downloadable treat (an image, a gif, a handout, a link to a song).

I love a little treat at the end of a meeting. Why not use that moment as an invitation to send something to the group that communicates accomplishment, community, or simply happiness? It's efficient and smart to send meeting notes or a recap of the next action steps, so why not add a treat while you're at it? The treat is a way to acknowledge participants as people and not just as worker-bees.



- 12. Play music** to mark the start, end, and duration of parts of the gathering. Several minutes before the end of a break, start playing some upbeat music to help folks track when it's time to come back and to welcome them as they regroup. We've even had a musical guest play us a song at closing!

Music is a lovely way to use artistry to shape the boundaries of the time we spend together. The music can resonate with the feeling of the moment (e.g., be soft and calming during a break) or help to shift the energy of the group (e.g., an upbeat dance tune as folks return from break to start again).

It's pretty easy to have the meeting facilitator or tech lead play music from their phone that can be picked up by their computer microphone. Folks can take turns choosing or playing music for the group. Petra created a lovely ritual for closing our FEC weekly gatherings — she invites an artist to perform a live piece of music. We joke that our next experiment will be with some kind of interpretive group dance.





**13. Care for bodies and hearts** as well as minds. Put movement breaks, reflection, and emotional sharing on the agenda. Give these activities dedicated, protected, real group time.

Online sessions can be exhausting— perhaps even more exhausting than in-person meetings. The physical experience of sitting in the same place in front of the camera, focusing on the camera, dealing with stimulation on the screen and also in our physical space. It's a lot to manage, and can be taxing. Not to mention, it can be taxing to miss the shared psychical space and each other's bodily presence.

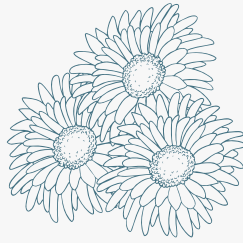
Making it even worse, we seem to try to pack as much as we can into online meetings even though working well in a digital space might already take more time.

For these reasons, we need to put physical breaks into the agenda so we can all move our bodies. We need breaks in the conversation so that we can take notes, reflect, and also have some time to think of next steps. And, because we are still learning how to participate and respond and understand each other in this virtual medium, we need extra time to process, to clarify and confirm what's being heard, and to share feelings.

Once these breaks, reflections, and movements are on the official agenda (and also when the facilitator or another participant suggests that a need for them has emerged) give them real, respected time.

If you have a ten-minute break scheduled, keep it to ten minutes since someone may have planned to use that time. Also, while we're on the topic of time... let there be a little silence in between conversations, to give each other a mini-respite. It's almost like being able to get up to refill your water bottle or coffee cup.





**14. Create a set of gestures** that communicate responses that are meaningful to the group. In addition to the “feminist fistbump”, we also have a way of placing our hands on our hearts to indicate depth of feeling, we pump up the volume when we agree and we snap like beatniks while someone’s talking to indicate our support. Each of these gestures adds to the feeling that we’re together in this.

Using gestures to respond to what’s happening in the group adds another channel of communication— but only when we know what the gestures mean. A shared lexicon of a few gestures can add a lot to the conversation, especially if the size or format of the gathering limits the number of folks who can speak at one time but the group still needs to know how others feel.

Shared gestures let us add to the quality of our responses and our presence. Noticing what others are doing, showing that we are processing, showing that we recognize what’s going on, and responding in a way others can interpret easily are all ways we can show that we are fully there for the group. We get to act in support of something shared in the group, and we also show that we are listening and feeling what’s going on.

Yes, there are methods for offering non-verbal feedback that are built into some online tools (e.g., the “raise hand” button in Zoom). These can be useful for queuing up the next speaker, but also they can feel unintuitive, mechanical, or simply awkward, in ways that are unhelpful.





15. Invite everyone to **share the same visual** image in their view — a banner, a piece of art, a plant, a word.  
(Because virtual backgrounds are available only to those with late model technologies, having some participants use these might leave others out.)

We can create a sense of togetherness visually, by sharing the same or related things in our physical space that can be seen by our cameras, or even by using logos or nicknames in our on-screen identifiers.

I've seen some teams put up logos, team pictures, or flags on the walls behind them, so that everyone has a shared background. We can also use virtual backgrounds to put us all in the same place (e.g., on the control deck of the Enterprise) or different parts of the same general location.

This can be just for fun, or correspond to the roles that members are playing for the group right now. We can also use these visuals to create an online space where everyone looks and feels equally welcome and equally part of things.

Consider that in the analog world, our spaces are often built in ways that reflect power dynamics. Conference tables and rooms, office spaces, and office decor themselves reflect who's in power and what cultural values are prioritized. For example, most office spaces presume to be 'neutral' in decor, but are usually masculine of center — a style that might not make everyone equally comfortable.

We can use shared or coordinated visuals to create belongingness, beauty and levity all while communicating that we are sharing together. One important reminder: With all of these 'togetherness' triggers, it's important to make sure that everyone has access to them.



**16. Decide as a group** whether or not to record the meeting.

Often, we default to 'no recording' if only one person doesn't want it, but this shouldn't be automatic. Other participants might find a recording to be really helpful. Work this out together.

Online meeting technology makes it easy for us to record our conversations (audio and video). These recordings can be very useful: Folks who can't attend the meeting or stay for the full session can listen/watch what they missed.

Folks who are neurologically diverse can listen/watch later and fill in what they missed. Folks who would rather not take written notes can have a full text easily available to them, since these recordings can be transcribed by web apps at a low cost. If someone is presenting or doing a lightning talk, they might want the video so they can share the content in other places, too. Conceivably, these recordings could be kept and archived if anyone needed to return to a conversation for a record at a much later date.

All of this said, recording an online session might also dampen folks' willingness to participate, to participate honestly, and to deal with difficult issues. Some folks might not want to be 'on the record' for posterity while they are learning something new or awkward. And, some folks just want their privacy, with no chance that their participation might be viewed or used again outside the actual session.

There are many ways to handle differences around whether or not to record, how and whether to make transcripts, how to edit or redact certain persons or parts of the conversation, and even how the recordings should be managed and disposed of.

The point is to make sure that the whole group's needs are attended to, and that the group doesn't default automatically and without deliberation and consensus.



17. Be as **fully present** as possible and add some spice to your online presence. Use props, nicknames, pronouns, accessories, activities -- whatever invites you to add a little more "you" to the gathering. Drink some tea together. Wear hats, happy clothes, fun earrings. Use emoji and gifs in the group chat. Have your pets drop in for a quick woof.

Partly for whole humanness, partly for a sense of agency around creating the experience for each other, and partly to be a little creative and generative, play with ways to expand how you occupy digital space as individuals and as a group.

Our flat screens and single cameras make our default digital presence — the way that we occupy time and space online — two-dimensional. We can bring more depth and texture to our presence by the way that we show up, the ways we present ourselves visually, the energy we bring, and the personality we show.

These days, too, we're usually joining our virtual gatherings from our homes (maybe a space that was previously private or off-limits). Work is intruding into our personal space in new ways, even when we are happy to be gathering together. Keep in mind that we don't always need to have our personal lives and selves accommodate to conventional expectations of work. As real, full-bodied people, we don't have to (unconsciously or reflexively) conform to expectations that we appear anodyne or "professional". We can remember to retain some of the comforts of home and the uniqueness of our selves and make this part of the ways we offer our presence.

18. Shortly before ending your meeting, invite the group to consider how well your experience together **aligned** with the group agreements you'd set for yourselves earlier.

Group agreements and other kinds of goals are important to clarify-- and they also are important to achieve. Take some time to return to the group agreements and ask each other: What did we do well, that followed our agreements? What do we want to do differently/better the next time? Are there any agreements we want to revise? Then, celebrate what you did well and what you learned.



19. Design a **closing ritual** to end the meeting on a note of togetherness. Consider pairing it thematically with your opening acknowledgement, or something related to creating a shared future.

Close down the group in a way that honors the work your've done together. A closing ritual, something that follows after a recap of action steps and responsibilities, can be a way to thank each other for contributions. A closing ritual can re-ignite that feeling of interdependence and togetherness since you are doing something symbolic and group-y. And, it can offer a formal ending moment, letting folks drift away and sign off knowing that the event is 'over' and that the need for them to be present has ended.

For me, the most awkward moment of any online meeting is those few seconds at the ending when everyone is groping for the 'leave meeting' button, wondering how to sign off gracefully and respectfully. When there is a ritual (a fist bump, a whoop, a poem being read or a song being played) to close the official meeting, I'm able to relax and oddly renew my presence one more time, before signing off comfortably.

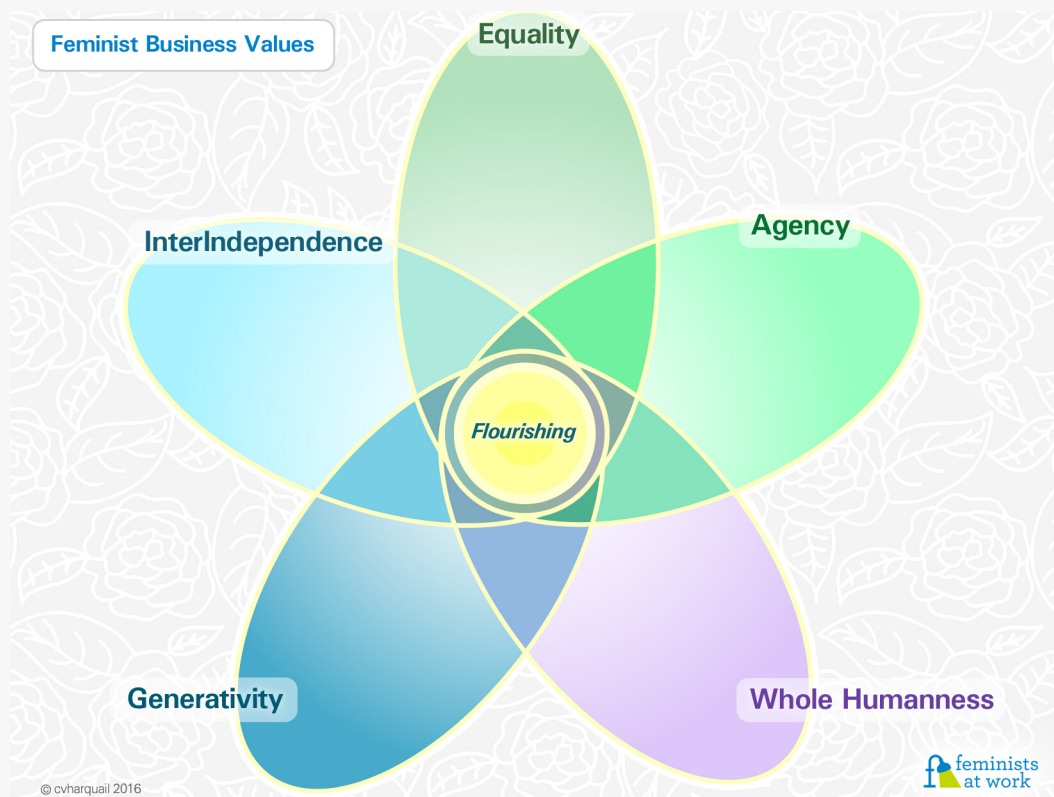
20. Help **keep the whole community in mind**. Take a screenshot of the whole community— a gallery view of everyone who is participating. This can be shared on social media, printed out to hang next to your computer, or sent in a followup email to participants.

A vision of the whole community together can help keep that sense of interdependence— that we're all in this together making our contribution to making it all work. It's not just the photos but also the expressions, the names, whatever else is in the name box, and all the other information aggregated to show the whole gathering. . If you can't get everyone on one screen, you can paste together two screenshots!

As I write this I have a screenshot of last week's Feminist Enterprise Commons gathering taped up on my wall. It reminds me that I'm in good company even when I'm working on my own.







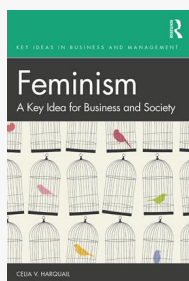
**Equality:** We accord all people, regardless of their specific features, the same value, rights, autonomy, responsibility, and opportunity.

**Agency:** We assert that human beings can determine their own actions as they represent themselves, care for others, and change the world around them.

**Interdependence:** We believe that individuals depend on strong communities and communities depend on strong individuals, and neither can succeed without the other. There is no community without the individual, no individual without the community.

**Whole Humanness:** We acknowledge and encourage the qualities of and differences in human beings' bodies, minds, hearts, relationships, cycles, and development.

**Generativity:** We support the human need to create, to create conditions that invite growth, and to care for things outside ourselves.



As the source of this articulation of feminist values for business, please cite my book, **Harquail, (2020), Feminism: A Key Idea for Business and Society**, Routledge, UK.





As we move our work together into online spaces, let's demonstrate our feminist values and experiment with feminist business practices like the ones described here. We have a terrific opportunity to reshape how we gather together to get work done. Let's work online, together, in ways that promote equity, justice, interdependence, and generativity.

Please let me know what you think of these suggestions, and share tips you'd like me to include. Find me at [cv@feministsatwork.com](mailto:cv@feministsatwork.com).

Download a two-page quick summary of these tips and more resources from my blog:

- [Bringing Feminist Practices Into Your Online Meetings](#)
- [Resources for: Creating Online Events from a Feminist Perspective](#)

**Thanks in advance for sharing this list with your community.**

For more conversations about  
**Feminist Business,  
Feminist Entrepreneurship, and  
Feminist Business Practice,**

sign up for my newsletter about  
**Feminism and Business at  
[cvharquail.com](http://cvharquail.com)**

Join us in the  
**[Feminist Enterprise Collective](https://feministenterprisecommons.mn.co/feed)**  
<https://feministenterprisecommons.mn.co/feed>

