

Feminist Society Toolkit

What is this?

This toolkit will enable you to create inclusive feminist spaces and find out how to overcome potential challenges when setting up feminist societies. Also it's full of great suggestions on start-up events you could easily run on campus.

"Before going back to college, I knew I didn't want to be an intellectual, spending my life in books and libraries without knowing what the hell is going on in the streets. Theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together." - Assata Shakur

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Identifying your values
3. Creating a working group
4. Promoting your feminist society
5. Organising Events
6. Inclusive Feminist Campaigning
7. Intersectionality
8. Safer Spaces
9. Useful Links

Introduction

Feminist groups have historically played a key role in organising against sexism, misogyny and other forms of oppression. From co-ordinating panel events and reading group on campus, to taking direct action and marching the streets for Reclaim the Night - feminist societies have usually been at the forefront of activism on and off campuses.

Indeed, joining the feminist society at my university was perhaps one of the best experiences of my student life. For one, it changed my life completely. It allowed me to meet new people and build up my confidence, learn about the radical history of feminism and organise direct action. Most importantly, it gave me an opportunity to get involved and to thrive. I do not believe that I would be occupying the position of national women's officer had it not been for my feminist society.

However, I can appreciate that if you do not have a feminist society on your campus it can often be quite difficult to push for change.

That is why the NUS Women's Campaign have produced a short guide to setting up a feminist society on your university or college campus. It is filled with top tips on building an inclusive feminist group and ensuring that accessibility is placed at the core of your feminist organising.

A special thank you to all those who contributed to this guide - including Gina Cuomo from the Disabled Students' Campaign, Rowan Douglas and Amelia Horgan. This guide would not have been possible without you.

With love and solidarity,

Hareem Ghani (NUS Women's Officer)

Identifying your aims and values

Firstly it's important to establish why you want to set up a feminist group and what core values that group is going to be founded on. It's like creating a manifesto for your group so anyone who joins knows what you stand for and what to expect from the group in terms of activities and atmosphere.

If your students' union requires you to apply to become a recognised society, having clear aims and values will strengthen your argument to be ratified.

Examples of Aims and values

- Educating the student body about feminism
- Creating discussion spaces to talk about feminist issues
- Campaigning for Women's issues on campus
- Intersectionality
- Collaboration

Creating a working group

Whilst it's possible for you to start a feminist group alone, it makes more sense and is more inclusive to have a team of people from various intersections. This can be in the form of a committee or working group who are delegated tasks regularly in order to keep the feminist society functioning.

Examples of Roles

- Chair - point of call for student union communication and chairs the feminist groups committee meetings.
- Secretary - deals with correspondence and supports management and organisation.
- Media Officer - in charge of the feminist group's media outlets and communication
- Campaigns Officer - coordinated the campaigns of the feminist society
- Events Officer - responsible for the production of events, coordinating venues and catering etc
- Outreach Officer - organises collaborations with external groups in order to build a more inclusive feminist group
- Social Secretary - arranges social activities for the members of the group to attend

It might also be an idea to bring add 'Representatives' or 'Reps' to your Working Group. For example Trans(*) Rep, Black/People of Colour Rep, Mental Health Rep. This way you can make sure that marginalised voices get heard in your working group. It is essential that only people who self define into these groups can vote or run for this position.

Promoting your feminist society

It's important to create a method of promoting your feminist group events so that members and potential members are aware of the events, activities and campaigns that are going on.

On Campus

Advertise everywhere! It is easy to think that only people already involved in politics will be interested in Feminism - that could not be further from the truth. Reach out to sports societies, cultural societies and religious societies.

Get your SU involved! Ask your sabbatical officers to promote your society and campaign.

Off Campus

Contact local feminist societies

Online

- Society Email
- Facebook Page
- Facebook Group
- Twitter
- Instagram

Organising Events

When organising an event it is important to decide first on its aim.

Broadly speaking, feminist society events do one of the following things:

- **RAISING AWARENESS** of feminist issues nationally or globally
- **CAMPAIGNING** for women's issues on campus
- **EDUCATING** the student body on feminism/ womanism/ anti-sexism
- **DISCUSSING** women's issues and feminism.
- **CREATING** a safe space to talk casually about feminism and personal lived experiences.

It is important when you run an event to know which of these five things you are focussed on. For example, if you want a safe space to talk about sexism, you cannot expect members to also educate people in that space as a safe space is non-hierarchical. Similarly, some people will be interested in joining a feminist society because they want to raise awareness about a national campaign e.g. ending FGM. However other people will join a feminist society because they just want to discuss feminism and women's issues on campus.

To make sure you meet the needs of all people, it is best to run different events which have clear distinct aims.

Here is an example of different events that you could run on the same issue.

ISSUE: Ending the tax on periods

Raising Awareness: You can start a campaign to raise awareness about how menstrual products are taxed across the world and what people are doing to end the tax in government.

Campaigning on campus: You can petition the SU to supply menstrual products for free or tax free menstrual products.

Educating: Run an event where a speaker explains why it is unfair to tax menstrual products, invite everyone on campus! Create infographics to explain why the tax is bad.

Discussion: Run a panel discussion on the best ways to end period tax, how it affects certain people more adversely, why period tax is not a women's only issue.

Creating a safe space: Create a space where safe space rules are enforced clearly, have a non-hierarchical discussion about period tax and broader personal issues and how tax affects women and non-binary people. Have a member of your committee facilitate this event.

Social Events

- Zine Making
- Movie Trip
- Exhibition Trips

Inclusive Feminist Campaigning

Here are five general things that you should try to incorporate into your events or campaigns to make them more inclusive.

- Discussion — Create a space where women from different backgrounds are able to have input on the initial idea.
- Involvement — Try to make sure that a diverse range of women are involved in producing the campaign.
- Advertising — it is crucial that your campaign is advertised in a way that encourages all women to feel they can take part.
- Evaluation — Talk to various people about how they feel about your events and campaigns and how you can improve things from the perspective of inclusion.
- "Nothing about us, without us" - If you want to put on an event about a particular issue, you need to make sure people with lived experience of that issue get their voices heard e.g. an event on feminism in Islam must prioritise the voices of Muslim women and non-binary people.

Examples of Campaigns

- #FreePeriods
- This Girl Can
- Consent Education
- International Women's Day
- Women's History Month
- Black History Month
- LGBT+ History Month

Intersectionality

"Intersectionality" is a theory on how different forms of oppression manifest, intersect and impact on people's lives. The term was first coined in 1989 by the civil rights advocate and lawyer; Professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. However, the principle(s) of intersectionality were rooted in black feminist thought long before 1989.

When sexism and gender are discussed without also looking at other types of identities and oppressions, the dialogue often revolves around the experiences of the more privileged women in society. This can mean that the issues and experiences of the more socially marginalised women are overshadowed, dismissed or erased. Intersectionality is

understanding that one person's oppression will be different to another person's when multiple oppressions are at play. For example, gender and racial oppression will work together to make a Black woman's struggle different to a white woman's.

Intersectionality as a theory is not new, and it does not claim to be an instant solution that will solve everything. However, understanding how it can be used as a tool to explore identity, oppression and liberation can help you develop more diverse and inclusive campaigns. For more information, check out our [intersectionality toolkit](#)!

Inclusiveness and intersectionality may be some of your core values but it is important to reflect on how you are practicing these in each of your activities and at every decision you take. Without realizing it you may be excluding and oppressing women from making important contributions to your work. Below we explore what a truly inclusive feminist society means from three different perspectives; trans, disabled and sex worker

Why trans liberation matters

Trans women and transfeminine folks face a great deal of oppression in society and this leads to some pretty horrifying statistics:

- 41% attempted suicide rate (compared to 1.6% of cis people)
- 78% harassment in school
- Twice the rate of unemployment
- 19% at some point experiencing homelessness (of which over half have been harassed in shelters)
- 57% experience rejection by families

All of these statistics are compounded by other intersecting forms of oppression, in particular white supremacy

What you can do about it

Pronouns: One of the easiest ways you can be a good human being is by asking, respecting and at all times where possible remembering peoples gender pronouns (she/they/ze/xe/he/ey etc.). This means not sighing when you do pronoun circles, as well as not making huge amounts of drama when you inevitably get it wrong. Again, it is always better to ask!

Invite Us to Things: Put trans women on your committees. Not having a space specifically for DMAB (designated male at birth) trans people excludes them in the same way that feminist organisations have for decades. Don't just have one panel a year on 'trans issues', have interesting trans women talking about reproductive healthcare, feminist housing, motherhood, whatever on any of your panels for interesting, different, and important perspectives on all these issues.

Don't platform people that hate us: Nothing says "we don't care about trans women" than inviting Julie Bindel to a party. Building a culture in your FemSoc in which trans people feel welcome means not platforming the people that would deny them healthcare and access to resources such as domestic violence shelters nor those using slurs against them.

More top Tips

- Don't use phrases like "men and women" or "he or she" because it ignores all the people that are not men or women and those that don't use he or she pronouns
- Use the names/pronouns/gender descriptor that people tell you to
- Don't say "transgendered" or "cisgendered", being trans isn't something that does something to you, it is something you are (just like you wouldn't be a "talled" person, you're a tall person)
- Don't say transwoman or transman, it makes them seem like a category different to "real" (read: cis) men and women
- Don't say trans*, just use trans, the asterisk doesn't do anything
- Don't use terms like post-op, pre-op, MTF (male2female), or FTM (female2male), they focus on bodies and that upholds the idea that gender = sex = whether you have a penis
- If you really need to refer to the gender the doctors put on their birth certificates use the following constructions:
DMAB/DFAB – designated male/female at birth
AMAB/AFAB – assigned male/female at birth
CAMAB/CAFAB – coercively assigned male/female at birth
- Don't ask people (unless they are talking about it themselves) about their genitals, it's just weird. Same goes for transition-ey stuff like hormones/surgery, it brings out the dysphoria and sucks
- Don't tell trans people "how well we're passing" if they want to talk about how hot they are they will, it just brings attention to trans status when cis people do it

This has been adapted from [How to centre trans liberation in your FemSoc](#), please read for further information.

Why disabled liberation matters

1 in 5 people the UK is disabled so the issues your Feminist Society is campaigning on will affect disabled and neuro-diverse people, often disproportionately compared to their able bodied/neurotypical peers. Here are some statistics to put it in context;

- Adults with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely to be a victim of violence than those without a disability, while those with mental health conditions are at nearly four times the risk of experiencing violence.
- 80% of women with an intellectual disability have been sexually assaulted with 50% of them more than ten times.
- 50% of girls who are Deaf have been sexually abused.
- More than one in three people with mental illness have experienced domestic abuse in the past year with one in 20 people with mental illness have experienced sexual violence in the past year (Public Health England, 2015).
- Disability is one of the characteristics most closely associated with domestic abuse.
- Women with disabilities are often denied equal enjoyment of their human rights and face particular disadvantages in education, work and employment, family and reproductive rights, health, violence and abuse.

What you can do about it

Communication: It's important to remember that not all means of communication are accessible to people with disabilities.

- Facebook is difficult for blind and visually impaired people and can be challenging for some who struggle with social interaction/get socially anxious.
- Making videos with no audio captions is exclusionary to members of the d/Deaf community or those who struggle cognitively with watching and listening to a video at the same time.
- Some fonts are impossible for those with specific learning difficulties to read – accessible fonts for partially sighted and those with specific learning difficulties include Arial, Futura and Helvetica (any "sans-serif" font would work).
- Sharing a visual image? Write an image description and/or find an accessible link (for example, Wordpress, Tumblr, Twitter).
- Twitter is very accessible and email is also great. It is really important to actually consider "would anyone be able to access this information, regardless of ability?"

Language and Ableism: Ableism is the discrimination or prejudice against people who have disabilities. Ableism can take the form of ideas and assumptions, language, stereotypes, attitudes and practices, physical barriers in the environment, or larger scale oppression. Student activists frequently describe problematic behaviours using ableist language which can alienate disabled students and make them feel unwelcome.

- Avoid using ableist slurs. This is essentially describing something negative using a word that was originally a medical term to describe developmentally, learning and physically disabled or mentally ill people. Ableist terms include lame, mad, crazy, crippled, spaz, retard (anything -tard), wheelchair bound, differently abled, dumb etc. Not all of these are slurs but it is all language that perpetuates the ideas of ableism.
- If you are going to use ableist terms when discussing disability issues it is more appropriate to censor the language i.e. cr*ppld, d*mb etc. Some slurs such as "crippled" and "mad" have been reclaimed by the mobility impaired and mentally ill communities respectively, but if you are not a part of these then it's probably inappropriate for you to use them.
- Behaviours can also be ableist, with regards to how we treat disabled and mentally ill people. Watch [Unboxing Ableism](#) for a full explanation.

Accessible events: When discussing making your events accessible, it's not just about stairs and ramps. There are a lot of factors to consider – lighting, hearing loops, physical access, disabled toilets, noise, number of people, accessible transport, the list is pretty much endless.

- Actively communicate what access is available. Be open and honest and invite questions about accessibility because ultimately every disabled person has different access needs.
- If you are having an event such as a protest or an event designed to garner crowds of people, this is inherently inaccessible. Make sure you are producing a variety of events in an effort to be more inclusive or even alternative ways for

people to be involved without attending, for example live streaming or live tweeting events.

Value and Energy: It is essential to value the efforts of disabled activists, even if this energy is spent in doing the behind the scenes work or social media.

- Life in general can take more energy for disabled and mentally ill people meaning that they may be unable to participate in activism as much, this doesn't mean they are not as invested or care less. Be supportive of that and validate the efforts of everyone who contributes in any way to your activism.
- Don't be rude and abrupt when people don't use activist language correctly, make spelling or grammatical errors or screw up word order. You can ask for clarification if you are confused without attacking individuals.

This has been adapted from [Feminist Society Guide – Disabled Women](#), please read for further information.

Why sex workers' rights matter

- Of approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK, 85-92% are women
- Sex workers suffer high levels of rape and other violence. It is estimated that at least 152 sex workers have been murdered in the UK since 1990 and in London, sex workers are 12 times more likely than the general population to be murdered.
- Migrant women are increasingly at risk: 82% of sex workers killed between 2013-2015 were migrant women compared to none in the previous seven years.
- The number of prosecutions in of women working together in premises is on the rise – from 55 in 2014 to 96 in 2015 – with hundreds if not thousands more each year being criminalised. A criminal record can effectively bar sex workers from other jobs, making it much harder to leave sex work.
- When the state tries to reduce sex work or criminalise demand it makes it harder for sex workers to support each other, access support when they need it, reduces their power collectively and individually, and has ended up with migrant sex workers being deported.
- Decriminalisation is the best way to ensure that sex workers are safe, able to support each other, able to profit from their labour, and better protected from male violence (including state violence)
- Sex workers have been at the centre of feminist organising for a long time, yet feminist organising has all-too-often excluded them, presenting them as fallen women to be saved, or as undesirable sorts whose very existence degrades other women. Allowing sex workers to organise as workers through decriminalization and fighting stigma reduces the vulnerability of sex workers to exploitative labour practices and violence.

What you can do about it:

- Lift up the voices of those directly affected, but don't ever push people to disclose their status, or reveal someone's status.
- When you run events or talks think about how you can ensure sex workers aren't left out of the equation. For example, if you're running an event on workplace organising don't forget sex worker unions.
- Avoid using language like 'prostitution', 'sell herself/themselves'. Thinking that sex workers 'sell their bodies' but miners or labourers don't contributes to a culture

which sees sex workers as needing to be saved, and unable to understand what's good for them. Avoid conflating sex work and trafficking.

- Learn about the history of sex work, sex work organising, and sex workers in your FemSoc. For resources check out [Sex Worker Open University, English Collection of Prostitutes](#) and [Whores of Yore](#).
- Remember that many students are sex workers so don't present sex work as happening somewhere far away. Make sure your advice service, welfare officers, women's officers etc are able to provide support that is sensitive and tailored.

Safer Spaces

In feminist spaces, we are usually conscious of sexist situations, but often less aware when other types of oppressive language or attitudes are present. When spaces are made unsafe by oppressive behaviour it can result in marginalised groups feeling like they can no longer be a part of the conversation or group. This is why it is important to have a safer spaces policy in all campaigning spaces, either physical or online.

Sometimes people say or do offensive and discriminatory things, and no space can be called completely safe. However, it is important to prevent these things from happening as much as possible, to act properly when they do happen and to create a space where people feel comfortable confronting discriminatory behaviour and learning from mistakes.

Below, we've outlined key things to include in your safer spaces policy.

Introduction: Not everyone knows what a safer spaces policy is, so a brief introduction to explain what safer spaces means to your group would be helpful. For example, "Please note that this group is a safe space in which sensitive issues are sometimes discussed. Please be sensitive and respectful at all times."

Outline your stance against all types of discrimination: Make it clear that as a group, you recognise intersectional oppression as well as sexism and that you are against all types of oppression. Your students' union will probably have a policy around discrimination that you could use if you are having trouble with wording.

Trigger warnings: Ask people to use trigger warnings before saying or writing things that might be emotionally triggering (upsetting or bring back painful experiences). Explain what trigger warnings are and how they are used. For example, "Trigger warnings are used to inform people about potentially upsetting content, such as: racism, sexual violence, self-harm, eating disorders, etc. If something is potentially triggering, you should give a trigger warning before talking about the subject. This will give people who may feel uncomfortable discussing that topic a chance to say so, or to momentarily leave the space."

Warnings: You should explain how people will be warned if they break the safer spaces policy and what will happen if they continue to breach it. For example, "Anyone found in breach of the safer spaces policies will be warned. We have a three-strike policy. Strikes one and two will be accompanied by an official warning from the committee. Strike three will lead to a permanent ban from the group and all of its events."

Contact details: It is important to display the name(s) of who to contact if someone wants to report a breach of your safer spaces policy, raise a problem or requests a trigger warning on a particular topic.

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
 0845 5210 262
 nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk
