

Using Feminist Process to Challenge Oppression and Build Solidarity

Submitted by the Feminist Commission

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The culture of Solidarity – the way we interact with each other on the email lists, in national meetings, in many branches – is important to building trust, educating ourselves and sustaining our organization. It's not just political ideas that draw people to Solidarity and will encourage them to stay for the long haul, but also developing respectful comradely relationships. However, we do not yet have an organizational climate where most people feel respected, included, and welcomed. The way we treat each other, talk to and about each other, engage in debates/discussions, too often reflects the individualistic, competitive and hierarchical world in which we live much more than the democratic socialist world we aspire to build.

In the socialist tradition we inherited, issues are clarified through sharp debates and counter positions, in which one side politically defeats the other. We consciously chose to build a more inclusive socialist organization around a set of 12 points of unity. At our founding we said that we would live with a range of views and over time perhaps we could develop a more sophisticated and nuanced analysis that would prove superior to sharp polemics. Over the years Solidarity has attempted to grapple with certain habits of debate and discussion that epitomize left discussions but are not helpful in building a thoughtful and collective organization. We realize that those old habits reward talky, argumentative, college-educated white men but are not helpful in reaching out, drawing in and maintaining relationships with others who may well share our critique of capitalism. This is especially true in dealing with the inevitable difficulties of working with people across the divides of race/class/gender/sexuality.

Of course, the tiny island of our organization, embedded in a hierarchical, capitalist society cannot produce a socialist utopia. But, we can do a much better job in bringing socialist values into our organizational culture. One strategy for achieving this goal is to draw on feminist process.

What is Feminist Process?

Feminist process first emerged as a set of practices in women-only groups where people began to recognize that personal power dynamics were present even when men were absent. Over time, these ideas spread into other movements, while feminists borrowed ideas from other political traditions such as the popular education movement in Latin America (see, for example how bell hooks uses Paulo Freire in *Teaching to Transgress*) and the Quaker-influenced peace/non-violence movements (especially, consensus decision-making).

Feminist ideas about organizational process and culture were further enriched when women of color challenged white feminists to confront their unexamined racism. Feminists have contributed to and borrowed from the insights developed by consciousness-raising projects confronting white supremacy and trainings about how to work across race differences.

The practices that come out of this history are not difficult or complex to describe, but they take an effort to learn and to enact. This is because they are, in some respects, very different from the

modes of interaction that this society values and because they require a kind of self-awareness and self-consciousness that is neither taught nor encouraged in society or in many of our political organizations. These norms for interaction within an organization can start out feeling formulaic, too formal, and not genuine. But over time, as people act on them, like any other social practices, they come to feel more natural and personal.

The kind of self-awareness and self-consciousness that feminist, anti-racist process calls for concerns both thinking and feeling. In most of the revolutionary traditions we inherit, any attention to feelings is considered "apolitical," a distraction from real work. As the feminist phrase "the personal is political" encapsulates, however, the reality is that institutionalized power relations of the society shape our most personal interactions. Feminists have challenged the dualistic opposition of public/private and intellect/emotion. Feelings are always there and we bring them into any social interaction. The more we are aware of our own and others' feelings, the more capable we are of having a productive intellectual interchange.

First, people on the upside of power have to acknowledge and to recognize the many ways in which white privilege, middle-class privilege, heterosexual privilege, masculine privilege, gender normativity, etc. operate. This, of course, is complicated because almost everyone finds themselves in one way or another on both the "upside" and the "downside" of these relations. Second, we are called upon to acknowledge and deal with the emotional consequences of recognizing privilege and experiencing oppression. The left, because of the persistence of the masculinist culture which defined most of its history, is particularly resistant on this second point.

Let's indulge in some gross generalities for a minute to define a "masculinist" culture within capitalist society. Although mediated by race and class, a masculinist culture discourages the expression of strong feelings other than anger and hostility; values competitive striving more than taking care of others, and defines masculine potency as the ability to win in struggles with other men.

Women, of course, are perfectly capable of adapting to these values and behaving according to their terms; so we are not speaking here of men alone. Also, many men find themselves at odds with masculinist culture. Further, feminine culture has its own unique, and in some ways complementary distortions; so we are not talking about some sort of female superiority. Indeed, the very history of women's organizations demonstrates quite well that they are also subject to the unacknowledged play of power, privilege and aggression; unresolved and pernicious conflicts; and failures of empathy.

Feminist Process and the Establishment of Norms

Feminist process, then, is an attempt to identify a set of norms that can be used in any organization regardless of its gender composition. Feminist process validates and brings into focus the emotional underpinnings of our intellectual and political relationships. The goal of feminist process is to open up more space for participation and to create a climate where the least confident among us feels it is safe to speak up.

Comrades have expressed two main concerns about feminist process. One is that the organization will become too personalistic, or too internally focused. While this is a reasonable concern, we think our organization is so far from such outcomes that the likelihood of being depoliticized is minimal. Furthermore, we would argue that in the long run Solidarity will be far more effective politically as an organization, if we can develop social norms that allow us to address our interpersonal conflicts well, rather than having anger, hurt, and frustration boil over into sarcasm, blaming, snide remarks, and cliquishness.

Another concern that has been expressed is that social norms are not only gendered but also linked to class and racial/ethnic group cultures; therefore, in creating new social norms we will unwittingly impose norms of the dominant, white, middle-class culture. Again, this is a reasonable concern. However, the social norms that are suggested by feminist process and anti-racist dialogue have been successfully adopted and used by people of many different races and ethnicities. They have also proven to be a particularly successful foundation for creating and sustaining multi-racial organizations. From our experiences in working in and with these groups, we suggest that the social norms suggested by feminist process are not particularly a reflection of white, middle class culture but are instead part of the contemporary political culture of anti-racist and anarcho/socialist/radical feminist organizations.

One fundamental political insight of second wave feminism was that interpersonal relationships are a site where power operates. This insight has opened up new thinking about how organizations work, and, particularly how the social norms and culture of an organization can reproduce oppressive social relations or help people to challenge them. Solidarity has an honorable tradition of institutionalizing democratic process. But we have understood this goal too narrowly.

For example, we have tended to assume that if the rules allow for everyone to speak, then that is sufficient to ensure that people will step forward. In response to the clear tendency of men to speak more frequently than women, we've said that before another man can speak, the chair must ask if any women wish to speak.

What we have not analyzed is whether the ways in which we talk to each other are also a barrier to participation. Our practice indicates that many people in the organization have assumed that the best way to encourage women to speak is to train them to be tough-- that is, able to interact with others in a particular kind of masculine style. We have not considered whether we ought to question that style of debate and think about how it excludes not only women, but many other people from participation.

In the following section, we lay out some examples of what feminist process looks like in concrete terms. We focus attention on how we talk to each other, including how we interact one-on-one, as well as in branch meetings, NC meetings, conventions and other bodies. But there are many further avenues that could and should be explored to bring feminist process into the organization.

How We Talk with Each Other: Creating Respectful Dialogue

Our goal is to achieve respectful dialogue where every person feels affirmed in the value of their ideas and their contributions to the group. This means that we have to speak in certain ways and we have to hear/listen in certain ways. Respectful dialogue requires that even if we disagree with an idea or a behavior, we are very careful to not speak in a way that demeans the other person or their ideas. Respectful dialogue requires that we engage in active listening--a technique that helps us to be less defensive in responding to criticism or disagreement.

Respectful dialogue is especially important to modulate the impact of strong emotions that we often experience around conflicts--conflicts about ideas or conflicts about someone's behavior. But even without sharp conflict, people's identities, sense of worth and self, are often tied up with their ideas. So we should be mindful of our responsibility to support each other and to engage in arguments in ways that always acknowledge the value of one another's points of view.

We should expect our leadership (NC members, PC members, fraction conveners, branch execs, etc.) to be exemplary in modeling respectful dialogue.

Norms for Respectful Dialogue

Listen actively

Close, active listening requires us to focus on the person speaking rather than on what we might have to say and to reserve judgment until they have finished speaking and we are sure that we understand their point of view.

In group discussions, active listening requires minimally:

- No side conversations or note-passing
- Body language that indicates supportive attention (e.g., eye contact with the speaker)
- No body language that is derisive (sighs, eye-rolling, muttering under your breath, throw-away comments after the speaker is finished).

- Do not raise your hand to be recognized while someone is speaking. Wait until they are finished.

Share the air

Acknowledge your own social location and modify your participation accordingly.

Take responsibility for ensuring that those who are on the "downside of power" (in one way or another) are encouraged to speak.

Discussions can only take so much time; therefore, those who are more active speakers in the group need to create room for others to participate.

- If someone has already made the point you were going to make, do not speak--even if they were not as eloquent as you think you are.
- Try listening to an entire discussion before participating. See what happens.

Take responsibility for how everyone in the group experiences the discussion

Many people define leadership as the ability to articulate the ideas that will move the group forward. As such, they are often focused on getting their own ideas out as much as possible so that other people can have the benefit of hearing them.

There are, however, other models. As Barbara Ransby points out in her biography of the civil rights leader, Ella Baker, Baker conceptualized leadership as developing the capacity of others to articulate their ideas and she did this by engaging in a dialogue with them rather than telling them what she knew or thought.

Speak respectfully

Do not make attributions about people's motives.

This is generally a form of name-calling passing as analysis. We cannot know the reasons that a person expresses an idea or behaves in a certain way. Address the behavior/idea only and be specific.

Make I statements.

There is no privileged place of knowledge from which you speak, no matter how much you may know or think you know. "I think," "I feel," "from my experience," etc. are all ways of framing your speech that opens up space for the next person to engage in the dialogue.

When someone makes you angry, address the behavior, do not shame or blame others.

We all make mistakes and however angry another's mistake makes you, you have a responsibility to deal with them in as empathic a way as you can. For example, 'when you said or did X...when X happened...I felt....thought...'

If possible, try to say what would have worked better, suggesting alternatives or giving a specific example.

Do not be afraid to apologize or to ask for an apology.

Again, we will all make mistakes, so we need to acknowledge them without trying to excuse or rationalize our behavior--just saying you are sorry is good enough

And we need to accept other people's apologies and then move on.

Facilitate meetings well

Identify clear goals for the discussion. Take time to summarize where people are at. Check in about process during the discussion.

Allow enough time for thorough discussion.

When planning meetings, realize that a really good discussion will take a lot of time. It is better to have fewer discussions where more people can participate. Having enough time also helps to lower the emotional tone because people are less likely to become frustrated.

Respect the people chosen to facilitate the discussion.

Unless a facilitator asks for your input, allow them to do their job. Do not interrupt, call out, or

otherwise undermine their authority. Facilitators should regularly check-in with the group. That allows for a space where those who want to suggest a different course of action can make that suggestion.

We believe that by paying attention to how organizations work, feminist process has the potential to help Solidarity thrive. An organizational culture and functioning that encourages broader participation in our discussions and debates will also broaden and improve Solidarity's political analysis and strategies.

We think the social norms proposed here will help Solidarity:

- Work across our race/gender/sexuality/class differences in ways that are emotionally supportive and therefore more productive
- Be much more skilled at handling conflicts--over behavior as well as over ideas
- Create an organizational culture where every person feels that they have important ideas and something to offer the group

We need to create an organization where how people feel about themselves and their comrades, and therefore the group, is as important to us as what they think. It is a hallmark of masculinist functioning when comrades do not take it as a *political* responsibility to care about and attend to each others' feelings. This way of doing politics simply reproduces the gendered division of labor in society, where taking care of people and attending to emotions is a devalued feminine responsibility.

Everyone agrees that Solidarity should try to change our social composition so that we are more working class, younger, more female, more Black and Brown. The social norms proposed above are an important step in that direction. Feminist process will help us not only to be more aware of how privilege operates, but more skilled in working with each other in emotionally supportive ways.