A Guiding Document for how to Hold Feminist Spaces for Healing

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Women’s Fund Georgia

Georgia
Women’s fund in Georgia (WFG) sees healing and care as integral values and principles for feminist movement building.

Defending human rights is intensely rewarding work. It is also difficult and is often dangerous. These aspects of the work are hard to talk about. Rarely, if ever, do women human rights defenders have the time, or the safe spaces, to reflect on their security and well-being in a meaningful way.

Throughout the years WFG has worked on addressing this need in different ways by giving it visibility in feminist debate in Georgia, by integrating the aspects of well-being in funding and capacity development interventions and by taking on the endeavor of building a feminist safe house. The construction of the safe house successfully continues. The outer facade is fully completed, doors and windows are installed and internal works are launched. As of 2023, the floors are being laid, an outside building is planned to be built (a technical building and a kitchen). Dining
room and Bathrooms are almost completed. Trees are being planted in the garden. WFG also plans to build a meditation space and a conference room in an additional building.

One of the most important ways for WFG to engage with the issue of feminist healing and care has been to provide Integrated Security Workshops for feminist activists and WHRDs in Georgia since 2015. The purpose of the workshops is to create safe space for activists, where they can reflect on their personal and public life and integrate self and collective care practices on different levels.

The ISW analysis showed that even though it is a vital space for mobilizing, it is not enough in terms of integrating healing and well-being principles in a wider movement context. Thus, in 2020 WFG, together with partners and Georgian healers have started working on the healing concept, rooting it in the local, ancestral experience and wisdom.

This work culminated in the creation of a manual on healing and local practices named the Book of Healers. The process of the manual development included the preparation work, defining specific objectives and selecting experts to be involved.

Three groups were identified to be involved in the development process:

// A group of local practitioners who work using different methodologies and mediums.

// A group of feminist activists who have contributed with their experiences on care, trauma, healing and related issues;

// A group of experts, which included feminists from different parts of the world.
The experts in question have provided 3 webinars for the group of practitioners and activists:

- **Cara Page – Healing Justice, the herstory of the concept;**
- **Sandra Ljubinkovic and Bojana Glusac – deepening practices for feminist activists, centering ourselves and dealing with traumatic experiences;**
- **Cynthia El Khoury – Trauma informed modalities, personal experiences;**

The knowledge from the webinars was later on translated into the Book of Healers as well as the set-up of the subsequent healer retreat. The extensive 5-day meeting took place in December 2021 (details are elaborated in the report). Georgian healers, practitioners, feminist activists and witches gathered to further the manual topics into practice and to create a community, which will evolve collectively and will learn from each other.

The purpose of both the book and the collective work carried out at the retreat was and remains creation of safe space for feminist activists to discuss care, healing, burn-out, [generational] trauma, existing systems that we operate in, possible alternatives, local practices, witchcrafts and instruments to deal with all the above mentioned.
This module is inspired by the work done by the Women’s Fund in Georgia since 2015 and at the feminist healing retreat that took place in December 2021.

The module is meant to serve as a guide to support feminists who work in various capacities to hold healing containers in their respective fields. The guide is not limited to workshop models but is intended to serve as a space of creativity, reflection, and adaptability to the spaces that feminists who do work in social justice, healing justice and environmental justice hold.

**How to read the module**

You can read it as a compass or an inspiration for the work that you aspire to create in your spaces. The reflections and exercises are for you to use and adapt to your settings and to your communities. The emphasis of this guide is to present you with feminist ways of creating safer containers to explore healing justice work in your own settings.

**When and how to use this document**

The module is intended to help you in your creative process and provides examples of the work that has already been conducted in a feminist healing justice retreat space for reflection and action. You can use this manual for work meetings, retreats, workshops, hangouts and across the areas of community organizing.

**Intention of space holding**

When calling in individuals and communities to healing spaces, organizers need to clearly communicate the intention behind their invitation. An intention can help you as an organizer to establish with clarity with yourself and with your audience what holds a value to you, what you intend
When inviting members of communities to take part in a space one needs to start by laying foundations of where people are entering both in a physical and mental/emotional/spiritual sense. Preparatory work needs to be done to meet the accessibility needs of the participants. This includes language accessibility, physical accessibility, as well as making the space welcoming for participants with different levels of emotional well-being, shaping the program in a way that allows them to rest, sleep and eat without stress.

Once at the venue, take your time to communicate who is here and what they can expect from the time spent together. We recommend that common values are laid out, beyond making introductions and slowly creating room for people to get to know one another:

// What are the values that inform the way that you hold space for the community that you are gathering?

// How can you integrate the participants’ preferences and points of views?
Both facilitators and participants can be invited to share their wishes and expectations for the group and the time spent together in a form of a wish, an incantation or in other textual/verbal formats. Some examples from the feminist healing retreat held in 2021 can be seen below:

- "may our mind expand"
- "may our soul become refined"
- "may our body prosper"
- "may our heart be filled with joy"
- "lightness in heavy times"
- "serenity in anxious times"
- "order in chaos and chaos in order"
- "spaciousness in closed spaces"
- "care in troubled times"
- "love in time of hardships"
- "light in the dark"
At the end of the retreat/program, participants and facilitators can be invited to share the wishes and expectations for future. Some examples can be seen below:

*With love and hope: may this group become our (and not only) haven, that will bring us back into peace, strengthen our faith in future and will make the road ahead easier. May we be enveloped by the healing practices so they permeate our bodies and actions and become an undivided part of us.*

*May this group be charged with healing energy, that is shared with everyone who comes in touch with it. May this energy be infinite and never be exhausted.*

*a traditional Georgian incantation, not translatable*

*May the group have the wisdom*
Themes and layout

The themes or exploration topics that groups can address in healing justice work depend on the community with which you are doing the work, your expertise, knowledge, and sense of ease in the material that you want to present along with what is relevant for a particular moment in time. It is always wise to remember that when in doubt, you can rely on asking those who wish to be present in the room what they would like to get out of being in a healing justice space. Once at the venue, take your time to communicate who is here and what they can expect from the time spent together. We recommend that common values are laid out, beyond making introductions and slowly creating room for people to get to know one another:

What do you desire to deepen knowledge or experience in?

What would be supportive to you at this moment in time?
### Example of a Layout

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intergenerational trauma</strong></td>
<td>Telling the story of your ancestors, showing an object, introductory presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lineage Line;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forming a collective</strong></td>
<td>Team-building activities</td>
<td>Importance of feminist space; joint work on rules of being in this space</td>
<td>Drawing/painting exercise: what is safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radical rest</strong></td>
<td>Self-care and its political importance</td>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>Collective care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative economic systems</strong></td>
<td>What is money and what is the alternative to money; my first memory in relation to the money, my current attitude to money</td>
<td></td>
<td>Healing practices; The economy of self-care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feminist activism</strong></td>
<td>Internal and external challenges</td>
<td>Ways of integrating healing justice into the feminist activism</td>
<td>Experiences of vulnerable communities (such as queer community)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciation / gratitude, privilege and unity</strong></td>
<td>Culture of appreciation, cultural environment, impact of the system and power of resisting it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political body/entity</strong></td>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Connection to one’s body</td>
<td>Emotions, feelings, thoughts (connecting the rational and the emotional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connection with nature</strong></td>
<td>Reconnecting to the nature</td>
<td></td>
<td>Qigong</td>
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</table>
Upon opening the space, a space holder needs to acknowledge and anchor the work in the feminisms that are present in the room. When attendees can relate to the politics and the values of everybody else, a container of harmony and trust can start being created. Healing justice is a concept that is quite specific to the geopolitical spaces and we encourage you to explore your own understanding and contexts.

**Feminist Foundations of healing justice**

Trauma, stressors and any other hurtful event that happened in a community or on an individual level can and will impact the way that communities connect or not with one another. They also impact and at times direct the way that communities ask for their rights. In healing containers, we acknowledge the magnitude of impacts and examine with care how not to do harm to participants. While trauma has become a popular theme in today's activist

**Note:**
While the teams in this chart are not arranged in particular order, note that it is preferable to have team building-related activities in the beginning of the retreat/workshop.

// What is healing justice to the community that you are doing the healing work with?

// Why is healing a feminist act?

**Holding space for trauma and complex emotions**
spaces, only skilled professionals and individuals who have been undergoing trauma healing can support someone who is actively suffering. The healing spaces should not in any way open spaces of wounds that they cannot tend to or close. That is why it is of high care for facilitators and space holders to ask with caution the questions that they want to explore. We encourage you to link these questions with the intention(s) that you had set when calling for the space.

// What might we come up against when working with activists and feminists?

// What are violent and traumatic memories we need to be mindful of?

// How can we address oppression and trauma in a caring way?

// How to hold the space for those discussions without re-traumatising?
Our right to abundance

Oftentimes we observe that women, queer and gender-diverse folks have inherited shame and a taboo when it comes to asking for money. That is why, a feminist healing space needs to assert the right to abundance by countering the narrative of the taboo that most communities have when talking about money and asking for one’s right for fair compensation and a luscious livelihood. At the same time, a conversation on abundance needs to be anchored in the sustainability of the resources of the planet and linked to the local, regional, and global economy. For example, crises, wars, pandemics and the destruction of the natural environment and capitalism can all affect our perception of our right to abundance.

What are the blockages of the community?

What are the tools that support blockage release?

How can communities find sustainability in their internal and external resources?

How to support activists to shift mindset towards abundance?

What are the systems that we dream of and can create in our movements? What models can we come up with for abundance?
The space we inhabit, nurture and preserve

Often, feminists do not necessarily consider themselves environmental justice activists yet when exploring topics of rituals, roots, and healing, we find that we all inherently have a connection that bonds healing justice to practices with nature. A healing justice container needs to anchor its practice in the locality as the earth body is the space where the healing takes place. It is the space of ancestry, folk tales, and of healing. Healing justice can help us anchor our bigger connection to the communities of fauna and flora and make us feel supported and nurtured.

What are the healing practices and ways to hold space to discuss environmental justice issues?

Can we find ways of connecting with nature and environmental justice issues that give us energy and hope?

How do you connect to nature? Can you name one plant ancestor? What is one traditional form of healing you would like to name?

If something is disappearing, how do you preserve it? What is your story of preservation and hope?

How do you envision the connection between the healing that you practice and nature?
Debrief and taking time for self

Space holders need to take the time to rest during the days that they hold the work. They must also keep practices of boundaries or rituals that support them to stay in their own experiences and not take on those for others. Self-compassion is of high importance when doing the work of feminist healing. We need to model the care that we give for ourselves as the care that we wish that our communities and peers have for themselves.

What are your practices of care that keep you grounded and nourished?

How can you sustain them when doing this kind of work? What kind of support do you anticipate? And how can your needs be met?

Tools

There is a wide variety of tools and methods one can use to explore the themes and processes listed in this module. In this section we bring you some practical suggestions offered by the practitioners that have participated in creation of different materials surrounding the Healing Justice Manual and Retreat. Some of the tools can be used in group settings, some are more suited for self-help, but they can still be taught within the frames of the module.

Grounding is a simple tool helping distance from emotional pain, shifting focus from inside to outside and on here and now instead of the past. Used in for trigger exposure, rage, disassociation or other strong negative emotions, as well as chronic anxiety. This can be exercised in group, but is also a good self-help practice.
Some examples include:

**Mental grounding**

- Describing one’s surrounding environment, using all the senses, focusing on texture, temperature, form etc.
- Playing with categories and classifications: list all the dog breeds, street names, cities, words that start with S etc.
- Remember the recipe of your favourite dish and go through the way of preparing it
- Say "I am (name), I am at (place), I am safe, today is (date, month, year) etc"
- Reading any sentence backwards

**Physical grounding**

- Grip an object tightly
- Touch different objects and focus on the feeling
- Press your heels into the ground
- Jump
- Scan your body for feeling in different parts of it – feet that touch the ground, back that touches the chair etc
- Focus on your breathing
**Calming grounding**

- **Tell something nice to yourself**
- **Imagine the faces of loved ones or look at the photos**
- **Remember positive quotes from favorite novels or poems, or private conversations**
- **Think about a place where you feel calm and describe it to yourself**
- **You can also use the grounding exercise S.T.O.P**

Throughout the meeting/retreat while the participants share the space, it is good for the facilitators to invite them to propose and hold energizers and grounding exercises for the group. In order to avoid putting pressure on the participants, facilitators should have several exercises set aside in case no one volunteers. It can also be helpful to communicate to participants ahead of time that they are welcome to share some practices and energizers or grounding exercises within the frames of the shared space.
Both facilitators and participants, while offering grounding exercises or energizers should shortly explain what the practice entails, ideally give an alternative based on people’s mobility and other conditions that may prevent them from performing a specific practice. For example, focusing on breathing for instance, as innocent as it may sound, may cause anxiety in certain people.

Additionally, participation should always be optional and participants who do not feel comfortable following the specific practice, should be invited to do grounding and energize in their own preferred way.

While working with intergenerational (and other types of) trauma, practitioners may use methods such as psychotherapy/group therapy and/or other more complex methods of tackling trauma. Practitioners consider group therapy to be an important instrument for dealing with collective trauma, however due to its complex nature, this kind of work should be guided by experienced specialists in the field.

Consider also, that this is an area that surpasses the scope of one training program, but it can be considered for future references (starting with smaller groups and offering individual therapy for particularly severe cases).

Many also work with spiritual helpers (internal child, ancestor etc) – can be helpful in overcoming generational trauma. This can be done through the so called re-parenting practice, that consists of 5 steps and aims at becoming one’s own positive parent. After that for about a month, the person communicates with the internal child in writing, to learn more about wishes and ways of granting them, resulting in the adult automatically having the child’s best interest while making decisions.

Some other activities that were suggested for working on collective trauma:
Trauma focused yoga, which helps the person ground and re-establish contact with their body and ground;

Exercises aimed at regaining control over one’s body, as this is connected with feeling safe and secure, reconnect with past experiences. In body-oriented psychotherapy different exercises such as centering on one’s body, grounding, movement, breathing exercises, relaxation etc are used;

Art therapy techniques assists people in overcoming trauma, especially exercises aimed at expressing one’s trauma in more tangible way through color, texture, form etc. There can also be attached the symbolic burning of the work to let go of trauma;

Writing therapy practice, expressing one’s trauma in writing, whichever form one chooses

How do you envision the connection between the healing that you practice and nature?

Sound therapy techniques helps clean and balance energy – for instance, singing bowls can be used.
In order to maintain the energy and the mood in the group, as well as give space for everyone to come to the circle with full awareness and have space to deal with emotions that arise in the process, meditation practices and mindfulness are particularly important. Generally there are different ways of practicing meditation and mindfulness, there are exercises helping work on the energy of the heart, as well as meditation practices aimed at balancing chakras.

An example of simple meditative exercise can be imagining a place somewhere in nature, imagining purple clouds, purple raindrops, feeling those raindrops on one's body, becoming covered in those purple drops and slowly returning to reality. Purple and water both have cleansing power and this meditation is very helpful in many different situations.

There are other healing practices that can be meditative or connected to mindfulness for some, such as:

/// **Physical activity** - yoga, walking, but also other types of physical activity, depending on personal needs, conditions and wishes

/// **Creating a peaceful and harmonious environment** in spaces where we sleep and work

/// **Other types of self help practices, such as keeping a diary or doing individual exercises** that help us work on ourselves

An important segment of the work is connected to appreciation of one's inner strength and oneself aimed at cultivating/improving self-confidence and self-love. This can be done through different tools:
Affirmations: "I am strong, I am free, I am strong. I love myself. I deserve to be happy" etc.

Mirror exercise: Repeating positive, affirmative sentences while looking one’s reflection in the eye, daily for 10-15 minutes

Positive list: thinking about one’s problems and listing the opposite a.k.a what do we want to get if the problem is resolved
I should: writing things that you think you must/should do, then write why you think you should do them. After this, you make a second list where you write what you REALLY want to do and achieve for yourself and not because others want you to.

Wheel of life: helps evaluate one’s current condition and focus on future. What I want to achieve in the next year. You choose 8-10 areas, such as love, career, health, development etc. You evaluate the current state of each of those areas on the scale between 1-10. Then we choose one area to focus on and observe over time, how increase in this one area positively affects others.

Rituals created during the 2021 Feminist healing retreat

Planting ritual – can be used in the beginning section to set wishes for the group and the shared space
**Fountain Meditation** – can be used either as a beginning or the end of diverse sessions

*We sit. We are grounded. We breathe and imagine a hill.*

On this hill there is a fountain. The water in the fountain represents the collective energy of our ancestors. You can wash your hands or face with this water. Having done that you come down from the hill and ancestors on both sides of your parents complete a circle they open up their hearts and give love. You open your heart in response and share your love. When this love unites into one, you feel good. You feel that you are healing. You feel that any blockages you have are releasing. The flow of energy is restored.

*You say goodbye to the ancestors with gratitude.*

*Your access to this place remains and you can get there if you need it.*

*We plant any seed and say: I plant my future happiness, my success, my well-being and prosperity. From this seed I will get plentiful and generous harvest, strong health and happy life.*
The Utsuna and Plantago Ritual – can be used to conclude the discussions about holding space for trauma

We walk in a circle. We breathe. We feel grounded. We observe how we feel in our bodies. Each of us has a part of the incantation written down. We start pronouncing the words in order.

I grew out of the ground
my veins are many
my skin is green
my flower is a ripe grain spike
touching me heals
I cure injuries
I put out inflammations
I tame the anxiety
I chase away the sleeplessness
I bring serenity
I am a child of nature
generous
healing
Utsuna
The firefly meditation can be used either as a beginning or the end of diverse sessions. We sit in a circle, close our eyes and pay attention to our breathing. Breathe in through the nose, breathe out through the mouth.

Imagine entering a dark forest. As we go deeper into the forest we continue to focus on our breathing. We breathe in the forest air, hear the forest sounds, birds chirping, moss, leaves and moss under our feet.

Gradually the sounds subside and darkness grows and as we come to a tree that stands out for us, that attracts our attention we realize that we are enveloped by silence and darkness. We approach the tree. We touch it. We may even hug it. We focus on our breathing. We focus on silence and the darkness and as it becomes total, we see tiny fireflies appear and multiply in front of our eyes. They grow in numbers and unite into a big ray of light.

Georgian song Chemo Tsitsinatela (My Firefly) starts.
Afterword

This module is a result of the authors’ experience, as well as collective reflections and work carried out during the Healer’s Retreat taking place in winter 2021. The participants of the retreat, healers and activists themselves are owed gratitude and acknowledgment for the richness of discussion and amazing new rituals they have shared with us, and allowed to share with the readers of this module.

While the present module lists specific tools, themes and exercises, we hope that the reader will be able to use it both as an orienting tool, as well as an inspiration to create something new. We also hoped to show that there is a wide spectrum of practices and practitioners covering a wider range of topics pertaining to healing justice, that can be successfully brought in and integrated in the process. There is no one way to heal and no one way to care for oneself and for the community. We all have our own healing path, and understanding the crucial role of collective healing and care is a great starting point. We hope to be able to help guide the first steps along this road.