



Fostering Mental Well-being and Collective Care in the Workplace

**A Feminist Guide
for Civil Society Organisations**



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Fostering Mental Well-being and Collective Care in the Workplace: A Feminist Guide for Civil Society Organisations

October 2023

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1. Introduction

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) presents this guide as an introductory resource for organisations striving to enhance their work environments. We hope it will foster policies, mechanisms, and tools that promote safety and support in the workplace, encompassing both group and individual care, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the psychological well-being of workers in civil society organisations.

This guide was developed in partnership between Dr. Kholoud Saber and WILPF, initially stemming from the acknowledgment of the psychological care requirements identified by Syrian women's organisations operating under WILPF's **Feminist Movement for Change in Syria** project. Its key purpose has then evolved into an initiative to establish an initial framework, offering several guiding principles that aim to cultivate supportive work environments within women's organisations active in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Drawing primarily from accumulated feminist knowledge in the mental health domain, the guide adopts an integrative approach. It perceives mental health as a multifaceted, political, and feminist issue necessitating a careful analysis of intersectional structural elements that include the work environment and the economic, social, and cultural contexts. In this discourse, mental health is regarded as a shared responsibility among individuals and the societies they inhabit.

Our objective is to establish sustainable, structural support systems that empower individuals to manage stress effectively, sustain productivity, and mitigate associated psychological burdens. Throughout the guide, crucial theoretical insights facilitate the comprehension of mental health within work environments. Additionally, a set of guiding principles aids in evaluating the existing state of such environments. These insights and principles also serve to pinpoint significant opportunities and challenges, particularly concerning the prevailing stigma towards mental health within work environments. Subsequently, plans are devised to bolster the psychological well-being of employees, elevate the quality of collective and individual care rendered, and consequently foster safer and healthier work environments.

The first section of the guide addresses the overarching framework, primary objectives, and ensuing methodology. The subsequent section delves into fundamental concepts that underpin a supportive work environment that prioritises mental health, as well as the sequential stages of change that can be adopted to construct and sustain such an environment.

“Mental health is a multifaceted, political, and feminist issue necessitating a careful analysis of intersectional structural elements that include the work environment and the economic, social, and cultural contexts.”

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This guide embraces a contextual-feminist standpoint. It not only rejects exposing individuals to severe psychological harm in work environments, but also advocates for a supportive and nurturing atmosphere. Such an environment should facilitate recuperation and the attainment of improved psychological equilibrium, enabling a harmonious integration of activism with personal and social responsibilities, alongside professional roles.

2.1 Why do we need to talk about mental health today more than ever?

In recent years, significant attention has been directed towards mental health in the workplace. This focus intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was accompanied by transformative shifts in the work environment and its dynamics. These changes have led to profound psychological consequences for employees and have impacted work relationships. Numerous studies and research papers have emerged investigating the intricate psychological implications of the COVID-19 pandemic across diverse societies. They have also delved into the multifaceted challenges linked to work and professional life.



Among the effects that have come to the fore are,

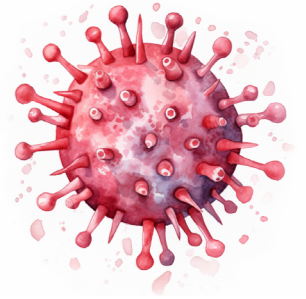
- occupational burnout,
- reduced work motivation,
- workplace conflicts,
- challenges in maintaining productivity while working from home during lockdowns,
- blurring boundaries between professional and personal life,
- the absence of social interaction and support from colleagues in the workplace — which often reduces the stress and fatigue, and acts as a buffer against work-induced psychological burnout

These studies have not only addressed the impact of the pandemic but have also sparked broader discussions about mental health in the workplace. Such discussions have shed light on several factors that directly impact the psychological well-being of employees, aspects that might not have been comprehensively understood previously.

Recently, it has been recognised that seemingly simple interactions such as morning chats over coffee, lunchtime conversations, or even morning greetings play a crucial role in cultivating a familiar work environment. These interactions foster a sense of belonging to a collective and fuel the motivation to sustain productivity. Moreover, the exchange of updates regarding work projects and the sharing of perspectives on these matters contribute to enhancing camaraderie among team members.

This, in turn, aids in forging a shared understanding of “**work values**” and gives rise to a cohesive “**work culture**.” Ultimately, this culture shapes the dynamics among individuals working within the same organisation.

In sum, the changes accompanying the pandemic have opened a wide and intensive dialogue about the need to put mental health in the workplace as a top priority on the agendas of those concerned with mental health, as well as on the agendas of the departments of various institutions and agencies. This dialogue has developed into a mobilisation of efforts to develop policies, systems, and mechanisms for collective care, and to support self-care. Such efforts have not only aimed to deal with the psychological consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, but also to create healthier and more balanced work environments in general – ones that support individuals’ sense of balance and psychological well-being.



Nevertheless, despite tangible progress in promoting mental health awareness within the workplace, several issues and concepts still lack adequate attention, particularly those extending beyond purely psychological realms. These are factors related to the structure and essence of the workplace, and determining whether it serves as a safe and healthy environment capable of supporting its members in effectively managing work pressures; or it evolves into an unsafe work environment fraught with conflicts, issues, and harmful power dynamics. This reality constitutes not only a risk factor for the psychological well-being of workers, but also poses a threat to the overall sustainability of the team or organisation as a whole. In this context, we observe that values such as clarity, transparency, and justice have a pivotal significance that cannot be detached from discussions surrounding mental health in the workplace. Moreover, the means to activate these values and their embodiment through clear and effective policies and practices constitute integral elements in the assessment of work environments from a mental health standpoint.

Hence, this guide’s scope extends beyond addressing solely the psychological issues most closely associated with work-related stress—such as **job burnout**, **anxiety**, or **diminished work motivation**. It equally encompasses a structural vantage point: delving into the framework that shapes the nature of the work environment and determines its characteristics. This framework essentially distinguishes between the creation of a secure, healthful, and supportive work environment, or one that lacks these attributes.


In conjunction with these paramount factors, what remains is to define the framework from which the criteria for appraising work environments stem. This framework serves as the backdrop against which strategies to enhance and refine these work environments are formulated. The cognitive framework holds considerable significance as a theoretical reference, illuminating our precise conception of a healthy and secure environment.

Moreover, it delineates the responsibilities of the various stakeholders within the work environment and steers the implementation of strategies aimed at enhancing the work atmosphere and fostering interpersonal dynamics among individuals within the workplace.



2.2 What is a feminist approach to psychological well-being in the workplace?

A considerable portion of the available mental health literature within work environments adheres to a neoliberal framework. This framework primarily centres on augmenting the productivity of workers and employees, both women and men, or minimising the risk of skills attrition due to worker disengagement. Alternatively, some evidence takes on a psycho-medical perspective, exclusively concentrating on psychological and mental symptoms outlined in psychiatric diagnoses. Such an approach can link symptoms to work-induced stress or workplace conflicts, but fails to explore broader factors such as shared values within the workplace or the encompassing geographical, political, and social context.




In contrast, this guide embraces a contextual-feminist perspective. It not only rejects exposing individuals to severe psychological harm in work environments, but also advocates for an environment that nurtures and supports workers, enabling healing and fostering improved psychological balance. This equilibrium facilitates the integration of activist, personal, and social roles alongside professional responsibilities. This approach also focuses on the necessity for workplaces to provide avenues for growth, facilitating self-development and learning. Thus, this guide does not perceive employee mental health solely through the lens of institutional achievements or the enhancement of their capacity for ongoing productivity. Instead, it recognises mental health care—akin to physical health care—as an inherent entitlement for workers. Consequently, resources must be allocated to meet the basic requirements of mental health care in an organised and sustainable manner.

A contextual-feminist approach also strives to understand the impact of political, social, cultural, and economic contexts on individual mental health. Gender roles, along with related societal expectations and norms, emerge as major determinants of mental well-being, or lack thereof. When examining instances of psychological distress among women and men—such as depression symptoms, anxiety, or psychological responses to traumatic events—a noticeable divergence between the genders becomes apparent. These distinctions are not regarded as personal predicaments or individual experiences attributable to a deficit in the appropriate psychological framework. Rather, they are recognised as political issues reflecting cultural patterns tied to how genders are socialised, and encompassing the methods each gender adopts to manage and express emotions. These concerns are intertwined with societal expectations and specific codes of conduct linked to gender roles.

In sum, a feminist perspective prioritises healing from encounters of violence and trauma, and the provision of gender-sensitive psychosocial support. This approach allows individuals, especially those most susceptible to systemic violence such as women and non-binary individuals, to navigate stress and trauma. Within this feminist paradigm, attending to emotions assumes a paramount role, as it empowers feminist and women's rights advocates to sustain their demands and endure the workload. In the context of mental health in the workplace, this perspective demands that civil society workers give precedence to mental well-being and healing which, in turn, can enable them to pursue their work without jeopardising their mental and physical health.

The feminist perspective views individual mental well-being as a shared responsibility, encompassing both the individual and the collective to which they belong, which demands systemic and structural attention within institutions. Such an approach is necessary to establish secure and supportive work environments that foster understanding and solidarity among peers and within the social context. By addressing this responsibility in a comprehensive and organised manner, these environments can offer individuals the confidence and assurance required to navigate personal emotions within the work environment, including emotions concerning work matters and interactions with colleagues and co-workers.



In the context of Syria, and particularly within civil society organisations dedicated to women's issues, there is a prevalence of severe psychological stress among a majority of workers. The severe psychological stress experienced by most employees in those institutions, as well as the instances of organisational conflicts and tension witnessed by some in recent years, are manifestations of not giving individuals' mental health sufficient attention. This lack of attention, coupled with the absence of effective policies and mechanisms, leaves people ill-equipped to confront adversities, stressors, work pressures, and the traumatic environment in which they operate.

Numerous risk factors compound the likelihood of exposure to stress, burnout, or psychological trauma. These factors include the issues that an organisation addresses, such as violence, forced displacement and migration, detention, torture, loss, and enforced disappearances, or issues of violence against women, whether by the Syrian regime, armed groups, or deeply ingrained societal patriarchal norms. These heavy and emotionally charged subjects often directly impact the mental well-being of the people working in these fields.

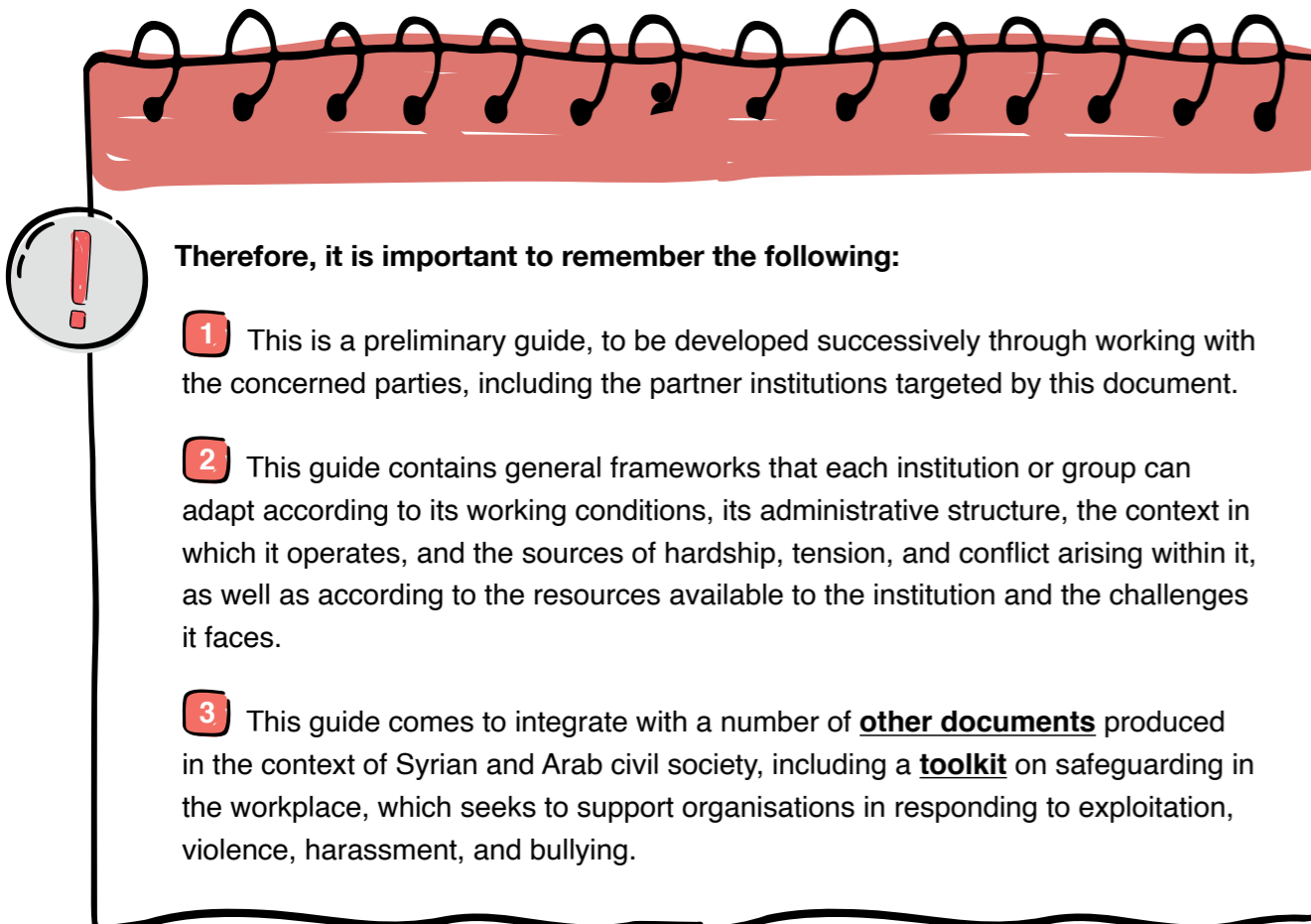
Another risk factor is that many of those engaged in this type of work are themselves survivors, often burdened with severe traumatic experiences related to war and displacement, and might not have had adequate opportunities to heal from these experiences. Moreover, many activists live in difficult economic and social conditions in countries of refuge and asylum. All of these conditions are a constant source of additional stress and tension, thus constituting a general mental health risk factor for civil activists and workers.

Hence, the ability of institutions or individuals to remain productive and active in civil society, especially on women's issues, is dependent on the development of suitable mechanisms and tools for addressing well-being. These tools should operate on two levels: 1) the collective or institutional, and 2) the individual with institutional support. The purpose here is to supply essential psychological support to individuals, facilitate their healing from past experiences and, as much as possible, and shield them from the psychological impact of working on addressing feminist issues. These mechanisms should further aid in managing the attendant psychological stress.

2.3 What is the main purpose of this guide?

This guide is sought to be an introduction that interested organisations can rely on to make their work environments better and more supportive of mental health. It presents frameworks that can be used to develop policies and mechanisms for collective and individual care with the aim of improving the level of psychological well-being of working teams.

Although we are aware of the overlapping set of issues related to creating a safe and healthy work environment, and the elements that affect the psychological health of workers, this guide will not cover all important topics, nor will it engage with all aspects that make up the work environment in the same degree of detail.



Therefore, it is important to remember the following:

- 1 This is a preliminary guide, to be developed successively through working with the concerned parties, including the partner institutions targeted by this document.
- 2 This guide contains general frameworks that each institution or group can adapt according to its working conditions, its administrative structure, the context in which it operates, and the sources of hardship, tension, and conflict arising within it, as well as according to the resources available to the institution and the challenges it faces.
- 3 This guide comes to integrate with a number of **other documents** produced in the context of Syrian and Arab civil society, including a **toolkit** on safeguarding in the workplace, which seeks to support organisations in responding to exploitation, violence, harassment, and bullying.

2.4 How can you benefit from this guide?

The guide is anchored in the need to foster a sense of belonging and shared responsibility within an organisation or group. This collective sense of duty ensures active engagement from all parties in enhancing the mental health of this communal setting, while also addressing individual psychological needs and contributing to their fulfilment. Nonetheless, the initial stages of this project, particularly the reconfiguration of the work environment and the formulation of policies bolstering mental health, squarely rest upon the shoulders of the management team and the human resources unit.

These entities bear the onus of providing necessary resources for establishing mental health care systems, realigning work processes with the fundamentals of psychological well-being, and spearheading the development or refinement of protective policies.

Hence, the primary stakeholders of this guide are members of the administrative teams. This includes departments concerned with financial resources, monitoring and evaluation, programs and units, all the way to human resources divisions. It's noteworthy that this toolkit is also intended to concurrently inspire other work teams or groups to assume a more proactive stance in evaluating and cultivating the work environment in tandem with the distinct psychological and social requirements of each team member.

The guide additionally seeks to awaken teams and groups to the imperative of extending the scope of safeguarding and support to encompass all individuals directly engaged with the organisation or group. This encompassing circle includes partners, volunteers, and engaged communities.



This guide was developed in cooperation with a number of WILPF's Syrian partner organisations, as part of the Feminist Movement for Change in Syria project.

The author has expanded upon her work with WILPF partner organisations since 2018, offering psychological support and assisting them in managing work-related stress and its associated mental health effects. This experience highlighted the necessity to develop collective-level mental health interventions that provide employees with a safe environment to address their emotions and experiences.

Several group psychological support workshops were designed, where a specific topic related to the lived reality within an organisation is chosen, and then a safe and comfortable space is created, allowing all team members to share their feelings and ideas. This allows for joint learning from different experiences in stress management work, alleviating the psychological burden associated with it, and creating a balance between work and personal life, and thus spaces for healing, both individually and collectively.

These workshops sparked a discussion about civil society organisations as spaces that could either hinder or support mental health, as well as spaces that have a responsibility to create healthy environments for individuals, protect workers from harm, and enable healing. There was a need to open discussions on a number of topics, such as the potential for insecurity, injustice, and lack of appreciation within work environments; the absence of clarity or transparency and its impact on the mental health of workers; the absence of learning and development opportunities that enable the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, and career advancement; the absence of a culture (and skills) of effective and non-violent communication within the workplace; fluctuating management methods; lack of clarity in evaluation, employment and promotion criteria; as well as the absence of material and job security - either as a result of lack of resources or legal difficulties related to the rights of Syrian women and men to work in neighbouring countries. These factors also include the absence of protection policies and mechanisms for dealing with complaints of sexual violence, bullying, discrimination or racism, or the ineffectiveness of existing policies.



The integrated feminist perspective on mental health in the workplace sees all issues as closely related to the psychological well-being of workers. If we only address problems such as burnout or psychological fatigue, without approaching the structure of work and the nature of the dynamics of relationships within it, or the policies and mechanisms that enhance individuals' sense of safety and support, the discussion will remain incomplete. Therefore, it was mutually agreed with WILPF to dedicate the existing support program within the Syria project to promote a structural approach addressing various infrastructural elements related to collective and individual care policies and mechanisms, with the aim of enhancing and protecting the psychological well-being of individuals in the workplace.

We conducted a detailed needs assessment that adopted two mechanisms:

- 1** Conducting in-depth interviews with a number of partner organisations in the project;
- 2** Designing and distributing a questionnaire form with representatives of the administrative teams or human resources teams in each of the partner organisations. The survey was done in order to collect information about the structure and dynamics of each organisation, and the most important issues it works on, in addition to the most important sources of pressures that the work team is exposed to. The questionnaire also inquired about the most prevalent manifestations of burnout, and the methods currently used within the organisation to deal with pressures, including policies and mechanisms for psychological care, and those related to regulating interactions between team members. Finally, the questionnaire asked about the extent to which the work environment is considered safe, comfortable, and supportive for workers, as well as the most important obstacles facing the administrative team in the process of making the work environment safer, healthier, and more supportive of the team.

Through the detailed needs assessment, in its two phases, a number of objectives related to providing support to the partner organisations were formulated in order to enable them to improve their work environments to better support mental health. These policies included mechanisms designed to support the well-being of the team, incorporating both group and individual care tools. They also emphasised the importance of ensuring the sustainability, transparency, and fairness of these mechanisms.

4. Basic concepts

4.1 Safe work environment

The definition of a work environment should not be limited to the physical space of the work (the office or a group of offices from which the workers operate). It extends to include all the physical and virtual spaces in which interaction and task circulation take place, such as training courses, conferences and meetings, as well as casual social activities between workers outside working hours. It also includes forms of communication via digital media such as email and instant messaging.



Thus, the concept of the work environment has expanded, gaining special importance after the COVID-19 pandemic, with many individuals shifting to work from home. It has also expanded in the context of organisations whose members are located in a

large number of countries, whether inside or outside the Arab region, as different individuals within them receive disparate levels of legal protection depending on local laws in different countries and the legal status of each individual in each country. All of this makes it necessary to expand the definition of the work environment and then develop internal mechanisms that regulate it in a manner that constitutes an umbrella of protection for all workers, regardless of their geographical location or the form of internal communication among colleagues.

A safe work environment is a work environment which is free from any harm that may threaten the individual's sense of physical safety, freedom, psychological balance, or human dignity, and in which individuals feel safe and comfortable, enabling them to express themselves and their differences in values, beliefs, and ways of life. It also refers to an environment in which individuals feel that their physical and psychological health is valued and prioritised, and that provides the necessary tools and channels to be used in the event of feeling threatened or abused. Elements of safety within the work environment include individuals' sense of job security – a level of safety and material stability that fulfils basic needs such as shelter, food, health care, and other basic determinants of a decent life.

Are you currently working in a safe environment?

Among the most important elements that must be considered when evaluating the level of safety in the work environment are:

- Being free from material and symbolic violence
- Being free from violence and discrimination based on gender, race, colour, religion, gender identity, or nationality
- Being free from sexual harassment, bullying, extortion, threats, and toxic power relations
- Clear and trusted prevention and intervention mechanisms to deal with abuses and violations, such as the abuse of a member of the work team. — These mechanisms include anti-discrimination and gender-based violence policies within the work environment, accountability mechanisms, and mechanisms for managing complaints of sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination. —

4.2 Healthy work environment

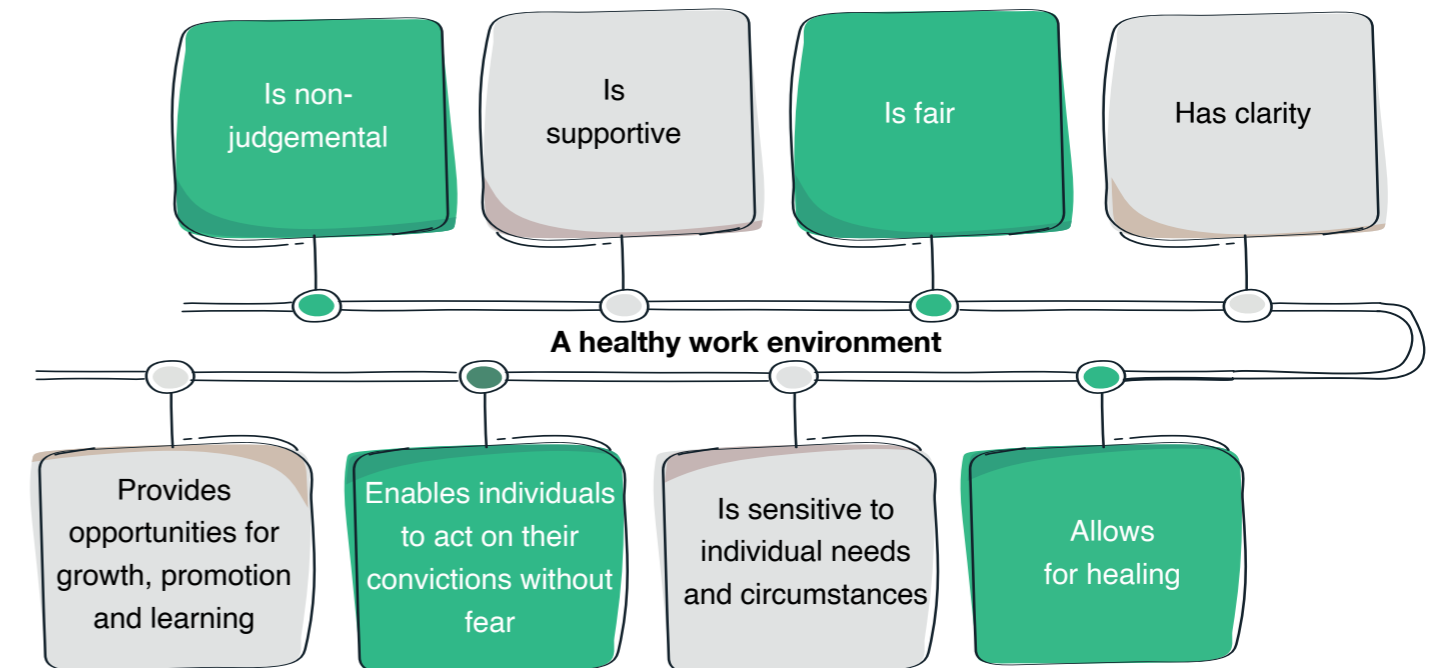
A healthy work environment is defined by clarity, equity, and openness. It nurtures the mental and physical well-being of employees, fostering spaces for growth and progress. This environment fosters avenues for professional advancement and maintains the essential atmosphere, tools, and avenues for self-expression, individual emotions, seeking and receiving support, and psychological healing. Moreover, a wholesome setting demonstrates attentiveness to the diverse requirements, situations, and inclinations of workers, while effectively contributing to fulfilling those needs.

Communication in a healthy work environment is non-violent and supportive, with high levels of understanding and empathy. It also relies on the working relationships being safe, comfortable, and non-toxic.

Achieving a healthy work environment requires effective collaboration between management and the team on a number of levels, including:

- Creating channels and tools for effective non-violent communication
- Following clear and democratic management methods
- Division of tasks and clarity of the capacities, responsibilities, evaluation, and accountability
- Clear and effective policies that regulate work relations, rights, and duties, including mechanisms for managing complaints and achieving justice in the event of injustice or abuse
- Mechanisms that are fair and appropriate to the needs of individuals for requesting psychological and social support, allowing all workers, especially those most vulnerable to hardship, to request support when needed

Figure 1: What makes a healthy work environment?



4.3 Well-being

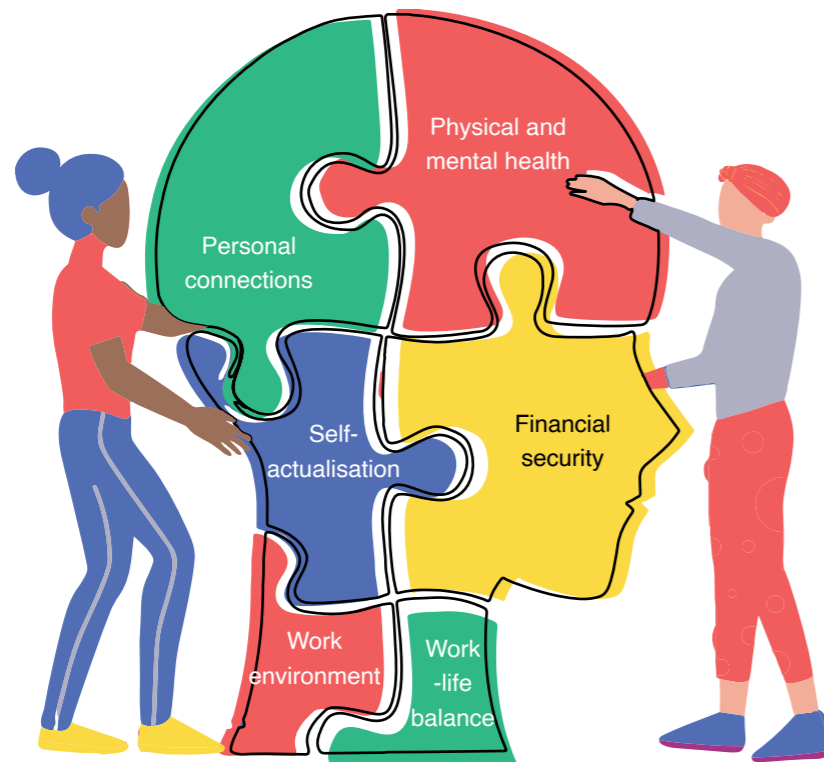
Well-being is a complex notion that encompasses the individual's sense of balance between the different aspects of life, helping them to achieve a sense of agency, control, and self-efficacy, and strengthening their ability to learn, develop, and improve their quality of life.

Wellbeing, then, is a general feeling of wellness, good self-esteem, and satisfaction with **different aspects of life**. It includes economic, occupational, social, health, as well as cognitive and emotional well-being.

Well-being is not a fixed personality trait. It is a state of being that is in constant flux, influenced by the conditions under which an individual lives, including economic, environmental, and political conditions. It is also affected by the individual's psychological state that enables them to feel self-satisfied and trusting in their ability, and enables (or hinders) their use of resources available in their environment, including opportunities to seek social support from others.

Although the psychological well-being of individuals is directly affected by the environment in which they live and the local context that they navigate, they are always able to learn some skills and acquire some tools that enable them to better manage their environment as well as their mental state. This means that the individual is able, through the acquisition of these skills and tools, to improve their psychological well-being.

Figure 2: Psychological well-being



Workplace well-being relates to all aspects of professional life. It determines the quality of that life and its level of safety. It is also affected by the physical environment in which an individual works, their feeling towards their work, and the extent of their satisfaction with the work environment, its prevailing culture, and the relationships that govern it.

4.4 Burnout

Burnout is a feeling of severe psychological stress, which may include physical, emotional, and mental stress, accompanied by a decrease in motivation and poor professional performance. It may also be accompanied by negative thoughts about oneself and others, and a decline in self-esteem. Burnout results from exposure to repeated, intense work-related stresses for extended periods of time. It is especially common among service providers, humanitarian and civil workers, and those with jobs that require listening to other people's problems and addressing their feelings, or that require exposure to content that includes the traumatic experiences of others.

Manifestations of burnout among workers in the humanitarian field

- 1 Burnout:**
The feeling of being emotionally drained at work
- 2 Detachment:**
The inability to feel empathy or connection with the recipients of aid and services
- 3 Low sense of fulfilment:**
The inability to feel self-worth, ability, self-esteem, or happiness with the achievements made at work

A distinction can be made between burnout and temporary fatigue resulting from work pressure. Burnout is accompanied by a feeling that is significantly different from the usual feeling of work-related fatigue, as it encompasses more than one situation and affects more than one area of life. Burnout is continuous and concomitant for a period of not less than two consecutive weeks. It is also usually accompanied by negative feelings towards oneself and towards others.

The **Maslach Burnout Inventory** is considered one of the most popular self-reporting measures that can be used to determine the presence and severity of burnout that an individual suffers from. The following figure contains examples of the most important items of the scale. The person is asked to give an **estimate** of whether they experience each symptom of burnout, with answers ranging from 1 (I never feel like this) to 5 (I feel like this most of the time).

4.5 Healing, from a Feminist Perspective

By **healing**, we mean an individual's continuous efforts to overcome the psychological impact of stress and harmful or negative experiences, and to overcome the oppressive environment in which they live. Thus, healing involves learning new skills and having new perspectives, knowing one's needs, practising self-care, and seeking support from others to help cope with stress.

Healing is the process of the individual returning to a state of psychological balance following a traumatic experience(s) with a severe psychological impact. It does not mean returning to what the individual was like before exposure to the traumatic experience, but rather understanding and assimilating this experience, incorporating it into the individual's psyche and their memory, and understanding the changes that occurred in their personality, their self-perception, and their life as a result of the experience(s). Through healing, they acquire new skills for coping, and then move forward.

Perhaps we can **imagine healing as a journey**:

- ➔ It involves individuals building their own narrative around their harmful experiences;
- ➔ Learning to recognise their needs;
- ➔ Finding time to grieve and process negative emotions and feelings of loss;
- ➔ Building alliances and support networks with others who have had similar experiences;
- ➔ Regainng a sense of strength that enables them to move on with life more effectively.

Healing is a feminist priority that needs effort and resources to support individuals, find tools, and create supportive and safe spaces. It is also **key to continuing the struggle** to improve the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that lead to traumatic experiences. Ignoring the need for safe spaces and resources that enable people to heal leads to a diminished ability to create the desired social and political change or to fulfil the demands of work.

Thus, recovery is a shared political responsibility between groups, institutions, and individuals concerned with feminist issues, women's rights, human rights, and justice more generally. It is no less important than the conventional work carried out by those groups and individuals such as mobilising, documenting, capacity-building, and lobbying to change the policies governing gender relations, all of which aim to achieve justice. Therefore, psychological healing deserves allocation of financial and human resources, and the development of plans and strategies to place it sustainably on the agendas of women's rights advocates and human rights workers.

Healing is a continuous process of change

Use these examples from the Maslach Inventory to measure work-related burnout

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Most of the time
1 I feel emotionally drained from work.					
2 Working with people puts too much stress on me.					
3 I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning.					
4 I feel I haven't accomplished worthwhile things in my job.					
5 I don't feel that I am positively influencing people's lives.					
6 I feel a sense of emptiness due to work.					

How can you predict the likelihood of burnout within an organisation?

Factors for work-related burnout

- ➔ **Work pressure:** The amount of work to be done within a time interval, and to what extent there is balance between work, personal life, and social responsibility
- ➔ **Control:** The extent to which a person feels in control, capable of making decisions and solving problems, and being effective at work. It also relates to autonomy at work.
- ➔ **Reward:** The sense of being appreciated at work, both materially and morally
- ➔ **Belonging:** A sense of being part of the group and safe within it
- ➔ **Fairness:** A sense of clarity, balance and fairness in distribution of roles and tasks, evaluations, and respect in the workplace
- ➔ **Values:** Harmony between personal values (and sense of meaning and fulfilment) and collective values of a group or organisation



Basic principles for healing:

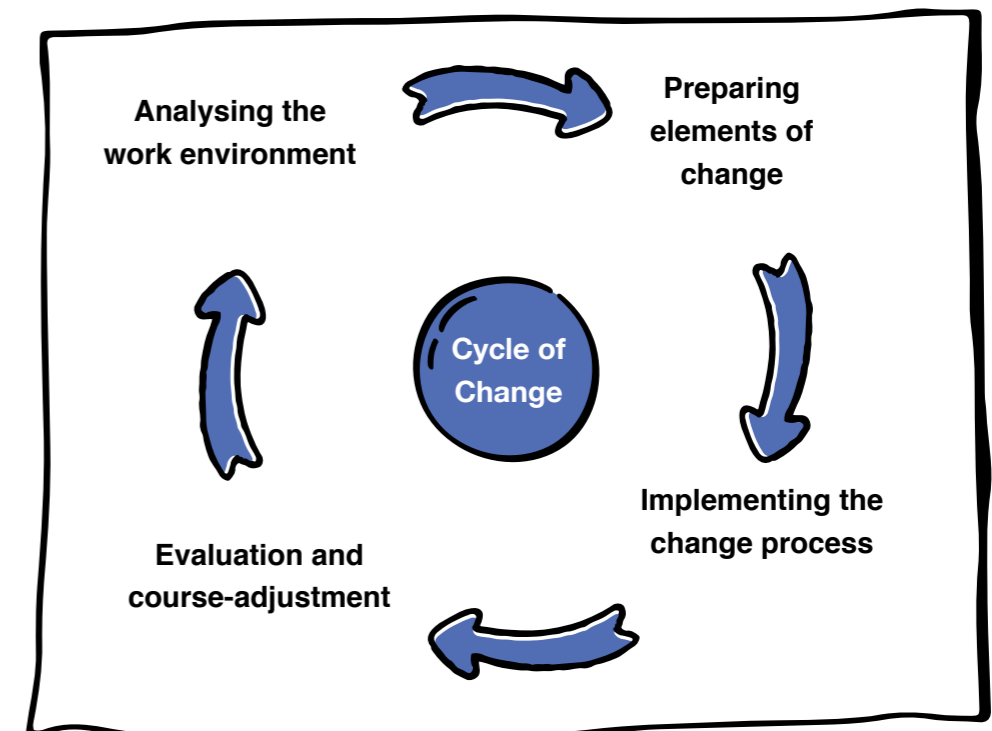
- 1 **Prioritising self-care:** Training on the need to put self-care and basic psychological health as a priority, in order to reach a state of balance that enables better life and work.
- 2 **Many ways to heal:** There is no one right way to heal, but ways are as diverse as the psychological needs of individuals, their psychological structures, social conditions, and the mechanisms used to achieve harmony and balance. Therefore, each individual should search for the appropriate method that brings them the greatest sense of comfort.
- 3 **Making space for feelings:** Remove the stigma from talking about personal feelings and create a safe space within the work environment enabling individuals to share fears, frustrations, and aspirations, as well as express personal feelings towards work colleagues.
- 4 **Healing is a continuous and dynamic learning process:** It requires openness to the individual's exploration of their inner nature, and their conflicting emotions and needs.
- 5 **The importance of solidarity, support, and collective healing:** Solidarity is one of the most important principles on which the feminist movement is built, allowing each individual to both obtain support and provide it to others. It emphasises the need to make an effort to understand the experiences and feelings of others without value judgments. Solidarity and support are also two basic mechanisms that enable collective healing, especially in cases where a group of individuals share similar experiences or a common history, concern, or goal. This creates a sense of empathy and solidarity, which helps individuals deal with their problems more healthily while also creating a sense of self-worth through the ability to support others.
- 6 **Healing is a continuous process:** Healing requires a continuous effort towards improving one's well being for as long as possible. It also requires accepting the possibility of setbacks or going through periods in which there is a sense of decline in mental health.

5. Advancing a healthy work environment: Steps towards change

Creating a healthy work environment is a complex, multi-stage process. This guide suggests dividing it into four stages, starting with analysing the current work environment, then preparing the tools necessary to shift it in a healthier direction, then implementing the change process. The final stage is to evaluate the new work environment and make the necessary adjustments to improve it further. Change is a continuous process that may take a circular path. It includes periodically re-assessing the work environment to evaluate whether everyone is being provided with the fundamentals for tending to their mental well-being, then making phased adjustments, testing, in practice, the impact of each on the workplace.



Figure 3: Work environment change cycle: Creating a healthier work environment



- Step One: Analysing the work environment
- Step Two: Preparing elements of change
- Step Three: Implementing the change process
- Step Four: Evaluation and course-adjustment

5.1 Step One: Analysing the work environment

This process includes monitoring and analysing the current work environment for risks that may threaten the workers' sense of safety, adversely affect their mental health, or impede their chances of recovery and healing from stress or psychological trauma. It also includes analysing the material and human resources available for implementing change, finding additional resources both within and around the organisation, and finally, monitoring the various challenges that may hinder the implementation of change or slow its path.

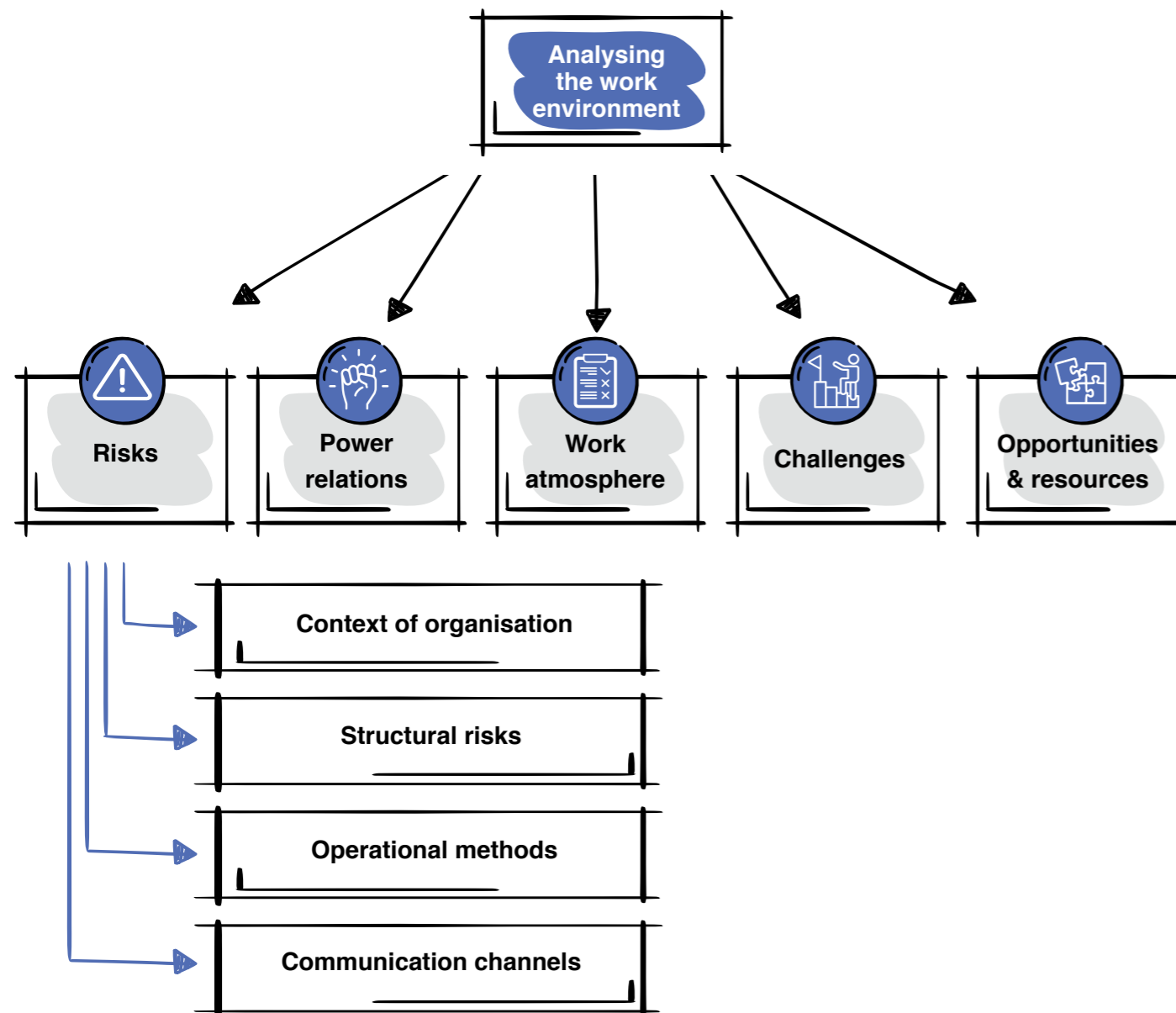


Figure 4: Work environment analysis: What to look for?

5.1.1 Work environment risks

The risks threatening the well-being of workers, women and men, can take many forms and have many sources. Some relate to the nature of the work environment itself and the dynamics of communication within it, while other risks relate to the surrounding context in which the organisation operates.



B- Structural Risks

These are the set of risks associated with an organisation's internal structure. One of the most common types of these risks is excessive work pressure resulting from planning activities that exceed the actual capacity of the working team. This leads to a state of perpetual pressure and tension, with the need to work after hours, and increased chance of non-compliance with leave, holidays, and vacation days. This can undermine the team's ability to balance work and personal life, and is a risk factor for burnout. Furthermore, work that includes responding to emergency situations or rapid intervention is already a major risk factor for burnout, especially when the organisation does not have an effective and clear system for supporting and protecting those who perform interventions.

Lack of transparency, including financial and administrative transparency, can also negatively affect the work environment. It undermines trust between the working team and management, as well as team members' sense of belonging to the organisation. Lack of transparency can manifest as the absence (or lack of clarity) of monitoring and evaluation systems that assess the work team's performance and lead to related decisions about rewards or penalties.

Structural risk factors also include lack of financial resources of the organisation. The availability of funds means employees receive fair salaries that provide them with a decent living, allows for a larger work team and less pressure on existing personnel, allows for the use of expertise, and provides the work team with the necessary external support. Also among the structural risk factors is the lack of effective sustainability plans that ensure the organisation can continue to operate and preserve the job security of its members.

A- Contextual Risks

These include all risks that are not strictly related to an organisation's internal structure, but rather to the political, social, and cultural context in which it operates. These include physical risks, particularly for organisations operating in the context of armed conflict or in areas with security or military instability, with security risks including the possibility of security crackdowns or measures taken against the work team.

As for risks related to cultural and social context, this is particularly relevant for organisations working on culturally sensitive issues or those that may provoke hostility from the local community, as is the case for many organisations in Arab countries working on feminist and women's rights issues, the rights of people with non-normative sexual identities, or other issues that the dominant local culture see as controversial.

C -Work structure risks

These include the risks associated with management systems, how work is divided between programs and units, how tasks are distributed among team members, and periodic evaluation and follow-up mechanisms for team performance. Lack of clarity or fairness in the assignment and distribution of labour may threaten the mental health of work team members and generate conflict within the organisation. Work structure risks also include the boundaries of the competencies of each team member, the criteria for evaluating workers' performance, and the rights and duties of everyone in the organisation. Risk is also present in the absence of feedback systems, the absence of autonomy for the staff to make decisions, and a lack of fairness in imposing penalties, distributing rewards, and obtaining privileges.

D -Risks associated with channels and methods of communication

These risks include the absence of appropriate channels for vertical communication between the working team and the administrative team and of horizontal communication between members of the work team, or the presence of weak or ineffective channels. The latter includes methods of communication that are violent, abusive, oppressive, or exploitative of a position of power.¹ It also includes communication that contains discriminatory language based on gender identity, race, religion, nationality, or disability. Communication issues, especially when violent or discriminatory against a member or group of the team, are a major threat to the mental health of the team. Poor communication leads to a toxic work environment² and threatens the structure of the organisation as a whole.



¹ By workplace power relations, we mean relationships based on positions of structural inequality, whether those related to a work relationship such as the relationship between a boss and a subordinate, or a relationship of gender inequality such as a man and a woman who are co-workers, or a class position such as the relationship between a person who comes from a wealthier social class and another from a less fortunate environment.

² A toxic work environment is one in which the dynamics of interaction reflect conflict, discrimination, bullying, or violence, which constitutes a direct threat to the mental health of some or all workers and their sense of comfort and safety within the work environment.

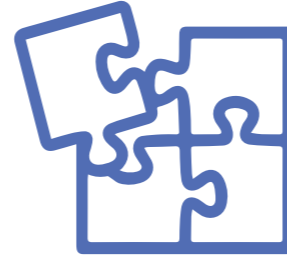


What are some of the risk factors that threaten psychological well-being in the work environment?

- 1 Working for long hours due to work pressure or lack of resources
- 2 Direct involvement with survivors and those enduring hardship (listening, documentation, psychosocial support, emergency and protection services)
- 3 Working in difficult or dangerous circumstances, or lack of legal stability for the organisation
- 4 Working in emergency contexts that require immediate responses or interventions
- 5 Lack of clarity on assigned tasks or methods of performance evaluation
- 6 Being emotionally affected by the experiences of beneficiaries and partners (and our own experiences and unhealed traumas)

5.1.2 Opportunities and Resources

These are the support channels, frameworks, and tools available to the organisation externally and internally, and which the organisation can rely on to improve the work environment and support the well-being of the team.

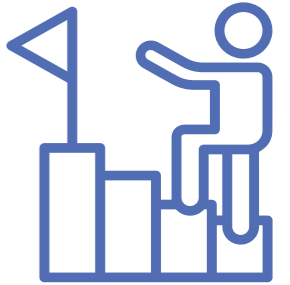


These opportunities and resources include:

- 1 Feminist and human rights values that constitute a main reference point for the work of feminist and women's organisations – the values of equality, justice, solidarity, freedom, gender sensitivity, intersectionality, and accountability
- 2 Networks of local and international organisations and agencies that support efforts to build safe and healthy workspaces
- 3 The prioritisation of mental health and safety in the work environments of the human rights sector in the Arab region
- 4 The availability of mental health experts at regional and international levels who possess the necessary knowledge and tools to help create healthier and safer work environments
- 5 Awareness among donor organisations and international partners of the importance of mental health, resulting in the availability of financial resources for supporting efforts to build individual and group psychological care systems within women's organisations
- 6 The spirit of solidarity and support among activists, which is based on common values and political commitment to change across the various organisations and groups of the women's movement at the local, regional, and international levels

5.1.3 Challenges

There are a number of challenges that may hinder efforts to build healthy work environments and to improve the level of well-being for workers. These challenges vary according to the nature and context of each organisation.



Some factors may be common to organisations within the Syrian feminist movement, and they include:

- 1 A general lack of human resources needed to manage the work, affecting, in particular, the ability to build a healthy work environment
- 2 The lack of financial resources necessary to achieve safety, stability, and sustainability for the organisation, to provide decent wages for workers, and to improve the structure of the organisation's support systems
- 3 The global economic crisis, which was reflected in the lack of funding allocated to civil society organisations, especially Syrian ones, and which is also reflected in the dire living conditions under which most of the workers in these organisations live
- 4 Conditions associated with political instability in the region, especially in the Syrian context, and the accompanying shifts - or lack of clarity - in the political agendas of donor countries and those supporting transitional justice in Syria
- 5 The legal conditions regulating the work of Syrian organisations, especially in the neighbouring countries, and issues related to the right to work in conditions of displacement, asylum, and migration. Also, the difficulty of getting work contracts, and social and health insurance coverage for workers
- 6 The nature and terms of working with donor organisations, which rely on supporting short-term projects that often aim for immediately measurable outputs
- 7 Persistent or recurring emergency situations that impose a rapid response or reaction approach to work, under which it is difficult to build long-term plans or mobilise resources for supporting the work team

5.1.4 General context of the organisation: Identity, culture, and power relations

This is one of the most difficult and complex steps in the process of analysing the work environment, with a number of abstract elements that are difficult to measure in a direct and objective manner. It requires special effort to discover the invisible factors that form the culture of the organisation and affect the nature of relationships and communication within it.



Perhaps the appropriate starting point here is to identify a set of foundational values that inform the basis of the organisation and its work philosophy, including its vision and mission. In tandem with this, it is helpful to define the organisation's distinct identity and the political compass on which it builds its goals.

→ Feminist organisations are specifically concerned with issues of women's political participation, for example, and so their agenda priorities differ from those that focus mainly on combating gender-based violence or supporting women's economic empowerment. Despite the existence of common denominators between these organisations, there will remain a number of key differences related to the identity of each organisation and its political approach to the context in which it operates.

→ This also relates to the extent of homogeneity (or diversity) of political values and approaches between workers within the organisation, and between the workers and the organisation itself as an entity. The presence of either homogeneity or diversity directly affects the general atmosphere within an organisation and the interactions between its workers. While encouraging diversity among the employees, it is necessary to have a degree of consensus around fundamental values that constitute the identity of the organisation and its compass. This element alone is a significant prerequisite towards workers feeling a sense of belonging to the organisation, which in turn facilitates effective internal communication and motivation to adhere to work agendas.

Then comes the analysis of determinants of the organisation's culture, taking note of management methods and decision-making mechanisms and how they affect work relationships.

→ We find here a difference between organisations that adopt a participatory or democratic method of management, and those that tend to leave decision-making tasks to their leadership.

→ We also find a difference between organisations that place creativity and innovation as central values versus those that expect their employees to follow predefined work patterns.

→ Flexibility is another value that directly affects work culture, especially with a large number of organisations recently adopting a policy of flexible working hours, or working from home, in order to reduce pressure on workers.

→ The relationships within the work team can also vary from purely professional to more personal familiarity, which is another important determining factor of an organisation's culture.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned examples are not absolute dichotomies (flexibility versus inflexibility, democracy versus authoritarianism, professionalism versus familiarity). Each of these is a continuous spectrum that extends between the two opposites. Most organisations are close to one of the two extremes, or occupy a middle position between them, without identifying with either of them. It is also important to point out that the initial impression of an organisation may strongly imply a specific approach (democratic management, flexible management, management that encourages creativity, a work environment that shows humane relations), but these impressions are not necessarily correct.

With each of the aforementioned mechanisms comes a set of difficulties related to its actualisation in practice and in daily work, and each will influence the organisation's climate, productivity, and the mental health of its workers. Therefore, the best approach is that which suits the nature of the organisation, the capabilities of its administrative structure, the preferences of its employees, and the nature of the relationships between them. Choosing the right approach is important in order to achieve balance within the work environment and make it conducive of mental health.

5.1.5 Forms and structures of power

The final step is to analyse the power structures within the organisation. By this, we mean the **various forms of symbolic and material power** possessed by team members that dictate the patterns of relationships between them, such as gender, authority, age, social class, economic status, geographical location, education, gender identity and nationality.



It is important when analysing these power structures to use a cross-lens that takes into account the intersections between the aforementioned elements, which interact together to form the actual power position occupied by each individual in the organisation.

If one of the employees of the organisation is a woman who does not possess administrative authority, is young in age, is a refugee, has an average level of education, lives in difficult economic and social conditions, and does not have an employment contract, she has less power. Compare this to a man in an administrative position who is older, well-off financially, and has the nationality of the country from which the organisation operates and a university degree. It is not possible to understand the interactions between this man and this woman, or to judge them, without understanding the representations of power that make up that relationship. The privileges that the man in this example possesses represent a broad power he has over the woman, power that exceeds the limits of his direct administration authority.

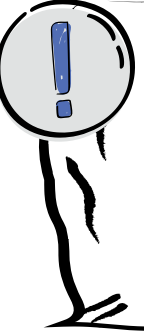
Thus, it is vital to analyse the power dynamics within – and specific to – the organisation, according to the various privileges held by certain team members, and the cultural and political significance of these privileges within the context of the work being done. Then, these power dynamics must be taken into consideration when preparing for the change process.

5.2 Step Two: Preparing elements and tools for change

5.2.1 Developing a plan for change

Developing a plan for change comes as the next step after the work environment analysis. **It includes designing and building the stages that the organisation will go through to transform from its current status to its desired one – as a safer and healthier work environment.**

The transformative strategy encompasses more than just establishing support and safeguard mechanisms for the well-being of workers. It must encompass a comprehensive range of aspects, including management methods, workers' rights and responsibilities, the ambiance of the workplace, and the structuring of interpersonal dynamics among employees. This also involves systems of incentives and disciplinary measures, along with mechanisms for addressing possible complaints and conducting investigations when employees perceive injustices or harm.



The change plan should be structured as a multi-phase approach, complete with a well-defined timetable. This sequencing allows for the logical arrangement of elements based on their interdependencies or their priority in terms of fostering tangible, positive shifts in the organisational climate. Elements could be prioritised based on their potential to effectively enhance the work environment, or the urgency with which they need to be addressed, should there be a specific risk to the mental well-being of male and female workers within the organisation.

5.2.2 Mobilising enterprise organisation resources

This involves the **assessment and mobilisation of the organisation's resources**, encompassing financial assets and human capital, that can be leveraged in the pursuit of an institutional transformation towards a healthier work environment. These resources might entail existing financial allocations designated for team care or organisational enhancement, or they might necessitate seeking fresh resources from partners who recognise the importance of supporting the mental health of the team and are willing to contribute financial or technical support for the development of a healthier work environment.

It is imperative to align the devised financial plan with the stages and timeline of the change strategy. This alignment should consider the prioritisation sequence, particularly in terms of allocating essential resources to whichever initial elements will serve as the bedrock of the transformation, laying the groundwork for subsequent phases. Among these indispensable resources are the formulation or enhancement of internal policies, the engagement of human resources specialists or consultants, and the involvement of mental health experts and professionals in organisational psychology.

During this phase, it is vital to explore alternative solutions in instances where funding avenues that support change are not available. This exploration might involve tapping into the existing skills and capabilities of the current team to leverage their pertinent expertise. It could also entail seeking support from within the immediate circles of allies and advocates. There is potential for voluntary contributions of effort and time to execute specific steps. Lastly, the organisation or group can solicit insights from analogous organisations with comparable circumstances and contexts. These friendly entities can provide guidance and access to internal policies that can be adapted, modified to align with the organisation's unique climate, and subsequently adopted.

5.2.3 Utilising expertise

Upon equipping stakeholders within the organisation who will actively partake in the transformation journey, it becomes imperative to pinpoint gaps in available expertise. This entails identifying any aspects that lie beyond the purview of the current workforce's knowledge and skills, necessitating external support in the form of hiring consultants and experts. The involvement of experts should extend beyond the preparatory phase of the change process; their role may be indispensable in preceding or subsequent stages. This is particularly significant during stages involving an assessment of the work environment in its existing condition. These steps demand an impartial external perspective, detached from the internal dynamics of the organisation. An external viewpoint might also prove essential during the planning phase and subsequently in evaluating the efficacy of implemented changes.

One of the most notable hurdles in outsourcing remains the substantial financial cost it entails, which imposes a strain on both the organisation's overall budget and the dedicated budget for the change process. Consequently, the requirement for external expertise demands careful evaluation. The specific nature of this expertise should be meticulously ascertained, along with the projected financial outlay associated with it. These considerations should be seamlessly integrated into the financial blueprint for the change initiative prior to embarking on its execution.



5.2.4 Establishing the change framework

This phase pertains to creating a team tasked with executing the change process throughout its many stages. This organisational structure might encompass the management team, human resources personnel, program and unit leaders, finance specialists, legal experts, psychologists, and social workers.

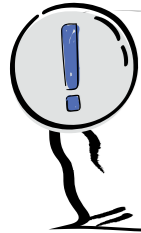
5.2.5 Engaging the workforce

Beyond merely shaping the framework, it is of paramount importance that team members are actively involved in all stages of the change initiative. This practice serves a dual purpose. 1) It capitalises on the collective experiences, knowledge, and competencies of all team members; 2) It nurtures the sense that cultivating a secure and healthy work environment is a collective responsibility shared by all employees, rather than solely the responsibility of management. Ultimately, this approach facilitates a more nuanced, profound, and all-encompassing understanding of the myriad of perspectives and positions regarding the work environment's atmosphere, communication dynamics, and intricate power structures.

5.3 Step Three: Implementing the change process

5.3.1 Mobilising stakeholders and initiating implementation

The process of mobilisation entails orchestrating seamless collaboration among all pertinent parties integral to the change process. This involves task allocation, provision of requisite support, and alleviation of routine work demands, affording them the opportunity to focus on endeavours aimed at enhancing the work environment.



A pivotal aspect at this juncture involves revisiting the comprehensive change plan, now that all its constituents have been finalised. This review should account for the time available to the team members responsible for driving the change, and should also factor in the evaluation of the existing work environment status, envisioned objectives, available resources, and the execution timeline.

5.3.2 Formulating internal regulations and complaints mechanisms

This stage stands as one of the keystones in the change process, encompassing the construction of organisational and procedural frameworks that underpin the building and maintaining of a safe and secure work environment. It also entails delineating pathways that employees can traverse in the event of perceiving harm, exploitation, or jeopardy to their mental or physical well-being.

Recent experiences within the domain of civil society have underscored the significance of having internal regulations and policies centred on regulating interrelations within the work milieu. These policies should be anchored in principles of feminist and human rights principles, in tandem with the tenets of mental health and human dignity. **Some notable policies include:**

- An anti-harassment and sexual violence policy;
- A policy to counteract discrimination and gender-based violence, or violence that has other bases such as religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, socio-economic class, or gender and sexual identity;
- A policy addressing bullying and various forms of aggressive communication;
- A human resources policy encompassing aspects like hiring, termination, remuneration, incentives, penalties, and leaves;
- A policy for nurturing team mental health, offering collective and individual well-being support

It is of utmost importance that each of these policies is coupled with well-defined mechanisms for their implementation. This involves specifying avenues for addressing complaints tied to these policies.

These mechanisms must encompass the identification of designated individuals responsible for handling complaints, protocols for investigating potential grievances, and provisions for supporting and safeguarding complainants. Alongside these responsibilities, it is also necessary to have strategies for managing those against whom complaints are lodged.

Several comprehensive guides are already accessible, offering general frameworks and tools to shape protective policies and implementation mechanisms. One notable example is the **Protection Policy Manual**, developed in collaboration with the WILPF, and tailored to suit organisations operating within the feminist landscape in Syria.

5.3.3 Enhancing communication channels and strategies

Issues with communication are a significant source of conflict within groups, whether these issues stem from the absence of effective communication channels or the presence of negative or hostile communication patterns. These problems have a pronounced, detrimental impact on the work environment and the mental well-being of employees. Addressing these concerns requires a meticulous analysis in order to deeply diagnose their nature and underlying causes, followed by the development of targeted strategies for resolution.

Peter Frost introduces a three-stage model aimed at addressing negative and toxic communication dynamics within the work setting. This tripartite model comprises the prevention phase, the intervention phase, and the recovery phase. Under this model, the administrative and human resources teams shoulder the responsibility of identifying potential sources of communicative toxicity in the workplace. Subsequently, they implement necessary interventions to address these sources. This may involve engaging specific individuals who contribute to the toxicity, facilitating open discussions within the team to address the issue, and seeking external expertise to analyse the problem's impact on the team's mental health. The solution might encompass restorative actions for those who have been affected, as well as orchestrating a collective healing process involving team participation.

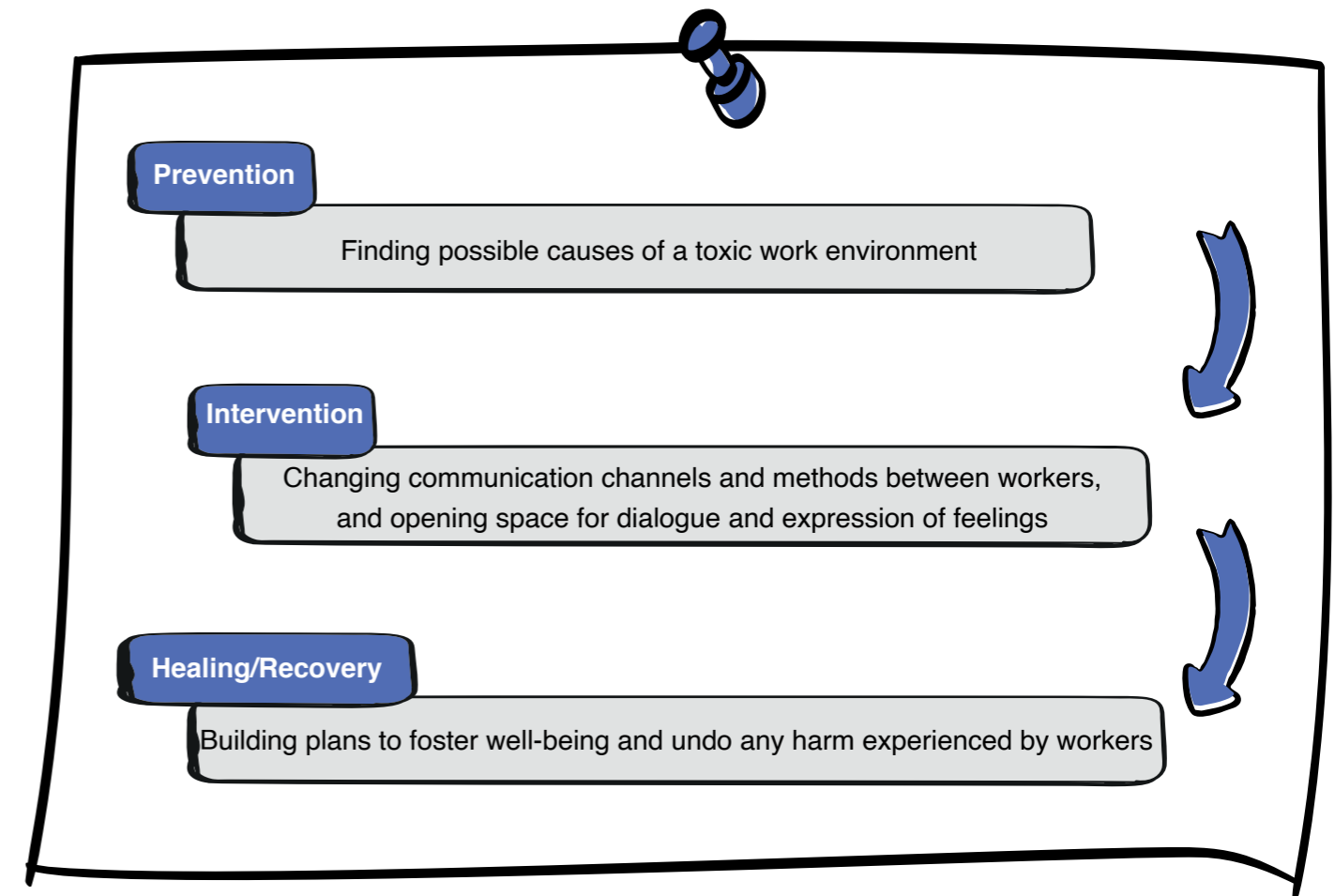


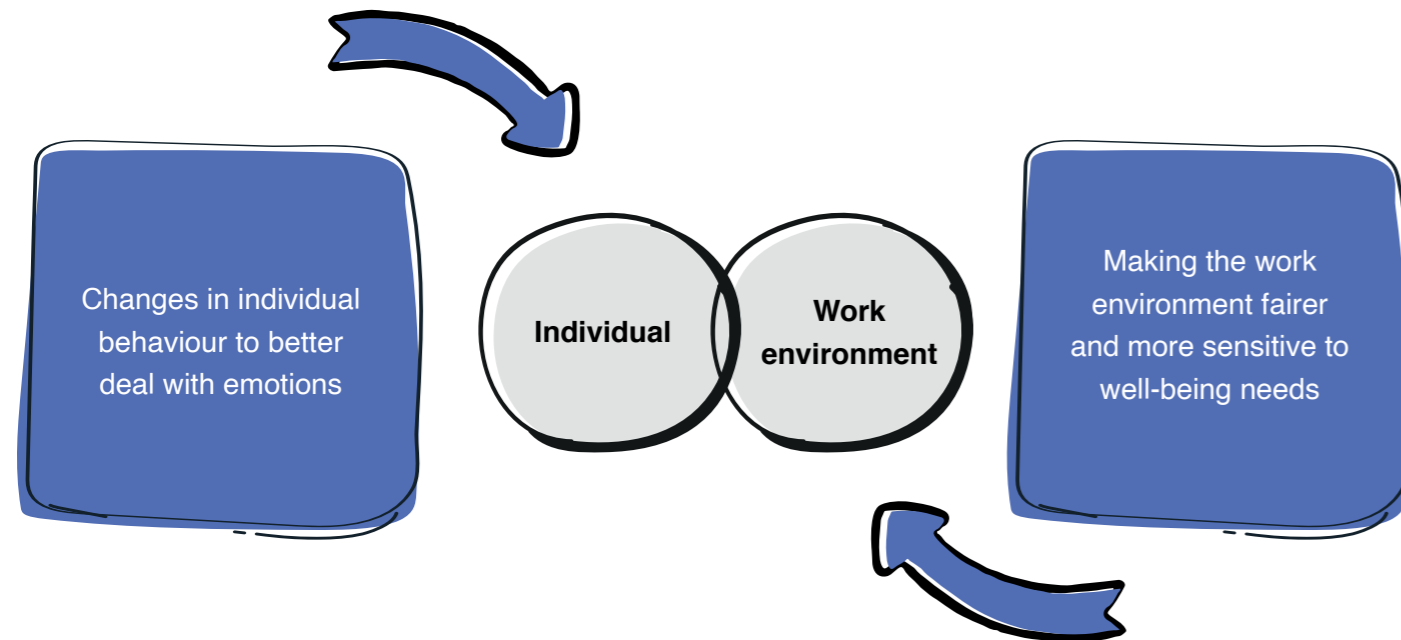
Figure 5: Frost's model for addressing passive communication dynamics

Marshall Rosenberg also presents an illustrative model known as **Nonviolent Communication**, referred to as compassionate or cooperative communication. Rooted in psychotherapy theories such as person-centred therapy, this model prioritises language and dialogue techniques to enhance conversational quality and meet the psychological needs of all parties involved. The outcome is an elevated sense of empathy among individuals. The framework of nonviolent communication has several practical applications within the workplace context. It can be employed to elevate the quality of work relationships and foster a sense of empathy, support, and solidarity among women and men colleagues within the work environment.

4.3.5 Building care systems

An integrative view of mental health considers the need to pay attention to contextual factors in order to understand the nature of an individual's suffering, and help them develop an effective way to cope. This requires integrating individual mechanisms (such as the individual modifying their behaviour, adopting new coping strategies, or learning to deal with emotions in a healthy way), as well as adjusting the environment surrounding the individual to make it fairer and more compatible with the capabilities and needs of the individual.

Figure 6: An integrative perspective of mental health

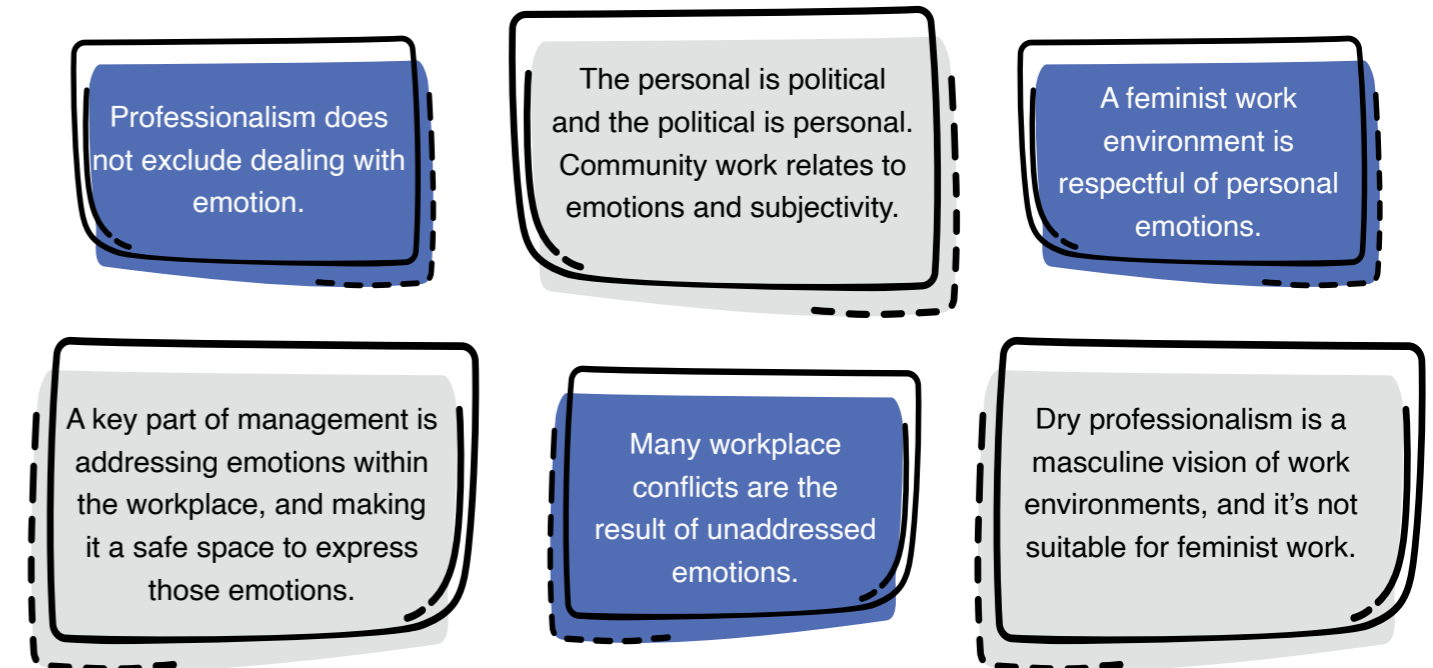


Building psychological care systems in the workplace starts with recognising the significance of addressing emotions as a fundamental determinant of the work environment. This practice involves offering safe conditions and suitable mechanisms to allow team members to express, explore, and understand their emotions, and to enable discussions with others when necessary. With this perspective, the team's emotions in regards to their colleagues and work environment are of the utmost importance.

Numerous contemporary feminist perspectives argue that a primary source of conflict and toxicity in the workplace arises from insufficient emotional sensitivity on the part of the organisation, coupled with the absence of a secure environment that allows team members to openly express personal emotions and handle them effectively. One responsibility of the administrative team is to cultivate an emotionally supportive and interpersonally constructive atmosphere. This entails assessing the impact of administrative decisions on the psychological well-being of employees.

Recognising that leadership roles within organisations **involve an emotional component**, it becomes essential to identify factors and experiences that could detrimentally affect employees' lives or impede the fulfilment of their core psychological needs. Proactive efforts should then be made to minimise these factors or promptly address any adverse consequences they might produce. This underscores the necessity for managers to be able to make challenging decisions in instances where prioritising the personal well-being of both women and men on staff takes precedence over productivity. Those in leadership positions must consider the mental health of workers and be willing to place it above work-plan goals or required daily tasks.

Figure 7: What are the most important principles for dealing with emotions in the work environment?



In addition to addressing emotions as a fundamental element of the work environment, it is imperative to construct safeguarding and support mechanisms for workers' mental health and well-being. These mechanisms offer avenues for the work team to manage work-related pressures and mitigate the influence of those pressures on the team's mental health. Through this process, tools will be made available that enable team members to recuperate from the repercussions of adverse experiences they have encountered in the past or are presently undergoing due to life's pressures. The approach can be categorised into group care mechanisms and individual care mechanisms.

Collective care mechanisms

These mechanisms address workers as a collective team, nurturing principles of solidarity, emotional sensitivity, and a mutual sense of responsibility towards one another. They serve the dual purpose either as a preventative measure, or to improve overall mental well-being within an organisation. This can involve activities for social interaction, creating opportunities for emotional expression, participating in group care initiatives, or holding collective meetings to provide mutual reassurance. Such mechanisms can also be geared towards problem-solving and recovery. For instance, they might encompass organising sessions of collaborative group therapy led by experts and psychologists.



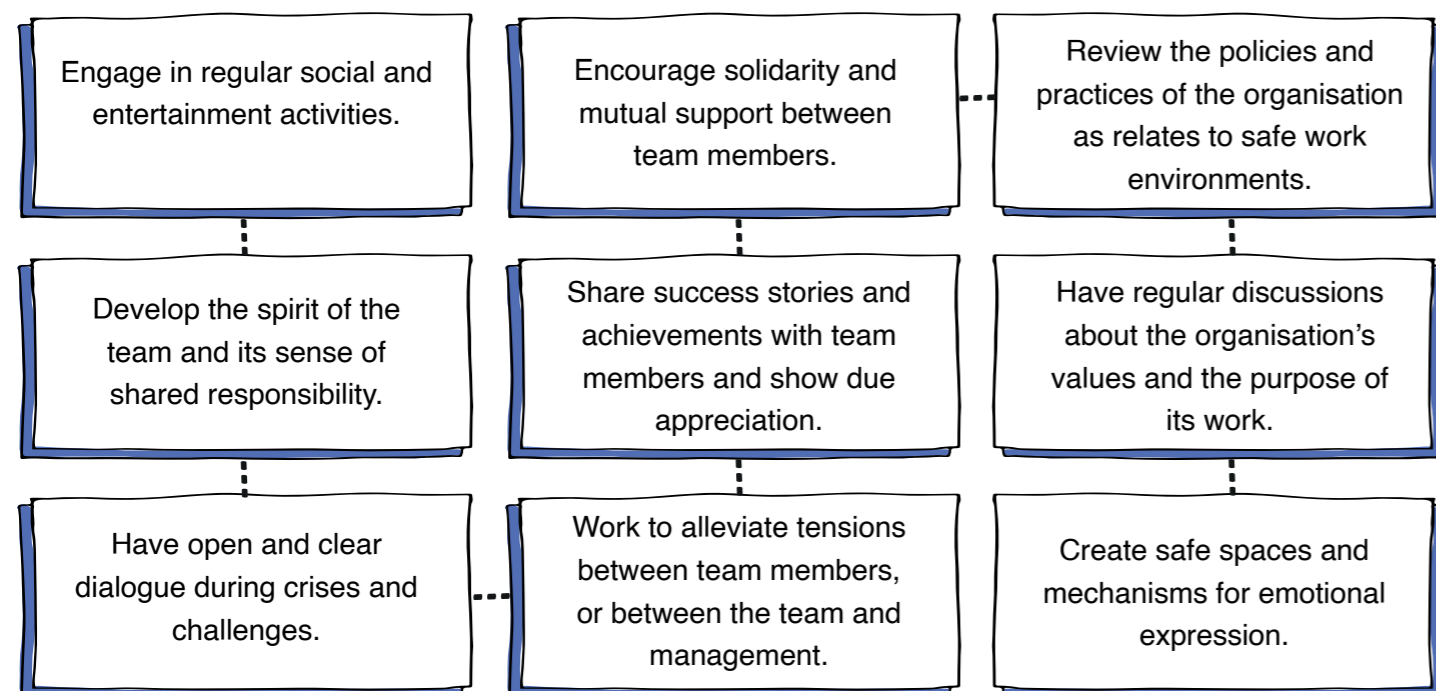
Individual care mechanisms

Individual mechanisms focus on a specific team member in need of mental health intervention and support. This can involve training in self-care skills or referral to a professional offering psychological services tailored to the team member's needs. The mechanisms designed to safeguard and support individual psychological well-being stem from the principle of workers' entitlement to receive psychological care. This care includes the right to have the work environment attuned to their individual circumstances related to social and gender roles, the right for workers to receive paid leave in cases of work-related burnout or other forms of psychological distress closely linked to work pressures, and the right to access specialised individual psychological support if needed, typically for a limited duration based on institutional capacity.



When building group or individual care systems, it is crucial to have a designated team member in charge of assessing the well-being of workers most vulnerable to burnout. When burnout occurs, this individual should implement the suitable administrative measures to address the situation and provide supportive psychological interventions for those in need of them. This responsible person should possess competence and professional training in mental health, or be trained by a specialist for this role. They should also be capable of responding in emergencies, should a team member face a mental health threat due to an accident or sudden incident. This might involve swiftly referring the individual to a specialist for psychological assistance.

Guidelines for maintaining a climate of collective care within the organisation



What are the key principles for building team psychological care mechanisms?

Clear policies and mechanisms to evaluate the well-being of team members and offer support when needed

A person or mechanism to evaluate and address the well-being of workers at risk of burnout

Financial resources allocated to individual and collective care

Mechanisms for referral to a mental health specialist

Procedures to deal with emergencies



5.4 Step Four: Assessment and course adjustment

The evaluation phase follows the stage of altering the work environment. Its purpose is to gauge the progress made in establishing a healthy and safe work environment and to address the well-being of the work team. It's important to note that the outcomes of the evaluation phase may reveal the need for further actions or adjustments to existing policies, mechanisms, and systems. Errors identified during the plan implementation process should be rectified, followed by a re-evaluation after implementing the necessary improvements and modifications.

The evaluation process can focus on three main elements:

1 Assessment of mental health status:

- Evaluate the mental health status of team members who are most susceptible to psychological distress. This should be conducted by a specialist familiar with the organisation's work environment.
- Utilise psychometric tools to assess the well-being of workers at risk (e.g., psychological and social service providers, emergency response teams, protection teams, documentation, listening, and legal support personnel). Assessment tools may include self-rating scales and individual interviews. In the absence of an external specialist, a well-trained team member with expertise in psychological assessment tools can perform the assessment, provided they are trusted by the rest of the team.
- Ensure the use of pre-established and standardised measurement tools, such as psychosocial burnout scales, **anxiety symptom measures**, or measures of depressive symptoms.

2 Evaluation of work environment satisfaction:

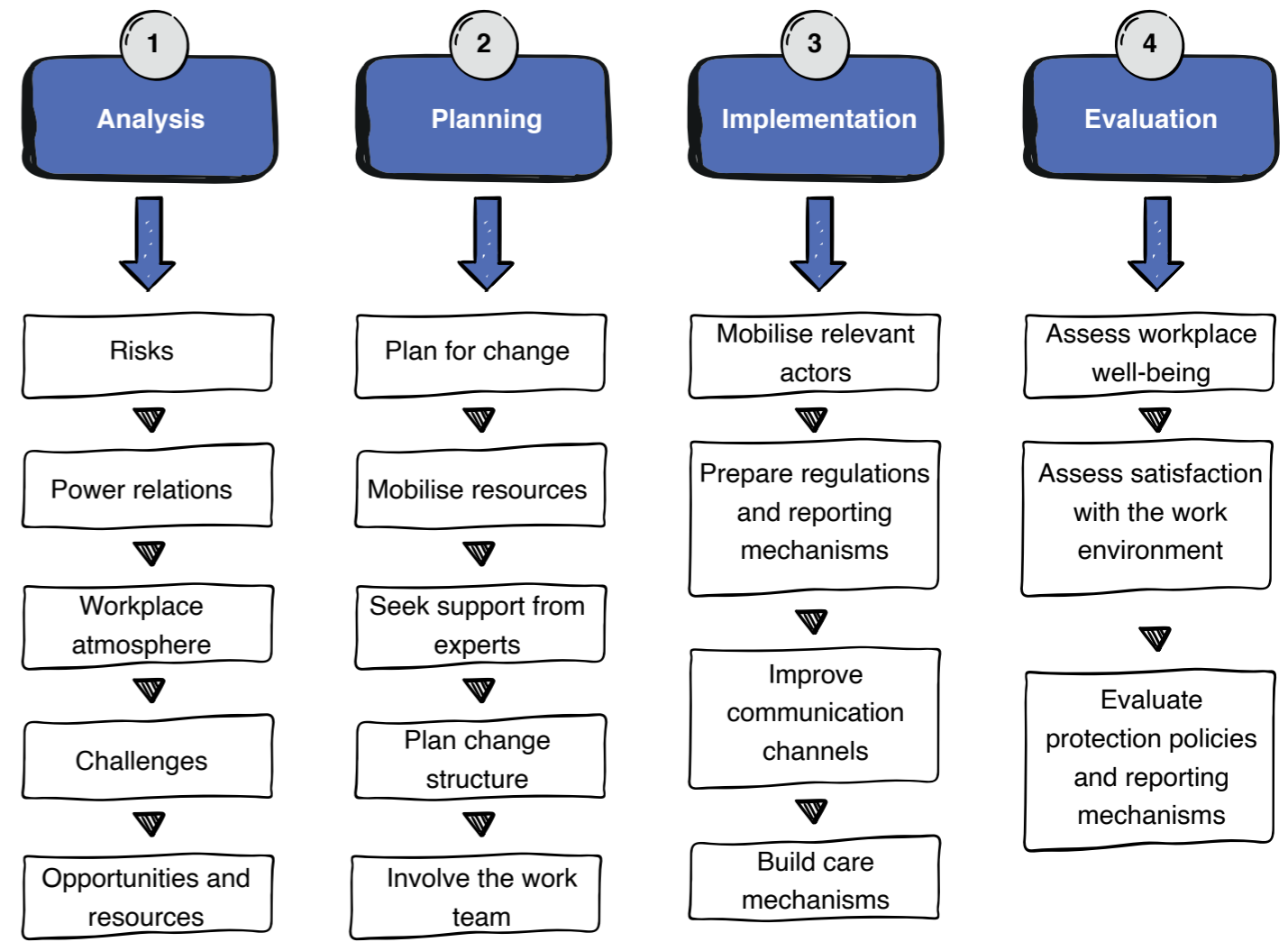
- Measure the work team's overall satisfaction with the work environment concerning mental health considerations.
- Assign a specialised team member, such as the human resources officer or protection officer, to conduct a survey. The survey should gather opinions on the work environment's health, safety, and supportiveness of mental health principles.
- Assess individual perceptions of safety, the work environment's sensitivity to personal circumstances, the availability of mental health improvement tools, the effectiveness of internal communication methods among workers, and the extent of support and solidarity experienced from colleagues. Utilise established **measures related to self-esteem** for this assessment.

3 Effectiveness of protection policies and complaint mechanisms:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of protection policies and complaint mechanisms.
- Use self-assessment measures to gauge the team's confidence in the efficacy and appropriateness of these policies and mechanisms.
- Assess the real-world success of these mechanisms in handling instances of abuse or violence within the work environment, if applicable.
- Evaluate their effectiveness in achieving gender justice, providing reparations for those who have been abused, and assisting in their recovery from the effects of abuse.

By comprehensively evaluating these three elements, organisations can continually enhance their efforts to create a safe and supportive work environment that prioritises the mental health and well-being of their team members.

Figure 8: Summary of the elements of the cycle of change



6. Concluding Remarks

Upon reaching the evaluation stage, the cycle of change is concluded. It's important to reiterate, however, that reaching the fourth step of the change process doesn't mean that the mission of improving the organisation's work environment is complete, nor does it imply that the work environment has achieved an ideal state. Rather, this is a continuous cycle, necessitating periodic reviews and further enhancements to attain better outcomes, followed by subsequent evaluations and modifications, and so forth.

It's also crucial to acknowledge that the mental health of the members of an organisation is directly impacted, for better or for worse, by significant changes within the internal work environment, such as alterations in work structures or shifts in organisational management, as well as changes in the external environment surrounding the organisation. Such circumstances may require adjustments in any of the aforementioned elements to effectively respond to these changes.

Eventually, subsequent reviews and improvements will become more streamlined and effective, especially after the work team has gained a deeper understanding of the nature of the process. The early-stage dialogues regarding the organisation's values, strengths, weaknesses, and the needs and expectations of team members - along with the nature of their relationships - will serve as a foundation for enhancing the work climate. Moreover, they will help in identifying and addressing potential interaction issues among team members in the future.

Completing the first cycle of change showcases that the organisation recognises the importance of striving to create a fair, safe, and healthy work environment. It also denotes the organisation's commitment to sustaining that environment. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to declare an ongoing commitment to the continuity of this environment and to make a conscious effort to address any manifestations that might jeopardise the work team's sense of safety and well-being.

As previously mentioned, this guide provides a general framework, and its elements require adjustment, scrutiny, and modification to align with the unique realities and circumstances of each organisation and work team. **The answer to the initial question, "What constitutes a healthy and safe work environment?", will encompass special and additional elements that characterise each organisation and delineate the needs and characteristics of its employees. Therefore, the objectives of the change process and the specifics of its steps should be tailored to each particular team; and each team member has a hand in nurturing and sustaining a healthy climate.**

In conclusion, this toolkit synthesises theoretical concepts from organisational psychology, insights from feminist studies, and practical discussions with a diverse range of activists and organisations. Its future development and enrichment will rely on organisations that will test, challenge, revise, critique, and propose alternative ideas.

Just as the change process is dynamic, ongoing, and without a defined endpoint, we hope that this guide will serve as a starting point for advocating the commitment to concerted efforts in fostering more just, safe, and healthy work environments, with active spaces for discussing how to achieve these objectives.

Appendix: List of key terms

- **Traumatic Events:**

Violent incidents that have a severe psychological impact on individuals after exposure. These events often involve a perceived threat to the person's life or the life of someone close to them. Traumatic events are typically sudden and unexpected, disrupting an individual's normal life, including work, social, and recreational activities.

- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):**

A psychological condition that may occur as a reaction to traumatic experiences. PTSD includes a range of severe and distressing psychological symptoms that can manifest in some individuals after the traumatic event has ended. Key symptoms include hyper arousal, extreme distress when recalling traumatic experiences, re-experiencing the event through intrusive flashbacks or images during wakefulness or disturbing dreams during sleep, resulting in fear or severe emotional turmoil. Individuals with PTSD may also avoid stimuli that could trigger memories of the traumatic event, experience disruptions in social relationships, and develop a negative self-image and outlook on the world. Effective treatment often involves the intervention of psychologists to manage symptoms and aid in recovery.

- **Depression:**

A psychological disorder characterised by an emotional state that affects an individual's thoughts, emotions, and physical well-being. Common manifestations of depression include profound sadness, loss of interest in activities or life in general, a negative self-image, pessimism about the world and others, decreased energy and motivation, and difficulty making decisions. Depression is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, and a decrease in sexual desire.

- **Anxiety:**

An intense feeling of fear or distress that may be directed towards a specific or imagined threat. Anxiety can occur without a clear source of fear. It encompasses cognitive aspects, including disturbing thoughts about oneself (e.g., fear of losing control) or the world (e.g., anticipation of a negative event), emotional aspects (such as feelings of fear or dread), and physiological aspects (including increased heart rate, high blood pressure, and sweating).

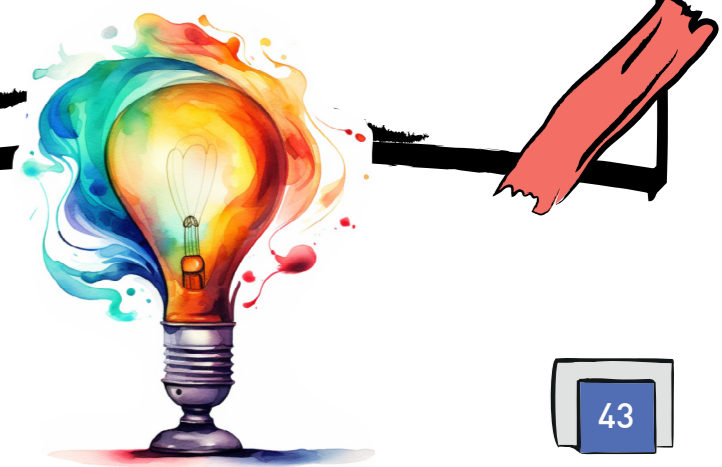


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