



Doing Feminist Legal Work Best Practice Guide 3



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DFLW Best Practice Guide 3

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Feminist Approaches to PhD Supervision

Edited by Maebh Harding and Aoife O'Donoghue

This best practice guide brings together lived experiences from legal academics and PhD students about the value of feminist approaches to PhD supervision. It is hoped that supervisors and PhD students will find this teaching tool empowering and helpful in developing the supervision relationship.

Doing Feminist Legal Work (DFLW) is a new network of Feminist Legal Scholars funded by the Irish Research Council of Ireland under the New Foundations Shared Island Scheme.

What is feminist legal work?

Any form of action that ensures that issues of gender are central in legal policy making, legal education and public discussions.

What do we mean by feminist approaches to PhD supervision?

Feminist approaches to PhD supervision prioritise equality within the supervisor/supervisee relationship, embrace a variety of approaches to scholarship and make the academy more inclusive.



Feminist Approaches to Postgraduate Researcher Supervision

Ruth Houghton

Writing on feminist approaches to postgraduate researcher (PGR) supervision, Szymanski writes that feminist supervision is “a collaborative relationship that is characterized by mutual respect, genuine dialogue, attention to social contextual factors, and responsible action” (Szymanski, 2003: 221). PGR Supervision is often understood as a teacher/student relationship between supervisor and supervisee; a power-dynamic in which the supervisor imparts wisdom and criticism (Grant, 2023). Feminist theories and feminist praxis seeks to dismantle and works to challenge the power-structures underpinning this relationship to construct a relationship of dialogue and reflexivity of learning from all members of the team. In reflecting on what it means to adopt feminist approaches to PGR supervision, I am drawing on my own experiences of being supervised and mentored by feminist academics.

Feminist approaches to supervision might be summarised into four key approaches:

- Inclusion
- Care
- Community
- Relationality

Inclusion: Racially and ethnically minoritised researchers, women, and marginalised researchers face many barriers to entry both in terms of embarking on a PhD programme and in entering the profession (if they pursue academia for example). Feminist supervisors should first take the time to educate themselves about the structural barriers to entry that arise as a result of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, nationality as well as the impacts of socio-economic factors and caring responsibilities. PhD funding structures, university policies on flexible working, on part-time work, and on parental leave, sick leave, and carer’s leave (as well as others) for postgraduate researchers can operate to dissuade applicants from applying to PhD programmes as well as hindering a PGR’s progress once enrolled. Taking cues from the ‘feminist killjoy’ Sara Ahmed (2023), feminist supervisors should continue to expose these barriers and policies in university meetings. Working to mitigate these structural barriers also includes working with applicants to seek out funding schemes where appropriate, working together to establish working practices that accommodate the caring/working responsibilities and commitments of the researcher. Feminist supervisors take time to understand a PGR’s career aspirations and goals, and to facilitate (where possible, and whilst being mindful of competing demands on their energy and time) opportunities to meaningfully include them on projects, in workshops, seminar etc that would be beneficial to their PhD journey and career trajectory.

Care: It is perhaps too simplistic, but at the forefront of feminist approaches to supervision is the reminder that a PhD researcher is more than their project; as supervisors we are working with a person who has dreams, passions and aspirations, as well as personal lives, challenges and potential barriers. Feminist scholarship

is (rightly) nervous about the implications of focusing on care given the role society places on women as care-givers (Grant, 2023: 16), and the devaluation of care within society as a result of being conceptualised as women’s work (Fannin and Perrier, 2017: 140). Care in supervision means both thinking ahead and helping to support those dreams and aspirations, as well as being equipped to respond appropriately to challenges and barriers. The Newcastle University Wellbeing Team, for example, offer a course on ‘PGR Supervisors who CARE’, where CARE is broken down into: Champion positive health and wellbeing; Accept difference; Respond appropriately; Exercise self-care. Feminist approaches to CARE include, taking time to learn about the wider-university wellbeing and disability support services that are available. Understanding how these services work is part of then being equipped to respond appropriately and reflexively to the needs of PGRs. Taking time to understand the researcher’s specific learning styles, needs and practices, and working together to develop meaningful ways of giving feedback on draft work is a key part of ensuring Inclusion. Practising, and then making explicit, the exercise of self-care could be through setting boundaries and modelling (where possible) a healthy work/life balance, such that postgraduate researchers feel able to reject the model of the workaholic academic.

Community: The PhD can be an isolating journey, and so building communities is important. As a “feminist supervisor”, creating space for PGRs to come together to share works-in-progress or to participate in reading groups can work to create a sense of community. Ensuring that these groups are accessible (reflecting on location, dates and times) is key to maintaining an Inclusive community. One key aspect of this Community is its role in dismantling the pervasive image of the “lone hero” academic or the “lone male genius” (see Grant, 2023; Fannin and Perrier, 2017). Creating communities of shared practice challenges this competitive and isolationist idea of the PhD experience. Whilst comparison and competition can be motivating for some, they can be destructive for others’ self-esteem and self-worth. Making time and space for the development of communities in which researchers feel safe and secure to have the confidence to “paddle their own canoe”, is part of feminist approaches to supervision.

Relationality: Feminist scholarship has long exposed the power-dynamic of the supervisor-supervisee relationship (see Grant, 2023). In feminist supervision, this hierarchical relationship is replaced with a reflexive dialogue; a dialogue where supervisor and supervisee alike are undergoing processes of reflection and growth (see Bryant and Jaworski, 2015: 12). Practices will need to be revisited and revised throughout the PhD journey. As part of this dialogue, a “feminist supervisor” is prepared to unlearn what they thought they knew, what counts as knowledge production, and what constitutes knowledge exchange (Heathcote and Kula, 2023). Feminist approaches to PGR supervision should not be siloed according to the type of thesis; this work is not tied to projects that utilise feminist approaches or feminist methods, nor should these practices only relate to projects that explore questions of gender, sexuality, and/or intersectionality. Rather, feminist approaches to PGR supervision should be informing PGR supervision throughout Law schools and universities.

References can be found in the further resources section.

Evolving as a supervisor

Robin Hickey

Dictionary definitions of “supervision” refer to surgeons directing the work of junior doctors in surgery, or military superiors giving orders about how a mission should unfold. Such hierarchies are also found in a classical understanding of the PhD, which positions supervisor as master and guardian of knowledge, and student as a petitioner seeking to earn entry to the established ranks. In my practice of supervision, I have tried to aim for a more level space, which sees supervisor and student as partners on a shared endeavour. The supervisor’s task is to “watch over” the project, providing the advice and perspective of one who has been further down an academic road.

When I think back on my early practise of supervising PhD students I see traces of a more hierarchical leaning. I might have expected myself to read all the cases independently, to have come to my own view, nearly to have done my own parallel version of the project. I might have been quick to give a steer based on my own view of the argument. Sometimes of course that’s exactly what students are looking for – on the other end of the hierarchical frame they’re looking for the “right” answer, the master’s approval – but there are risks of too much deference to the supervisor’s view, and insufficient nurturing of the student’s voice(s). There is a balance to be struck, one in which supervision operates within a framework of mutual trust, and there are many ways to foster this trust.

In my practice now, supervision meetings are framed as a place to talk about the project together. In the early stages I will spend more time reading the sources, but so as to inform a general view about how the student is handling these rather than to steer overly or impose my own opinions. I will share thoughts and feedback gently, but always as comments, whether in discussions or marked up on a text. I very rarely track changes on a draft – even my thoughts on matters of style or layout are positioned as reflections for a student to consider in coming to their own view. Tasks, timeframes and deadlines are the product of discussion and consensus, and the student has a clear voice in working out what bit of the project to undertake next and developing their own sense of the ‘whole thesis’. And I aim to meet my students regularly between supervisions – coffees where the conversation can carry on, inviting them to seminars and talks within the School, introducing them to colleagues, supporting them to prepare for conferences, reading drafts for presentations or publication. We can reject a mode of supervision which positions student as petitioner seeking admission to the established ranks while still recognising that one of the great joys and responsibilities of the supervisor is to support the student to become integrated in an academic community and to see themselves as an academic.

Tailoring PhD Supervision to the Student

Fiona de Londras

The social architecture of PhD supervision has long been based on a master/apprentice model at odds with the proclaimed aspiration of doctoral training: the development of an independent researcher who has produced original work of intellectual significance. However, that disjuncture has not prevented ‘top down’ approaches to supervision becoming the paradigm, including in law schools. However, that is not the only way to be a supervisor.

Taking a feminist approach to supervising a PhD and supporting a doctoral student in their intellectual work requires the supervisor to practice humility, patience, generosity, and respect. As well as engaging with the thesis itself, it places value on the work that goes into supporting someone to develop their own approaches, their confidence, and their sense of professional and intellectual identity. All of this is harder, more time consuming, and more emotionally labour intensive than simply marking up draft chapters with red pen and ‘supporting’ professional development through a kind of ‘benign neglect’. If it’s so hard, then, why do it? Simply because it is both coherent with the nature of doctoral training and more fulfilling and fun than the alternative. It is wonderful to see a student develop mastery of their subject before your eyes; to learn from doctoral students; to encourage them; to support them; to form meaningful, life-long intellectual and professional relationships with them that are based on care and respect rather than patronage or status. Like everyone, I am sure I fail at this more often than I succeed. I also know that some students I have worked with have neither wanted nor responded well to it. For some people a PhD is simply a stage in their professional journey that they want to finish: they want to be told what to do and to do it.

The key, in my view, is to work with the doctoral researcher to understand their motivations, needs, preferences, and ways of working and then to support them in the way that makes sense to them.

Feminist PhD supervision within a larger research project

Amy Strecker

I am a relatively junior academic when it comes to supervising doctoral students, having supervised three PhDs to completion prior to joining UCD. I am currently supervising a further three PhD researchers as part of an ERC-funded project, who are close to completion. In truth, I never thought of my approach to supervision as necessarily feminist until I started to reflect on my own practice and heard it being described as such.

Mentoring a team as part of a larger research project is somewhat different to supervising PhDs working on individual projects because of the existence of collective research objectives, a timeline, funding body requirements, and the nature of group collaboration. However, from having been a researcher myself within a larger project, I know first-hand how important it is to be flexible and seek input into the overall research direction from the team. This involves openness, a lack of ego, and a willingness to learn from the PhD researchers just as much as it involves being able to guide and motivate them. It's an iterative process.

In my view, the supervisor-supervisee relationship is based on mutual respect and dialogue, albeit where there is an inevitable power imbalance: I am deeply aware of the privilege of being in a permanent academic position and consider it my responsibility to use this position to support mentees – both in their academic work and more generally in a pastoral sense. This can be frustrated by wider structural issues with the status of PhDs in Ireland (including the lack of the existence of maternity leave), but a feminist approach to supervision attempts to improve conditions that are within our power to change (while also advocating for changes in the broader system where possible). As the prayer goes, grant us the serenity to accept the things we can't change, courage to change the things we can (including in ourselves as supervisors), and wisdom to know the difference.

Feminist PhD Supervision (And Beyond): A View from Three Places

Alice King, Vanessa E Munro & Lotte Young Andrade

Vanessa: I had a fantastic PhD supervisor - so much so that, at the time, I didn't fully appreciate it because they made it seem effortless and routine. It was only with the benefit of hindsight and navigating my own way through being a supervisor that I properly realised how challenging the role can be. Part of the challenge, but also the beauty, of PhD supervision is, I think, that no two projects, relationships, or ECRs, are the same, so it's a constant process of learning for all involved. What I try to do, with varying degrees of success, is meet PhD students where they are, remind them that the research journey is a long one - with peaks, valleys, speed bumps and potholes - and encourage them to strive for their best while being pragmatic about the PhD 'end game', open to competing perspectives, and - perhaps most importantly - kind to themselves in the process.

Alice: I completed my PhD (supervised by Vanessa) in 2022, looking at attitudes and responses to sexual misconduct at elite UK universities. With Vanessa and Lotte, I've recently been a Postdoc Research Fellow on a project exploring CPS responses to rape (Operation Soteria), whilst developing publications from my own research. One of the things that has been most defining, I think, in terms of a feminist approach across these experiences has been the building of non-hierarchical relationships in which everyone is encouraged to reflect collectively about the substance of the work, how to approach it conceptually, ethically and methodologically, and what impact it has on us as researchers. Feeling, expressing and responding to the frustrations provoked by the subject matter of the work and/or research process has emerged, for me, as a feminist method; one that has provoked insights, improved skills, and built deeper collegiality.

Lotte: I'm currently in the second year of my PhD, looking at the evolving (legal) role of domestic abuse caseworkers in England. With Alice and Vanessa, I recently worked on Operation Soteria, and prior to that I worked with Vanessa on a project on Domestic Homicide Reviews. One of the things I've taken from these experiences has been the importance of creating 'feminist safe spaces' to learn and develop. When approaching a subject matter with emotional sensitivity, feminist collaboration can help reframe such experiences as a positive strength and valuable research tool, rather than something that suggests a lack of resilience or rigour. I think it has been implied or said to so many of us that we're 'too emotional' or 'not objective' in responding to the subject matter of our research, but feminist research communities - big and small - have helped me to have more confidence in challenging that in how I now approach my own work.

Broadening Research Horizons

Richard Bunworth

My PhD proposal did not have a feminist angle when I commenced my research at UCD, and was instead strictly focused on competition law and digital markets. However, I was encouraged by my supervisor, Dr Mary Catherine Lucey, to complete a very interesting module in Feminist and Egalitarian Research that completely reoriented the direction in which I wanted to take my thesis. I found the idea of feminist research very inspiring and was supported by my supervisor in exploring this, as she agreed that I take a month to prepare an alternative PhD proposal. Thus, she played a pivotal role in granting me the space that I needed to think deeply about what I would like to achieve through my research, rather than rushing me to make immediate decisions or to continue pursuing my original idea, which was relatively well-confined and built on previous research that I carried out so was arguably an easier avenue for me.

Dr Lucey's interest and experience in feminist research in competition law was essential in assisting me in crafting my new proposal. Her knowledge of the methods involved and their application gave me great direction in formulating both a research topic and how I would go about it. Her willingness to discuss ideas that were in a very early stage and provide feedback on how I could direct them proved invaluable. This was particularly the case because the relationship between feminism and competition law is relatively undeveloped, so the assistance of an excellent and supportive supervisor who had experience in this area was crucial, as I feel that I would not have been capable of blending the two without her guidance. In addition, I was able to work on a separate research project of Dr Lucey which further opened my mind to the various ways in which I could think about the subject. Therefore, as someone who had little experience in feminist methodologies in law, having the experience of a dedicated and supportive supervisor to rely on was essential. I feel incredibly fortunate to benefit from such a nurturing and invigorating relationship that grants me the space I require to develop my project.

Rest, community and support in the PhD experience

Aislinn Fanning

I am not the first person to say – and certainly will not be the last – that the PhD experience can be a lonely one. For me, one of the most rewarding things that has come from doing feminist work as a PhD student has been finding community and support, from those who are also somewhere along the PhD journey, those who are just past it and those who have it far from their sights. Finding community has allowed for sharing ideas and advice, but has also given me amazing friendships that will outlast the PhD. Joining community networks that already exist, or creating your own communities where they do not, should be something that becomes just part of a PhD.

Another thing that can make a PhD experience less daunting and lonely is encouragement and support from PhD supervisors. This might involve very simple things. So, maybe taking time at the beginning to think collectively about what we expect from each other, explaining what others' might expect from PhD students, what opportunities to look out for, or even pointing to opportunities for publishing or presenting at conferences. These things make a big difference in terms of who 'gets' to be an academic and who doesn't. Lastly, one of the most supportive things a PhD supervisor can do is treat rest as productive and important, both in their supervision and in their own approach to working. When surrounded by others who seem to be always producing work, it can be difficult to step back and take a break. A supportive supervisor who encourages and values taking time off, or even finding a balance in your day-to-day life, can remove much of the guilt attached to resting when there are external pressures to be 'productive' all of the time.

Building Trust and Being Brave

Lucy Crompton

I'm very invested in my PhD project, and it's easy to take comments on my writing personally. Learning through experience to trust my supervisor's feedback has been vital to my progress.

From the outset, I've had to submit writing before every supervision meeting. Looking back, I can see how this routine has driven the project. I've realised how much writing helps me to think: I usually have to work through multiple drafts to refine my argument and present it persuasively. Crucially, regular deadlines make me submit the current draft, whether or not I feel ready to. I've submitted some rubbish over the years, which can feel horribly exposing.

My supervisor provides well directed, non-judgmental feedback, aimed at helping me to persuade my reader. Comments are pitched at a level appropriate to the state of my writing. For example, if I've submitted a big old mess, she'll help me to revise the structure. If I've submitted something great, she might suggest tweaks to the wording. I know that every supervision meeting will give me a shove in the right direction.

Although my instincts tell me the writing is never quite ready to show to anyone, I have found it easier to resist this perfectionism as trust has built with my supervisor. I'm better at recognising when I'm in the weeds, and can ask for help rather than wasting weeks tweaking ineffectively.

I have to play my part in the process too, working on my resilience and trying not to be defensive. I still don't enjoy submitting work that I know is substandard; it gets a little easier each time being brave gets me on point feedback that makes the piece better.

Contributors



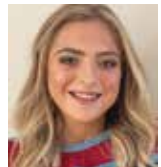
Richard Bunworth is a PhD student at the Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin, and was the recipient of a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Award to pursue his thesis. His research is focused on European competition law and its intersection with the social values underlying the EU's Treaties. In addition, he is a qualified solicitor, having spent six years working in a corporate law firm in Dublin and London.



Lucy Crompton is a solicitor (non practising) and has been a Senior Lecturer in Law at Staffordshire University and Manchester Metropolitan University. She is currently undertaking an ESRC funded PhD at the University of Warwick looking at gender discrimination in the English law of financial remedies on divorce, supervised by Dr Maebh Harding. Her research uses feminist critical discourse analysis, informed by social reproduction feminism, to examine financial remedies case law.



Fiona de Londras is the Barber Professor of Jurisprudence at Birmingham Law School and Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer at the College of Arts and Law, University of Birmingham. She has examined 12 PhD thesis and supervised 15 doctoral students to completion. Her current research group has four students, hailing from Ireland, Switzerland, Turkey, and China respectively.



Aislinn Fanning is a PhD student at Queens University Belfast School of Law. Her research uses queer feminist approaches to evaluate how anti-discrimination law addresses discrimination based on gender and sexuality in post-1998 Northern Ireland. It considers the role of addressing this kind of discrimination in transition from conflict.



Dr Maebh Harding is a Lecturer in Family and Child Law at University College Dublin. She is a co-editor of *Family Law in Context*, a new critical textbook on Irish family law published by Clarus Press in 2023. Her research combines a critical feminist perspective with empirical, historical and doctrinal rigour to challenge legal regulation of family life. She is a founder of the Doing Feminist Legal Work Network.



Robin Hickey is Professor of Law and Dean of Education in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Queen's University Belfast. He is a former Head of Queen's School of Law, and a current member of its Athena Swan Institutional Self-Assessment Team. Robin's research concerns foundational concepts of property like "ownership" and "possession", and how these interact with civil and criminal rules protecting property. He has written about the application of these concepts to contemporary global challenges including modern slavery and the reconstruction of cultural heritage post conflict, and currently is exploring the relationship between ownership and food waste. He is a past President of the Association for Law, Property and Society, and has supervised doctoral students in the fields



Ruth Houghton is a Senior Lecturer in Law at Newcastle University, Deputy DPD for PGR, and the programme director for the Global Legal Studies LLB. In 2023, she was named & Law Teacher of the Year; at the Northern Law Awards. Her research utilises feminist methodologies combined with law and humanities approaches to explore ideas of democracy and constituent power in global constitutionalism. She has published in journals such as *Global Constitutionalism* and the *Leiden Journal of International Law* on topics including feminist utopias, feminist manifestos, and democracy.



Alice King is a Lecturer in Law at London Southbank University. Previously, she worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on Operation Soteria at the University of Warwick and & Defendants as Victims; at the University of York. She is interested in the relationship between law, gender and sexual behaviours, specifically in the university context.



Vanessa Munro is a Professor at Warwick Law School, who has researched and published for over 25 years on legal and policy responses to gender-based violence, in Scotland and England & Wales. She has supervised research projects on various aspects of legal responses to domestic abuse, sexual violence, sexual harassment and sex work.



Professor Aoife O'Donoghue is Professor of Law at Queens University Belfast. Her research examines how legal structures enable or prevent states, institutions and individuals to (not) act and the ramifications of such actions. She researches utopias and tyranny and the impact of Brexit. She was one of the Directors of the Northern/Ireland Feminist Judgments Project and now co-leads Feminist Constitutional Futures. is a founder of the Doing Feminist Legal Work Network.



Amy Strecker is an Associate Professor at UCD School of Law, where she teaches on culture, heritage and human rights. She is currently leading an ERC-funded research project on the role of international law in facilitating spatial justice and injustice through its conceptualisation of property rights in land (PROPERTY[IN]JUSTICE).



Lotte Young Andrade is a PhD candidate at Warwick Law School, with research interests in gender-based violence, feminist activism, gender and the law, and intersectional feminist theories. Her doctoral research is exploring how domestic violence charities in England have adapted their support for victim-survivors after legal aid cuts.



Further Resources

M E David, 'A Personal Reflection on doctoral supervision from a feminist perspective' in Melanie Walker and Pat Thomson (eds), *The Routledge Doctoral Supervisor's Companion* (Routledge 2010)

Melissa J Fickling and Jodi L Tangen, 'A Journey Toward Feminist Supervision: A Dual Autoethnographic Inquiry' (2017) 9(2) *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, Article 9

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