

# Inequity & power in Evaluation – the role of Feminist Evaluation

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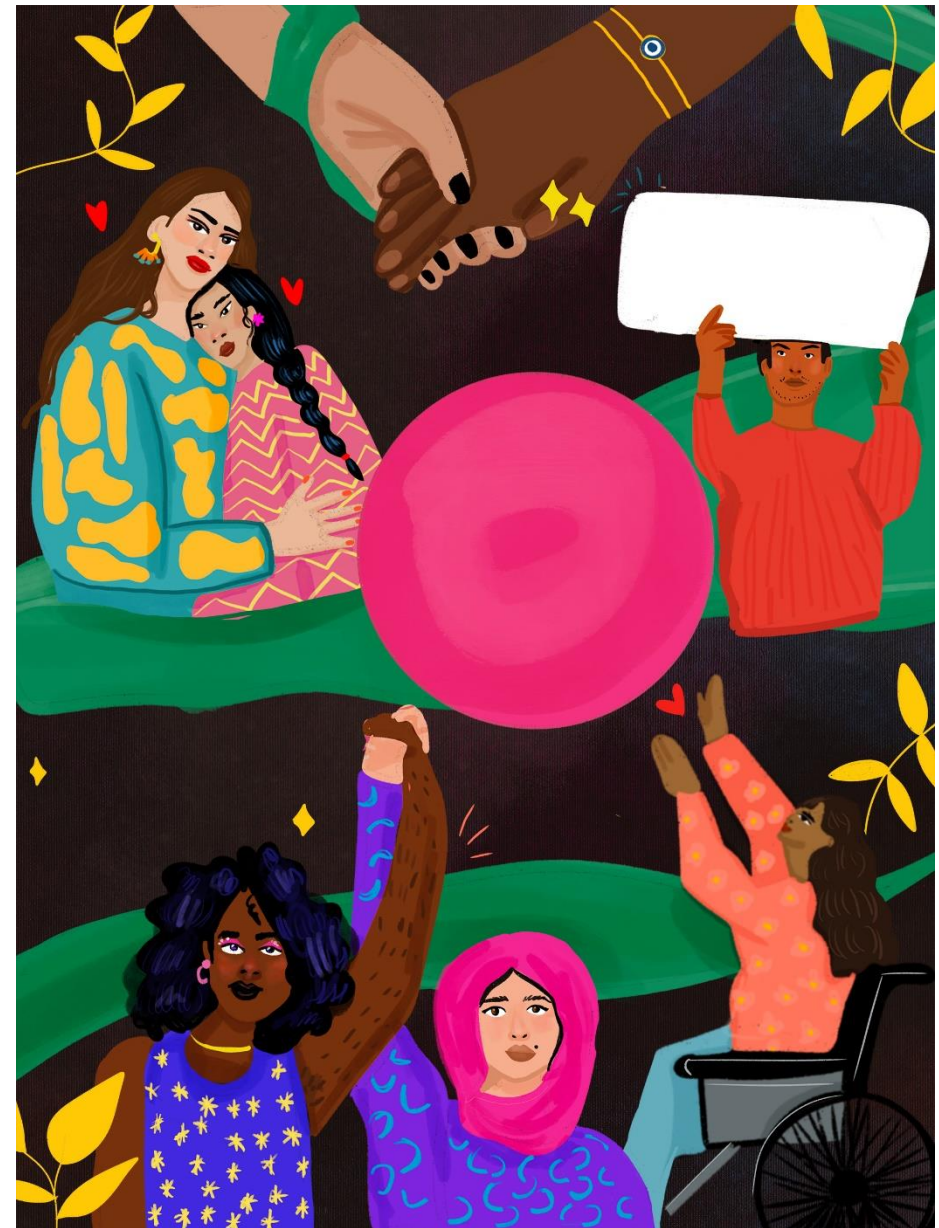


## Introduction

Over the past decade, many Civil Society Organisations have experimented with Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL). Interest in Feminist MEL has also reached the agenda of many Strategic Partners funded under the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework. Localisation and decolonisation have encouraged Strategic Partners to rethink how they do MEL. Both agendas share a focus on power shifts, with a common belief that this should also be reflected in our MEL practices. Discussions have shown a big difference between progressive Feminist MEL approaches and donor-driven quality criteria for MEL, the latter shaping MEL quality criteria under the Strengthening Civil Society policy framework. In response, we initiated a learning track on Feminist MEL, with several committed consortia members.

We began by exploring the key principles of Feminist MEL, which has led to [this publication](#). To delve deeper into the practical implementation of these principles, we hosted three additional learning sessions, focusing on planning for a summative evaluation, a Feminist approach to Outcome Harvesting and Feminist approaches to co-creating Theories of Change and indicators. With the rich knowledge and experiences shared during these sessions, it is now crucial to ask ourselves: where do we currently stand in relation to Feminist MEL?

In this three-part blog series, we reflect on this question and share our hopes for the future of international development in the light of Feminist MEL.



# Inequity & power in Evaluation – the role of Feminist Evaluation

## Feminist MEL and Decolonisation

Feminist evaluation celebrates the diversity of knowledge and puts learning right at the heart of development initiatives. It invites actors to engage in *praxis* – it is not a project management tool but rather an approach for action-reflection-action that centres the lived experience of those impacted by the change. When MEL is a learning journey, it becomes valuable and a key part of making sense of the changes experienced by local communities.

However, the results-driven approach of donors and funders in the past decades shifted the role of MEL. Its design and practice became a tool for project control as more and more development organisations, even grassroots and community-based organisations, became focused on reporting results rather than learning. The dominant MEL practice ignores power asymmetries<sup>1</sup>: the institutional power relations, political and colonial asymmetries, expert power, and financial resourcing inequities. These all affect how we have engaged with monitoring, evaluation, and most critically: learning. We cannot decolonise the development sector without making MEL more equitable and useful to those who are directly impacted by change.

Here are some of the reasons why we need to decolonise MEL, gained from a [workshop](#) that I recently participated in:

- MEL activities involve **making a judgement** – But who is making the judgement, and how are they determining whether something has value (as I understand this is an exercise of power)?
- MEL frameworks often **focus on upward accountability**, making it externally driven (as I've experienced, these are defined mainly by donors in the global north).
- MEL frameworks often **pre-determine what we want to learn** and what success looks like. (We miss opportunities to learn something more useful or relevant.)
- With current MEL frameworks, the most worrying part is that we **overburden local organisations** with so many requirements that time is shifted away to work on their core mission.
- There is a **strong focus on upward accountability to donors** rather than accountability to those closer to the change (impact groups).
- There is too much **focus on success rather than learning** (and less appetite for failure and not knowing everything in advance).
- There is a **universalisation of Western academic practice** and an increasing overlap of MEL with technical academic research methods.
- The increase of **external consultants who measure change** – mostly 'experts' (from the Western world with academic qualifications).
- MEL outputs are often **formal, written, long reports** in English.

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<sup>1</sup> [INTRAC: Decolonising monitoring and evaluation: from control to learning](#)

## Shifting the Power & the Evaluation Quality Standards

Shift the power is a movement that centres the actions of individuals, organisations and networks that reject externally imposed solutions and believe that another way is possible - one which centres people and communities as actors, decision-makers and investors in their own development processes and societies<sup>2</sup>. Feminist evaluation is relevant and contributes to the Shift the Power debate as it challenges inequity and power imbalances in the way evaluation is designed and practiced, which currently is donor-driven and focuses on compliance and accountability.

To truly [shift the power](#), we need to place less value on the three areas in which most donors “assess” the value of development initiatives<sup>3</sup>:

1. traditional definitions of reach or scale.
2. cost per beneficiary/cost-effectiveness.
3. pre-determined indicators of quality defined by donors and funders.

Feminist evaluation shifts the power by questioning this dominant framework that guides current “quality” evaluation practices. Feminist evaluation, meanwhile, draws on the feminist research epistemology, which is about knowledge<sup>4</sup> and learning. Feminist researchers contend that for research findings to be credible, researchers need to provide, as and if needed, various types of capacity building, mentoring, facilitating and support to ensure that the creation and use of knowledge from women/social groups, of all

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<sup>2</sup> [#ShiftthePower Treehouse](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Firelight Foundation: What does it take to shift power in philanthropy?](#)

<sup>4</sup> [IDEV: Making Feminist Evaluation practical](#)

backgrounds and experiences, are included<sup>5</sup>. Further, feminist evaluation is rooted in analysis that acknowledges challenging power and patriarchal or colonial structures as non-linear, complex and precarious<sup>6</sup>. It examines how discrimination based on gender is systemic and structural and leads to social injustice, while it examines the ways that different forms of discrimination intersect to create power inequalities and marginalisation. Hence, FMEL requires different forms of data and analysis, including (but not limited to) data collection driven by and shared by programme participants; analysis frameworks that embed and offer a basic power/gender analysis; and prioritising language justice and accessibility.

## Feminist MEL and Locally Led Development

Locally led development puts local people and their communities in the driver's seat. They know the problems that they are facing as well as the solutions that can work best in their context. *So why not ask local organisations what success looks like for them rather than predetermining indicators of success? Or why does not knowing in advance become less attractive for funding?*

Making MEL designed and practised with the key purpose of learning over donor accountability can promote transformative change as it generates knowledge that is more relevant to and valuable for local communities.

“ *So why not ask local organisations what success looks like for them rather than predetermining indicators of success?* ”

<sup>5</sup> [IDEV: Making Feminist Evaluation practical](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Partos: Rethinking MEL. A guide for a Feminist approach.](#)

## What are the key takeaways on adopting FMEL in summative evaluation?

### Importance of power and context

To shift the power, we have to acknowledge the power asymmetries and recognise the important role feminist MEL plays in shifting the power. Evaluations should serve as a true knowledge activity more than compliance: people who are experiencing the change, their voices and their lived realities should be at the centre of evaluations. They are the best ones to interpret the data generated by evaluations. External evaluators are supposed to be facilitators and not the ones driving the process of knowledge generation. As a facilitator, they have to recognise their own positionality and responsibility to try to make the [evaluation process more equitable](#). Measuring transformative change entails valuing the voices and insights of those who experience the change. Understanding the context is key in valuing the significance of this change.

### Focus on Learning versus Accountability

When evaluations are designed to focus more on joint learning, it encourages reflection among evaluation participants: about their context, the need to adapt their activities to the shifts in the context, unlearn from their experience of change and why failure is something important to discuss and learn from. This learning-oriented evaluation shifts away from the focus of collecting evaluation data to provide evidence of results and “report to donors” to meet accountability requirements.

### Re-claiming knowledge

Northern/ donor-centric/ and technocratic expert knowledge is not the only type of knowledge that exists. The dominance of this type of knowledge limits funders’ understanding of what quality evaluation should be about. Indigenous ways of knowing and measuring, and culturally informed methods of doing MEL are abundant and their importance needs to be recognised and valued more. *What if we didn’t focus on our own measure of value but ask communities to define what is valuable to them?* These can be about what they value, such as connections, purpose, safety, and solidarity, which are difficult to measure, yet fundamental to community development.

Who defines the evaluation quality standards is a question that we always need to ask if we want to dismantle power imbalances and unequal power relationships in MEL, and evaluation practice in particular.

“ *What if we didn’t focus on our own measure of value but ask communities to define what is valuable to them?* ”

### Dialogue matters

We can only unpack power and truly address unequal power relationships if we are in an honest and respectful dialogue with those whose power is dominating the development practice. Donors/funders are encouraged to be more listening, trusting, and humbling and commit to making the space for this dialogue to be truly empowering for those who want to transform MEL and evaluation practices.

### Centering local/grassroots actors

Moving away from the traditional paradigm of “program or project” success, we can see a more powerful form of success - [deep and lasting systemic change at the grassroots/ community level](#). Grassroots organisations see their own effectiveness not as a project, a program or a service, but as the capacity to build and use relationships with local stakeholders towards systemic change; they are holders and sharers of knowledge, experience, and expertise; and they are strategic activists and practitioners – that are important for both local and global discussions and decisions<sup>7</sup>.

### Embrace Feminist MEL to dismantle unequal power relations

From feminist MEL, we learn that evaluation is never neutral. We need to be more aware of our positionality, privileges, and power as evaluation facilitators or participants. We need to rethink bias and why centring on people’s voices and lived realities is never a bias from a feminist perspective.

Decolonising MEL, especially evaluation, has a long way to go. Right at the heart of this is embracing feminist MEL principles and being intentional about the need to learn, unlearn, and dismantle unequal power relationships in development.

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<sup>7</sup> [Firelight Foundation: What does it take to shift power in philanthropy?](#)

## Colophon

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