

# Why is Outcome Harvesting a good fit with Feminist MEL?

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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.



## Why is Outcome Harvesting a good fit with Feminist MEL?

For the past 15 years, [Gender at Work](#) has been collaborating with evaluators and organisations across the globe who are serious about bringing feminist principles into their MEL practice. Back then, there were already alarm bells sounded that typical donor M&E frameworks were not “fit for purpose” for tracking and measuring gender equality, movement building and other social change initiatives, since *“most tools do not allow for tracking negative change, reversals, backlash, unexpected change, and other processes that push back or shift the direction of a positive change trajectory”*<sup>1</sup>.

Since then, feminist evaluators have been looking for tools that allow us to capture the *“two steps forward, one step back”* phenomenon that accompanies much of the work of feminist and social justice activists and organisations. Recently, we came across an article by Barbara Klugman: [What is feminist about outcome harvesting?](#) A longtime Outcome Harvesting (OH) practitioner, Barbara’s article provided valuable insights into why Outcome Harvesting is such a good fit for those wanting to practice feminist MEL.

These insights formed the basis of the Partos learning session on outcome harvesting in July, which was facilitated by the MEL team from the Power Up! Consortium members PEKKA and Gender at Work, with JASS as the lead [Power Up! – JASS](#).

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<sup>1</sup> See [“Capturing Change in Women’s Realities”](#) by Srilatha Batliwala and Alexandra Pittman, AWID (2010)

## What is Outcome Harvesting, and how are MFA partners using it?

Outcome Harvesting is a monitoring and evaluation methodology used to identify, describe, verify and analyse the changes brought about through a development intervention<sup>2</sup>. Here, we focus mainly on Outcome Harvesting as an evaluation approach, though as a [monitoring tool](#), it offers an alternative to results-based management for tracking progress. Many aspects of Outcome Harvesting align well with feminist MEL.

### Participation

Participation is a central principle of Outcome Harvesting. Those most involved in an intervention take the lead in shaping the evaluation, generating outcomes and making sense of findings based on their experience, knowledge, and location. OH’s coaching style, working with those closest to the activities and outcomes throughout the evaluation, can **build a sense of power and agency** as outcomes are identified and celebrated.

<sup>2</sup> See [Outcome-harvesting.pdf](#) from [www.intrac.org](#)

## Outcome Harvesting as a tool for Feminist MEL

Two specific dimensions of OH especially recommend it as an approach for Feminist MEL practitioners.

First, it provides a compelling alternative to traditional M&E approaches that establish pre-determined outcomes at the beginning of an intervention and track and evaluate changes against these outcomes over time. OH can be used effectively in an evaluation alongside pre-determined outcomes if needed. Instead, **it allows for (positive and negative) outcomes to be identified as they emerge.** This lends OH well to capturing non-linear and complex change or the *“two steps forward, one step back”* phenomenon.

Second, OH **focuses on the contribution of the initiative to outcomes, rather than seeking to attribute changes** directly to the organisation or project. This is critical for feminist and social justice movement work and advocacy where there is an imperative to make visible and name collaboration in contributing to positive gender equality outcomes/results or, even more importantly, in the current context, in holding ground against women’s rights/anti-gender backlash.

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<sup>3</sup> Partos; [Rethinking MEL. A guide for a Feminist approach.](#)

## How does this link to bigger global discussions and challenges?

Of the many themes raised throughout the Partos Learning Series, two points regarding OH are worth highlighting. In the context of donors’ move towards so-called **localisation and locally-led development**, OH provides an example of a MEL methodology that centres the lived experiences and perspectives of women who are those most involved in an “intervention”, not just as participants from which data is extracted for evaluative exercises, but directly engaged in making sense of their experiences, drawing on their “ways of knowing”, defining and owning what change looks like.

This is set against the challenges described in other blogs in this series grounded in primarily Western/Northern methodological and epistemological approaches to **what counts as rigour**<sup>3</sup>. The evaluation guidance from the MFA NL, for example, argues that OH, like many other participatory and inclusive approaches, is not considered a sufficiently rigorous method for substantiating effectiveness and should, if used, be accompanied by a more robust qualitative, if not quantitative, methodologies for establishing causal claims. From a decolonial feminist perspective, there is a need to shift power dynamics, including what counts as rigour. We recently came across the term “inclusive rigour<sup>4</sup>”, which strongly resonates with feminist MEL and would seem to align with OH as well.

<sup>4</sup> The inclusive rigour framework identifies three interconnected domains of evaluation design and practice: effective methodological bricolage, meaningful participation and inclusion, utilisation and impact.

### 3 key takeaways on Outcome Harvesting and Feminist MEL

The OH session allowed participants to share their experiences using the methodology as part of their MEL practice. The discussion was a good reminder that OH itself is not “inherently feminist” and that we need to be attentive to the framework we are using to inform the methodology and the questions guiding the harvest. As one participant noted, *“are we still talking about ‘gender’ or ‘gender equality’ in development? Or are we finally cultivating the audacity to talk about power?”* Related to this, if we aim to decolonise narratives, we also need to pay attention to constructing meaning and making sense of it: *“Is it accounting for the multiplicity of experience in the field? Whose understanding is being centred? Who is it benefitting? Does it prioritise reflexivity and accountability around power relations?”*

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The other key takeaway was that OH takes significant time and resources. The step to substantiate outcomes<sup>5</sup> is an extensive and expensive process. This is true of most of the participatory methods that are consistent with the principles of Feminist MEL. It is critical that we continue to advocate for the time and resources to support such processes.

Finally, participants also shared how they have used OH alongside pathways analysis in their Theory of Change and are often surprised to see which outcome contributes to which pathway. These OH sensemaking workshops with social actors engaged in supported

activities are valuable moments for creating shared understandings of how change is happening.

### Join forces for a paradigm shift in evaluation

In the current global context of backlash against gender equality, women’s rights and feminist movements, the need for donors to adopt approaches to MEL that embrace the reality of how power change happens – “one step forward, two steps back” – are all the more critical. Logical frameworks, RBM, and predetermined outcomes and indicators to track and evaluate change are simply not “fit for purpose”.

There is greater recognition of this disconnect across the evaluation community, including among some donors, alongside the coalescing of perspectives on what it takes to practice MEL in ways consistent with the stated values and commitments of decolonisation, feminist foreign policies and localisation. This gives me hope. Those of us advocating for the uptake of feminist MEL need to find more opportunities to join forces with Global South-led networks for a paradigm shift in evaluation alongside the broader efforts to #ShiftThePower.

<sup>5</sup> See the 6 steps of [Outcome Harvesting](#), by Intrac.

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