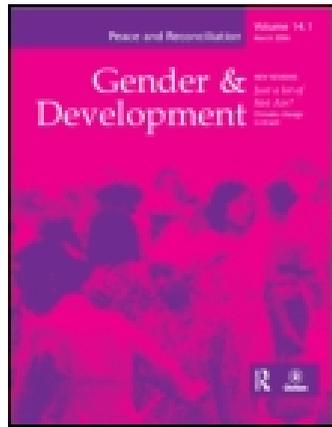


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Capturing changes in women's lives: the experiences of Oxfam Canada in applying feminist evaluation principles to monitoring and evaluation practice

Carol Miller and Laura Haylock

Current trends in the aid environment pose significant challenges for effectively evaluating gender equality and women's rights programmes. This requires approaches that can capture and tell the complex story of how gender power relationships are challenged and changed. This article describes Oxfam Canada's efforts to develop a mixed-methods approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning rooted in feminist evaluation principles, for Engendering Change, a multi-year, donor co-funded 'stand-alone' women's rights programme. The approach we developed was shaped by the external aid environment with its results orientation, as well as by our aspirations to bring feminist principles to our monitoring and evaluation practice. The article describes our understanding of feminist evaluation and what we believed it offered to strengthen our approach to monitoring and evaluation. Three examples of evaluative exercises used in the Engendering Change programme are provided to demonstrate how we attempted to bring the principles of feminist evaluation into practice.

Las tendencias registradas actualmente en el ámbito de la ayuda humanitaria presentan retos significativos a la hora de evaluar con eficacia los programas orientados a promover la igualdad de género y los derechos de las mujeres. Ello determina que se requieran enfoques que documenten y relaten la historia compleja en torno a cómo son enfrentadas las relaciones de poder de género y cómo se transforman. El presente artículo examina las acciones implementadas por Oxfam Canadá para desarrollar un enfoque de métodos mixtos destinado a monitorear, evaluar y aprender –con base en los principios feministas de evaluación– utilizado por Engendering Change, un programa de derechos de las mujeres, autónomo, multianual y cofinanciado por los donantes. La perspectiva desarrollada fue moldeada por el ámbito de la ayuda externa y, a su interior, por el énfasis puesto en los resultados, así como por el deseo de las autoras de incorporar los principios feministas a su práctica de monitoreo y evaluación. El artículo da cuenta de lo que las autoras comprenden por evaluación feminista, así como de su opinión respecto a las formas en que este tipo de evaluación fortaleció su enfoque en lo que respecta al monitoreo y a la evaluación. Asimismo, brinda tres ejemplos de ejercicios

evaluativos utilizados en Engendering Change, con el fin de demostrar el modo en que las autoras intentaron poner en práctica los principios de la evaluación feminista.

Les tendances actuelles observées dans l'environnement de l'aide soulèvent des défis considérables pour évaluer efficacement l'égalité entre les sexes et les programmes en faveur des droits des femmes. Cela requiert des approches qui peuvent saisir et relater l'histoire complexe de la manière dont les relations de pouvoir entre les sexes sont mises en cause et modifiées. Cet article décrit les efforts d'Oxfam Canada pour élaborer une approche employant un panachage de méthodes pour assurer un suivi, une évaluation et un apprentissage ancrés dans les principes de l'évaluation féministe, pour Engendering Change, un programme de défense des droits des femmes autonome, sur plusieurs années et cofinancé par des bailleurs de fonds. L'approche que nous avons élaborée était façonnée par l'environnement externe de l'aide, avec son orientation sur les résultats, ainsi que par nos aspirations à introduire les principes féministes dans nos pratiques de suivi et d'évaluation. Cet article décrit la manière dont nous comprenons l'évaluation féministe et la contribution que nous estimons qu'elle a apportée pour renforcer notre approche du suivi et de l'évaluation. Trois exemples d'exercices d'évaluation utilisés dans le programme Engendering Change sont fournis pour montrer comment nous avons tenté de mettre en pratique les principes de l'évaluation féministe.

Key words: feminist evaluation; gender-sensitive evaluation; mixed-methods approaches to evaluation; gender power relations; transformative change; balancing learning and accountability

Introduction

Trends in the current aid environment, including the predominance of the logical framework approach and the emphasis on results that are relatively easy to measure, pose significant challenges for understanding and capturing how changes happen in women's lives. This point has been well-made by women's rights researchers and activists including Srilatha Batiliwala and Alexandra Pitman (2010). This article focuses on Oxfam Canada's efforts to respond to challenges we faced monitoring and evaluating a transformative women's rights programme by adopting a mixed-methods approach to evaluation rooted in feminist evaluation principles. Specifically, it explores what applying feminist principles to evaluation practice offers to organisations seeking to tell the complex story of how development programmes can contribute to lasting changes in gender power relations.

Examples shared in this article are drawn from Engendering Change (EC), a stand-alone women's rights and gender equality programme co-funded with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and implemented by Oxfam Canada between 2009 and 2014, with a total budget of \$17.5 million. The EC programme

included a portfolio of 44 partner organisations of different sizes, budgets, and missions, working in regions and countries as diverse as Central America and Cuba, the Horn and East Africa, southern Africa, and Asia. Partners included women's and feminist organisations and networks, as well as mixed non-government organisations (NGOs), membership organisations, and co-operatives. What brought these diverse organisations together in the EC programme was a shared commitment to working to support women to further gender equality and secure their rights. The EC programme provided partner organisations with organisational capacity building to support their path to becoming stronger, gender-just organisations (Oxfam Canada 2012a, 2012b). Organisational capacity-building support included, for example, gender mainstreaming support (Gonzalez Manchón and McLeod 2010) promoting transformative women's leadership, encouraging dialogue on gender issues, supporting gender budgeting, development of sexual harassment policies, and interventions to support work-life balance. At the same time, the EC programme provided partner organisations with a mix of core funding and specific funding for programme support in thematic areas such as women's leadership, women's economic empowerment, and elimination of gender-based violence. Programme support funding primarily funded project and activities that partner organisations themselves designed and implemented in response to community-identified needs and issues.

Some evaluation challenges

Like other feminist development practitioners, as monitoring, evaluation, accountability, learning (MEAL) staff we found ourselves facing multiple challenges when designing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation system that would help capture transformative change in a complex programme such as EC.¹ EC represented one of Oxfam Canada's first efforts to implement a large-scale 'programme', in the sense of a set of strategically aligned, mutually reinforcing interventions that contributes to sustained, positive impact on poor people's lives. This created an imperative to aggregate results and foster programme learning across the diverse set of partners and largely locally-designed and implemented projects.

Oxfam Canada has a long history of working in solidarity with, and accompanying, partner organisations. This history influenced the way in which monitoring and evaluation needed to be carried out in the organisation. Oxfam Canada staff position themselves as co-learners working alongside partners in relationships of trust and mutual respect, to identify relevant issues and effective gender equality and women's rights strategies. These two interconnected challenges meant that, on the one hand, we needed to find some methods that would allow us to generate results that could be aggregated, compared, and contrasted. On the other, we needed to use monitoring and evaluation methods that would allow us to honour our partnership approach, as well as help us live our feminist values, which are explored further below. As part of living

these values, we were challenged to strike a balance between 'upward' accountability to Oxfam and back-donors, and 'downward', or social accountability, to partners and women constituents. Where possible, it was important that we created space for co-designing monitoring and evaluations processes with partners and their constituents. At the same time, there was a need to be able to build some common understanding across the diverse stakeholders (partners, allies, Oxfam staff, and donors) about how all the pieces of this complex programme fit together, while still respecting contextual differences in the way the programme would likely unfold.

Another challenge that we faced related to the issue of reporting on predetermined results laid out in a logical framework that was part of the contractual agreement with our donor, CIDA. For both accountability and our own learning purposes, there was a need to show results at multiple levels. At the level of changes within partner organisations, we needed to demonstrate the outcomes of Oxfam Canada's capacity-building support; and at the constituent level we wanted to demonstrate changes in women's and men's lives to which partner programmes had contributed. We understood fully that in this type of capacity-building programme attempting to demonstrate cause and effect relationships of our impact would be next to impossible. That said, Oxfam and its donor CIDA wanted to be able to uncover the contributions of programme interventions to changes at different levels. Importantly, there was also onus on Oxfam Canada to provide evidence of the ways in which changes at the level of partner organisations had contributed to stronger partner programmes and programme outcomes on gender equality and women's rights – what has been referred to as the 'missing-middle' (Watkins 2004, 22) in relation to linking investments in gender mainstreaming to impacts on gender equality. While Oxfam Canada supports the view that building strong, effective, gender-just organisations is a development outcome in its own right, both Oxfam and our partners were nonetheless concerned to learn about the contribution of our capacity-building activities in supporting partners to foster changes with their constituents.

Finally, the main evaluation challenge we faced was that the EC programme sought to support 'transformative' changes; that is, structural and institutional changes in gender power relations that were built on a feminist analysis of the factors that contribute to gender inequality and injustice. We knew that we had to bring a focus on gender inequality and power relationships to the heart of our monitoring and evaluation work. In this regard, we grappled with a number of questions. How would we know transformative change if we saw it? How could we capture the complex and non-linear nature of change in gender power relations (and other power relations) both at the level of organisational change, and in women's lives? How could we ensure that the knowledge and data generated reflected the context-specificity of gender power relations? How could we develop hypotheses about how change happens that were defined enough to guide us in programme implementation and learning but not so rigid as to confine the potential of our programme? We knew that gender-sensitive

approaches to evaluation could offer a lot in terms of ensuring that women were made visible in evaluation practices. However, the tools available did not seem so relevant for a 'stand-alone' gender-equality and women's rights programme,² which by definition would primarily focus on how the programme was being experienced by women and their families. Fortunately, as part of broader organisational efforts to 'live the values' of gender justice, Oxfam Canada was receptive to experimenting with using feminist principles to guide evaluation practice.³

The following sections explore how we attempted to respond to the challenges identified above by applying feminist evaluation principles in monitoring, evaluating, and learning about the EC programme. The first section describes our understanding of feminist evaluation. Then we describe briefly the EC 'feminist learning system', followed by three concrete examples of our efforts to infuse feminist principles into our evaluation practice. The final section offers some reflections on lessons learned that may be of relevance to others facing similar evaluation challenges.

Feminist evaluation

The term 'feminist evaluation' emerged about ten years ago in the evaluation community (Seigart and Brisolaro 2002), and has only recently received attention in the international development context (e.g. Batliwala and Pittman 2010; Hay 2012; Podems 2010).⁴ There is no one agreed upon definition of feminist evaluation; however, the *Encyclopedia of Evaluation* (Seigart 2005, 154–5) puts forward six tenets of feminist evaluation:

- A central concern is that *gender inequalities lead to social injustice*.
- Discrimination or inequality based on gender is *structural and systematic*.
- *Evaluation is political*; the contexts in which evaluation operates are politicised; and the personal experiences, attitudes, and characteristics that evaluators bring to evaluations (and with which we interact) lead to a particular political stance.
- Knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose. *Knowledge should be a resource* of and for the people who create, own, and share it.
- Knowledge and values are *culturally, socially, and temporally contingent*. Knowledge is also filtered through the knower.
- There are *many ways of knowing*; some ways are privileged over others.

As we grappled with how to bring these principles to our evaluation practice, we discovered that there appeared to be no specific feminist evaluation 'methods' distinct from other evaluation approaches. Instead, it is useful to see feminist evaluation as an overall approach or 'lens', that builds on developments within feminist research and theory of the past two decades. Like feminist research, understanding and analysing women's lived experiences from their own perspectives is the starting point for feminist

evaluation, and what lends it rigour and validity. Voice and representation of women (and different groups of women) are central in this approach to evaluation, as are a firm understanding of context, and context-specific perceptions of reality. This type of evaluation includes an awareness that measures of programme 'success' may be context-specific. Not surprisingly, a common theme in literature on feminist evaluation is the importance of using participatory processes. In feminist evaluation, participation is not just about voices being represented, but rather creating space for consciousness-raising, reflexivity, and capacity building. Evaluation processes are as important as evaluation findings in feminist evaluation.

In feminist evaluation, the role of the evaluator shifts from primarily providing technical expertise to facilitating collaborative processes that are empowering and contribute to a sense of ownership for stakeholders. Knowledge and understanding become resources to be created and owned by participants in evaluation processes. How the evaluation is conducted, the way evaluators, programme staff and programme participants relate to each other, how decisions are made, are all important in a feminist evaluation (Beardsley and Miller 2002). More recent understanding of feminist evaluation pays attention to capturing incremental changes, holding the line, or even reversals in women's status as part of the complexity of challenging and changing gender power relations. Srilatha Batliwala and Alexandra Pittman's (2010) work on feminist assessment points to the need for approaches that take into account that change that is multi-dimensional involves multiple actors, and happens over a longer time-frame than many other types of international development programme interventions.

It could be said that much of what is called 'gender-sensitive' evaluation follows the same principles of feminist evaluation, given that a focus on 'gender' emerges from feminist research and theory. We would argue that this depends on two factors: first, the extent to which gender-sensitive evaluation pays attention to changes in gender power relations; and, second, how far it promotes the use of evaluation processes that are themselves empowering for stakeholders. In international development evaluation, gender-sensitive evaluation often involves integrating gender analysis into the programme design, and then collecting sex-disaggregated data as part of the monitoring process, exploring gender-differentiated programme outcomes for women and men in evaluation (see examples shared in Batliwala and Pittman 2010; United Nations Evaluation Group 2011). While this is important, gender-sensitive evaluation can be descriptive of gender-differentiated roles and relations without necessarily placing a direct emphasis on challenging and changing gender power relations (Podems 2010). Likewise, gender-sensitive evaluation does not necessarily focus on creating spaces for stakeholders to engage directly and take some ownership over the evaluation process. Of course, much depends on the evaluator or the evaluation team and there are many evaluators who bring a feminist lens and gender analysis to their evaluative work, even if they do not use the term 'feminist' evaluation (Bheda 2011).

A feminist learning system

We refer to the approach that evolved in monitoring and evaluating the EC programme, a 'feminist learning system'.⁵ This term reflects the nature of this learning system, which we suggest is a methodological merging of some feminist evaluation principles with a few key elements of 'developmental evaluation'. Developmental evaluation is an approach that focuses on developing ongoing feedback loops to capture feedback from programme stakeholders and support the continuous integration of this feedback into the programme during programme implementation, as a way of placing learning at the centre of evaluative processes (Patton 2011).

The feminist learning system aspired to be an interconnected, non-linear system that responded to the need for programmatic monitoring and evaluation that was simple and flexible, reflecting our partners' realities, and centred on learning whilst maintaining the ability to meet back-donor accountability requirements. The system consisted of five key components. These were: a theory of change; a primarily quantitative performance measurement framework; evaluative moments that included a mid-term learning review, case studies, and a final evaluation; reflective spaces and sense-making exercises; and social accountability surveys.

In each of these components, we attempted to infuse the principles of feminist evaluation. Taken together, the components of the system worked as a mixed-methods approach that involved the aggregation of quantitative data, mainly through surveys, complemented with a number of qualitative methods to deepen understanding of how the programme was being experienced by stakeholders. Data from the different sources were triangulated to build a narrative of the programme's performance story.

Below, we explore in more detail three components: the theory of change; a reflective space created through a capacity assessment exercise; and a formal evaluation moment, the case studies.

Using a theory of change

From the outset, the EC programme was framed using a logical model and performance measurement framework, developed as part of the agreement with our donor, CIDA.⁶ The logical model described a set of activities, outputs, and immediate and intermediate outcomes that we hoped would be achieved in the programme. However, we felt there was a need to create a more dynamic and iterative theory of change to articulate how change happens in relation to building stronger, gender-just organisations, and how changes at the organisational level contribute to gender-just changes at the societal level. It was important, we believed, to have an overarching theory of change to guide this complex programme, but we knew from the experience of past programmes that changing gender power relationships is a complex undertaking that does not follow a linear path. Therefore, the theory of change would have to be

one which emphasised this view, and our methods would have to be flexible, and so able to capture the ways in which the programme unfolded in a more iterative way than was possible with the logical model. Our aim was to articulate an understanding of how change happens, and an approach to charting change, which were flexible enough to make sense to our diverse partners, their different capacities and contexts with regard to gender equality and women's rights, and their distinct stages of organisational development.

After a series of participatory exercises held across the organisation and with some partner organisations, we emerged with two theories of change. The first focused on the role of civil society organisations in supporting gender-just social change and, related to that, the importance of strong, Southern-based NGOs and networks in pushing for changes to policy and practice in their own regional and country contexts. The second theory of change, focusing on organisational change, posited that organisations become more effective change agents related to gender equality and women's rights when their own structures, policies, procedures, and programming are also democratic and gender-just. The first theory of change justified our programmatic focus on organisational capacity building, while the second provided an overarching framework for the range of tailored organisational capacity-building initiatives supported through the programme with each partner organisation. The latter described a set of capacity domains, that is, individual and organisation skills, behaviours, and resources, that we believed contributed to building stronger, gender-just organisations (Oxfam Canada 2012a, 2012b).

While there was some, quite understandable, concern among some Oxfam staff about the attempts to simplify the complexity of our programming in the form of a theory of change, there was also a real need to ensure that staff and partners across the programme were able to have some common language with which to speak about the EC programme and how we expected it would contribute to positive change in gender relations and support women's empowerment. This was to become of particular relevance when it came to telling the story of how the programme was working across the full breadth of the programme. In fact, we mapped the dimensions of our organisational theory of change on to the logical framework for the programme that had been developed as part of our contract with CIDA, in order to create a better synergy between our more dynamic vision of the programme and the outputs and outcomes laid out in the logical framework.⁷ In this way, the theory of change provided a reference point for the formulation of a learning strategy, and the development of key evaluation questions to guide learning throughout programme implementation. It provided programme staff and partners with a starting point for discussions about how the programme was being experienced, and the contributions it was making in a variety of areas.

About mid-way through the programme, Oxfam undertook a 'sense-making review' of the organisational theory of change involving a process to create shared

understanding from different perspectives, building on a huge amount of programme information, to make sense of how the programme was unfolding in different contexts. The exercise explored the extent to which the theory of change developed at the beginning of the programme was supported by evidence emerging from programme implementation.

Two key outcomes resulted from the sense-making exercise. First, the organisational theory of change was validated in that evidence was available to support the hypothesised relationship between internal organisational transformation and gender-just programmatic outcomes. However, the exercise also demonstrated a need to refine the original articulation of the theory of change to bring into greater focus some missing ingredients that were perceived to contribute to supporting gender-just organisational change, including, for example, women's transformative leadership. Importantly, the re-articulation of the theory of change was refined on the basis of perspectives that emerged on how gender-just organisational change happens that were the outcome of participatory processes that supported partners to reflect on their experiences of building gender-just organisations. However, reconstructing the theory of change to incorporate this learning also presented challenges for programme monitoring. Back-donor reporting remained tied to the original logical framework, and data collected in relation to the re-framed theory of change needed to be carefully transposed to that framework, which was time-consuming for staff. In summary, we found that using a theory of change helped us to be clearer on our assumptions about the relationship between our capacity-building programming strategies and their intended outcomes. It was also the basis for engaging programme stakeholders in learning processes throughout the programme, and engaging them to shift programming strategies and re-articulate programme outcomes in ways that were more meaningful to them.

Capacity Assessment and Benchmarking Tool

The Capacity Assessment and Benchmarking Tool – known as the CAT by Oxfam Canada staff and partners – was designed as a participatory self-assessment exercise around which EC partners could identify needs and design a context-specific capacity-building strategy to support them in becoming stronger, gender-just organisations. Some components of the strategy were then funded by the EC programme, but the strategy itself was owned by partners and used by some of them to create inputs into their organisational development plans (see Oxfam Canada [2012b](#)). In keeping with Oxfam Canada's partnership principles as well as feminist evaluation principles, it was important that the CAT process engaged partners in self-reflection and assessment, rather than being conducted as a third-party needs assessment exercise. The CAT approach honoured the experience and perspectives that participants brought to the

exercise, and engaged them in a conversation about current organisational capacities versus desired capacities needed to undertake effective gender-just work.

While the CAT self-assessment method enables multiple perspectives to surface, its effective use requires skilled facilitation, with some foreknowledge of existing power relations within an organisation, and strategies for how these can be managed to create space for different voices to be heard. The CAT has enabled a wide array of deeply sensitive issues to surface about gender power relations that may inhibit partners' paths to becoming gender-just organisations. For example, for some partners the CAT exercise led them to reflect on the numbers of women in senior management positions, or to question the disconnect between gender policy commitments and organisational practices, particularly with regard to work-life balance. For others, the CAT enabled them to delve deeper into how far they believed they were 'living the values' of gender justice, in relation to ways of working and relating within their organisation. Organisations also reflected on what transformative women's leadership meant and felt like, and how far the programmes they designed and implemented were focused on transformative changes in gender power relations.

The CAT generates both quantitative and qualitative data about current capacity areas and desired areas for improvement. From these, we can create a picture of these issues at the 'baseline', which enables partners to carry out self-monitoring over time. During the EC programme, these self-assessment scores were re-visited and reflected upon each year. Partners' experience with the CAT has been mainly positive. As noted by one participant:

The capacity building exercise is extremely useful ... it helps us to track progress and identify capacity gaps on our own. (Anonymous questionnaire, Keystone Accountability, August 2011, 19)

Feedback from partners suggests that intentionally revisiting and reassessing capacity to work on particular issues, and linking this to an analysis of gender power relations in our own organisations, allows each partner the opportunity to own the self-assessment process, and have an honest conversation about areas of progress as well as set-backs and reversals.

The CAT is an example of designing evaluative processes that meet the learning and accountability needs of multiple stakeholders. In addition to providing baseline information for individual partners' self-monitoring, the CAT enabled Oxfam Canada to aggregate quantitative data and track trends across the entire set of EC programme partners throughout the five-year programme. The data provided the basis for comparative analysis across different types of programme partners and across regions. For example, we noticed at the beginning of the programme that women's and feminist organisations seemed to have a more inherently self-critical bias and tended to rate themselves lower in their self-assessments of internal capacities, compared to other

types of NGOs, even in relation to living the values of gender justice. This finding was particularly intriguing because staff observations were that feminist organisations tended to have a more firmly rooted transformative perspective to gender power relations already present within their organisations. We saw this trend reverse about mid-way through the programme, when many NGOs engaged in Gender Action Learning (GAL).⁸ The GAL process helped partners engage in a more profound analysis of what it meant to be an organisation that lived the values of gender justice, ultimately leading to a lower self-assessment score in the CAT exercise than they had previously rated themselves. Related to this, the CAT provided a basis for partners to reflect on blockages or reversals in their organisational capacities, for example, the impact of turnover of staff with gender expertise, or changes in leadership.

Engendering change case studies

Throughout the EC programme, Oxfam Canada engaged in formal evaluation exercises, including formative and summative evaluations as well as a series of case studies. These processes have helped us to further explore our theory of change and synthesise and deepen learning around key outcomes of the programme. The case studies were conducted in response to the need to explore and understand the 'missing middle', of how changes at the organisational level were creating impacts at the beneficiary level, especially in the lives of girls and women.

While the EC programme was working in partnership with 44 different organisations, we decided to do a purposeful sampling of three partners to create 'information-rich' case studies that we thought would help yield greater nuance and depth about changing gender power relationships both at the organisational and beneficiary levels (Patton 2002, 181). Although Oxfam Canada put forward a set of four guiding questions that united the case studies, each took shape in different ways in large part because the processes were co-designed by the participating partners, reflecting their own contexts, geographic focus, and programmatic issues. Each partner also included their own learning question to guide the case study and was able to co-design a written or video output for each of the cases.

Importantly, it was agreed with partners that the approach to the case studies would explicitly incorporate some guiding principles of feminist evaluation. In particular, this meant that we would focus on learning to enhance our collective understanding of the power relationships that had been challenged and changed within the EC programme. This also required the process of the case studies to shift the traditional power structure of the monitoring and evaluation by allowing our partners and some of their beneficiaries to be in the driver's seat in terms of the design of the process, the data collection, analysis, and validation of the data collected. The key role of the consultants and Oxfam staff was to support and facilitate the process, convening

training workshops, synthesising the information, and presenting it to stakeholders in the form of videos – which is discussed further below.

In all three case studies, we collectively decided to use adaptations of the most-significant change (MSC) technique. We decided to do this because it was participatory, and partners all agreed it was easier for beneficiaries to tell stories of change than to talk about ‘indicators’ linked to specific outcomes. All case studies started with building the capacity of partner staff, as well as some beneficiaries from their programmes, so that they could use MSC. In one case, this took the shape of partner staff and their beneficiaries learning how to interview each other first and then conducting similar interviews with a variety of other beneficiaries in their programmes. Instead of documenting with written notes, we used video to capture the interviews. Partner staff and volunteers conducting the interviews themselves not only built their evaluation capacity, it also helped ensure that the interviews were more culturally appropriate and accommodated language differences (Peer Associates 2013). In another case study, staff and beneficiaries were introduced to the methodology ‘Photo Voice’. Using this technique meant that significant change stories were first designed on story boards, and then staff and beneficiaries were asked to go back into their communities, use digital cameras, and create photo essays of the top four change stories they had identified in their communities (see Evallab 2013).

In all cases, a participatory workshop was held approximately one month after the stories were gathered, where partners and beneficiaries were able to reflect together on information collected, discuss key themes, and make sense of the information. This workshop also provided the opportunity for participants to ensure that the story in the case study accurately reflected their organisations’ experience in the EC programme. Feedback from partners about the case study process has been mainly positive; in fact we have heard from partners that they did not know monitoring, evaluation, and learning could be so ‘fun’. Because partners and beneficiaries were involved right from the beginning of the process, they have found the information collected was particularly useful and are excited about the videos that were generated from the process.

The learning generated from the case studies also helped Oxfam and partners deepen our understanding of some of the significant outcomes of our work in terms of changes at community, household, and individual beneficiary level, outcomes to which the EC programme contributed. The case studies demonstrated the key role that women’s and girls’ empowerment and leadership play in challenging and changing gender power relationships, but generated surprising empowerment outcome measurements not intended by our EC partner or Oxfam. For example, at the community level, women beneficiaries in the Matabeleland Region of Zimbabwe focused on the acquisition of new assets such as a teapot, cups, and livestock as a significant sign of independence and empowerment. Both men and women beneficiaries spoke of enhanced interpersonal relationships, but suggested weight gain, enjoyment of sexual

relations, and increased fidelity in marriages as key indicators of improvements in gender relations. As noted by a partner staff member,

the main differences [in how empowerment is measured] are that the staff have a more holistic and broader picture of what empowerment looks like ... constituents spoke to individual issues of economic empowerment and acquiring assets, but also the angle of interpersonal relationships and improvement in the household. (Interview in Peer Associates 2013, 18)

The different ways in which programme outcomes were described by constituents underscores the strength and relevance of the MSC methodology, as discussing changes by way of storytelling allowed relevant and culturally appropriate indicators of success to emerge.

For many women interviewed in the case studies, the development of their leadership at a professional level has also created a sense of empowerment in their personal life. This was as true for staff members in our partner organisations, as for programme beneficiaries. Many women remarked that assuming a leadership role outside of the home has brought greater respect for them within their communities and even within their homes. For example, staff from our EC partner in Zimbabwe reported improved marriages and better communications with their husbands, as well as being able to broach topics like HIV/AIDS with their children (Peer Associates 2013). Staff interviewed emphasised a sense of consistency and authenticity across different aspects of their lives: the shift in gender imbalances at the organisational level, the work in which they engage to challenge gender inequality at the community level; and shifts in power relationships at the personal level. As one partner staff member remarked:

I personally believe I am the change I want to see in the world and if I want to see engendering change, the change has to start with me. Every moment is a time for me to learn. (Interview in Peer Associates 2013, 12)

The case studies also demonstrated that often the programme entry point is focused on women community members, for example in income-generating groups that integrate awareness raising on women's rights, but in order to challenge and change gender power relationships successfully, a whole community approach is required. For example, in Ethiopia there is a community-oriented gender-based violence monitoring group that consists of women representatives from self-help groups, local governmental officials, police, and traditional leaders. This monitoring group has meant that women have a safe space to go when violence occurs and are able to receive guidance and support. The gender-based violence monitoring group has also helped reduce the harmful traditional practice of 'early marriage' in the community. According to beneficiaries interviewed, the reduction of child marriages has also meant that young girls are staying in school longer. Locally grounded notions of changing gender power relations also emerged from the case studies. For example, some partners described

gender equality as creating more balance of power and space for women rather than inverting power dynamics. Moreover, the inclusion of men in programming has been important in shifting power imbalances and space for women. As stated by one partner staff member

the inclusion of men is critical to any women's rights programme because gender equality questions dynamics that exist. We live in a patriarchal society so men hold the power. So when we include them, it is about creating space, asking men to sift off some power... (Interview in Peer Associates 2013, 8)

Feminist evaluation principles reminded us that we had to be more explicit about documenting evidence of unanticipated outcomes, specifically evidence of resistance, backlash, and seemingly negative changes as indicators of 'successfully' challenging gender power relationships. An example of resistance that was unearthed during the Zimbabwean case study was that while men were sometimes open to assuming certain tasks stereotypically assumed by women, these roles were not always accepted by others in the community. For example, men reported taking sick children to health centres, but discovered that health-care professionals would not accept a child without her or his mother. This example suggests that acceptance from formal institutions, laws, and practices is often important for individual behaviours, norms, and practices to be accepted and changed in ways that are sustainable. While many interviewees relayed stories of success related to women's leadership, there were also some examples of resistance. In both Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, women community members noted that they are still not taken seriously with police and at local courts when attempting to seek justice after experiencing gender-based violence. At both the beneficiary and organisational levels, women noted not being given credit for hard work or, having to work harder than men to prove their leadership skills. Similarly, women at the organisational and community levels felt that the women who successfully assumed leadership roles are required to take on 'male' characteristics like being aggressive, firm, decisive, which they felt reinforced gender stereotypes rather than creating a different type of leadership.

Reflections and lessons learned

Our efforts to support staff and partners to tell the performance story of the EC programme required a constant revisiting of the theory of change we are using, as well as experimenting with innovative approaches and methods that would capture both transformative changes within partner organisations as well as in the lives of women that partner programming reached. The approaches we took were shaped both by the external aid environment with its results orientation as well as by our aspirations to

bring feminist principles to our monitoring and evaluation practice. Below, we share some of the key lessons learned.

Getting the process right

A central feature in allowing principles of feminist evaluation to shape our monitoring and evaluation was a strong emphasis on getting the process right. This approach required us to honour the knowledge, context, and experience of our partners, which logically led to the use of participatory tools and methods. The use of participatory processes and co-design elements led to stronger local ownership amongst stakeholders over the evaluative process itself. Related to this was the need to invest in capacity building with partners and constituents to strengthen their skills in using evaluative methods. For example, in the case studies, the co-design of the evaluation included capacity building with local stakeholders on conducting MSC interviews and analysing the data they collected. Within the CAT process, partners were supported to use a self-assessment technique to track their own progress and explore challenges they faced in becoming stronger, gender-just organisations. These processes reflect a shift in power relationships from partners having monitoring and evaluation conducted 'on' them to evaluations being 'with and for' partners. Implicit within this shift is allowing partners to guide the process and for Oxfam to be open to having the process unfold differently than anticipated. Getting the process right also created different criteria for what counts as evidence, in that it places a high value in reflecting stakeholders' lived experience of the programme. The examples shared here are also illustrative of a shift in the role and skills of the evaluator, with more emphasis on playing the role of a critical friend than on the notion of an objective, technical expert. Oxfam's role as critical friend required us to facilitate, listen, and be attentive to unanticipated results which require space for open conversation and wider exploration. One of the key lessons from engaging in these types of processes is that they require considerable time investment both for Oxfam and our partners. They worked best with partners who were also committed to putting the guiding principles to feminist evaluation into practice, strengthening their internal monitoring and evaluation capacity, and experimenting with and engaging in participatory processes to collect and analyse programme information.

Respecting diversity and context

Many development interventions now take a programmatic approach which contributes to shifting power into the hands of external planners, strategists, and evaluators (Wallace *et al.* 2013). Oxfam's commitment to working in partnership to support a diverse group of Southern organisations to design and deliver locally relevant programmes contributed to the strength of the EC programme; however, as we have described above, this created the challenging need to aggregate data that was context-

and partner-specific. We tried to respond to this challenge by using a variety of participatory evaluation methods throughout the programme that enabled context- and partner-specific experiences of the programme to emerge. The CAT, for example, created space for very diverse partners to identify where they were on their pathways to becoming gender-just organisations and to tailor capacity-building strategies that responded to their specific needs. The annual self-assessment processes tracked changes over time relative to a partner's unique starting point. Wherever possible, we aggregated information emerging from participatory assessment processes to tell the whole programme performance story. We also used this feedback to revise our theory of change to bring it closer to how changes were being experienced in the programme.

Another key lesson was the value of using case studies to explore the complexity of how social change happens. Given time and resource constraints, we could not have done this type of extensive exercise with more than three partners, and the effort to select which partners to involve was a prolonged and at times difficult process. In a programme of 44 partners, it is fair to say that three case studies are not representative of the entire programme. This underscores the importance of having multiple sources of information to triangulate (that is, cross-check) data, a fact we have recognised and integrated into our feminist learning system. Nonetheless it is important to emphasise that using case studies enabled a much deeper, nuanced analysis that otherwise would have been impossible. It allowed us to explore in a context- and partner-specific manner the complex ways in which capacity-building support at the partner organisational level influenced changes in how partners did programming on gender equality and women's rights and in turn how these contributed to outcomes for partner programme constituents. In particular, by using the participatory validation exercise, partners and some beneficiaries were able to discuss, reflect, and make sense of the generated data. This exercise ensured that the case studies enabled context-specific outcomes and indicators to be surfaced and prioritised. Case study data were analysed and synthesised across partner organisations to draw out general points wherever possible, while still holding on to the value of contextual understanding.

Embracing complexity

Within the context of the current aid environment there is pressure to tell a positive, simple story that demonstrates programme impact, preferably backed up by numbers. As others have pointed out, telling the story of changes in women's lives is complex and messy (Batliwala and Pittman 2010; Wallace *et al.* 2013). As we have described above, the evaluation approaches used for the EC programme sought to embrace complexity rather than generalise and simplify it. The various evaluative processes created space to capture non-linear change experienced by programme stakeholders, including backsliding on previous gains as well as encountering resistance to change. We took a dynamic approach to our theory of change which we revisited and revised

as the programme unfolded. While the theory of change provided some degree of programme coherence, it did not act as a straitjacket. Given the range of partners and the diversity of those partner's own constituents, we were unable to move beyond the level of partners in trying to build some shared ownership of this complex, multi-region programme. However, we tried to honour the outcomes that partners and stakeholders identified as most important even when they did not fit neatly within our own theory of change. Of course, we still faced challenges synching our flexible theory of change with the programme's logical framework which remained more static.

Balancing learning and accountability

Like many other NGOs, at Oxfam Canada we have found it a struggle to strike a balance between learning and accountability. An important lesson for us has been to try to develop approaches that meet accountability needs of multiple stakeholders. We tried to use different approaches that helped us to meet our accountability to our back-donor CIDA but still prioritised the engagement of our partners in participatory exercises to meet their needs. We achieved this to some extent with the CAT which provided data for partners' ongoing monitoring as well as for the performance measurement framework on which we reported aggregated programme results to our back-donor. Using the theory of a change as a guide, we tried to be strategic in focusing programme learning to build our collective understanding about how gender power relationships were being challenged and changed. In particular, certain processes like the CAT and case studies helped us make sense of non-linear results like resistance and backlash that often occur when gender power relations are challenged. Of course, other learning happened in the programme on an on-going basis but having this focus helped us move out of our comfort zone of activity reporting towards being able say something with confidence about outcomes to which the programme had contributed.

In some areas, we fell short in our aspirations with regard to applying feminist evaluation principles. In spite of our efforts, there was probably still too much upward reporting by partners to meet broader accountability requirements, which speaks to the fundamental power relationships at play.⁹ We did not have the resources to engage with all partners in certain exercises, particularly in the case studies, which in our view were the most successful experiment in bringing feminist evaluation principles into practice. However, our efforts to embrace feminist evaluation principles encouraged us to think differently about how we engage ourselves and our partners in evaluation. It supported us to dig a bit more deeply at understanding how gender power relations change and to understand what those changes looked like from the perspective of stakeholders. Most importantly, however, feminist evaluation principles reminded us of whose voices matter most in evaluation and whose stories should count as credible evidence of results.

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Notes

- 1 This article is written from the perspectives of two MEAL staff members who self-identify as feminists. Their efforts to bring feminist values and principles to evaluative processes was strongly supported by many colleagues, including the Director of the Centre for Gender Justice, Caroline Marrs, and the Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, Robert Fox. Overall, Oxfam Canada was receptive to experimenting with feminist principles in its efforts to 'live the values' of gender justice in its organisational culture and ways of working.
- 2 We use the term 'stand-alone' gender equality and women's rights programmes to differentiate them from programmes in which gender is 'mainstreamed'. For the first, the programme focus is already on gender equality and women's rights though the extent to which power relations are addressed depends on the specific programme. For the second, the programme may not overtly address gender equality and women's rights concerns and as a result attention to gender-related issues and outcomes need to be mainstreamed into the programme – hence the term 'gender mainstreaming'.
- 3 In 2006, Oxfam Canada took the decision to focus its organisational mandate on gender equality and women's rights. As part of that process it undertook a gender audit, the findings of which included some recommendations to enable the organisation to 'walk the talk' on gender justice, including its monitoring and evaluation work. Recently, Oxfam Canada used the Capacity Assessment and Benchmarking Tool (CAT) exercise internally (see Oxfam Canada 2009).
- 4 A report by Batliwala and Pittman (2010) for the Association for Women's Rights in Development provides a good overview of the challenges faced by evaluators in attempting to 'capture change in women's realities', including the non-linear nature of change. The authors present some principles for feminist assessment as a basis for feminist evaluation. The article by Podems (2010) provides a description of both feminist evaluation and of a gender approach to evaluation and explores them in the historical context of the development of gender analysis in international development and human rights work. Hay's (2012) article examines how feminist theory and practice is influencing the framing, methods, and conduct of evaluation in India and argues that, in the face of a narrowing of what is considered 'robust' development evaluation, feminist evaluation must demonstrate its rigour and play a stronger role in supporting us to understand how societies change. Here it is worth noting that Oxfam International hosted a learning event in June 2013 where 35 gender justice practitioners from across

the confederation reflected on their experiences and agreed the value of feminist evaluation principles to guide their evaluation practice.

- 5 It was only towards the end of the programme that the term 'feminist learning system' was used by Oxfam staff to describe the learning approach that had evolved during the course of the programme implementation, though Oxfam Canada consciously promoted 'feminist evaluation principles' with many partners and stakeholders throughout the programme.
- 6 Accompanying all CIDA-funded programmes is a results-based management logical framework, noted above, as well as a performance measurement framework which assigns indicators, baseline data, targets, data sources, data collection methods, frequency, and responsibility for the pre-determined outputs and outcomes. When we refer to a logical model we mean both of these performance measurement techniques.
- 7 For example, we used changes in the capacity domains from our theory of change as indicators for the immediate outcomes in the logical framework.
- 8 Gender Action Learning is a methodology developed by Gender at Work to address the gap between gender equality policies and deeply held cultural norms that are manifest in everyday unequal power relations within organisations. The approach allows participating organisations to question their assumptions about gender and other internalised norms that negatively affect their ability to live the values of gender and diversity. See <http://www.genderatwork.org/OurWork/OurPrograms/GenderAction-LearningGAL.aspx> (last checked by the authors May 2014).
- 9 While we perhaps placed too much emphasis on upward accountability, we did attempt to integrate mechanisms of 'downward' or social accountability into the programme. To review the anonymous feedback Oxfam Canada received from partners on its performance in the areas of financial and programme support, administration, communications, monitoring, reporting, and learning, see Keystone Accountability (2011).

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