

Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning:

The Praxis of Women's Rights and Women-Led Organizations in Conflict, Crisis, and Humanitarian Settings

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In collaboration with:



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“Once we have the data, it provides evidence for the advocacy we do. We conduct advocacy that strengthens actions. We bring information to decision-makers, we see which actors can make a change. Advocacy to push for change.”
(Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani (SMM), the DRC)

Introduction

In 2024, CARE and the United Nations Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) carried out a joint qualitative research project on feminist monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) in six countries - Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nepal, Nigeria, and Ukraine - and involving ten women’s rights organizations (WROs) and women-led organizations (WLOs). The objective of this research is to i) understand and document how these organizations see and use feminist MEAL approaches; ii) enhance understanding of feminist MEAL’s most important aspects; and iii) share with actors at all levels how to conduct and support its approaches more effectively.

For the purposes of this paper, the authors recognize the various definitions and terminologies used by grassroots, feminist, and women’s rights and women-led organizations as well as global experts in this area, and have summarized the term feminist MEAL as the multi-faceted, context-driven, and inclusive processes used in monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning with the key objective of using data for advocacy and transformative and long-lasting changes while ensuring Do No Harm approaches are applied.

Feminist MEAL is an approach that is not new. However, its widespread use by WROs, WLOs, and others has varied – sometimes even being seen as “less than” traditional and more quantitative monitoring and evaluation practices. This research finds, however, that there is a need to debunk that feminist MEAL is not as robust or systematic as traditional MEAL practices because of its flexible and adaptive nature.

Methods

The study used a combination of qualitative methodologies including document review of gray literature and key informant interviews with ten WROs and WLOs from six countries (Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Haiti, Nepal, Nigeria and Ukraine) that mainly focus on protection work, drawing on maximum variation for the selection of organizations across regions. Interviews took place between May 29 and July 15, 2024.

While the organizations who participated in the research work primarily on the protection of women and girls,

including the prevention of and response to gender-based violence (GBV), the paper recognizes the larger issues that WROs and WLOs work on in crisis and conflict settings.

All information collected during the research was transcribed (if given consent) and, if needed, translated from Spanish or French into English. Transcriptions were analyzed using deductive coding based on the thematic areas of enquiry. Coding and categorization were done using Excel and then summarized into narratives following the thematic framework.

Findings

WROs and WLOs have varying and evolving understanding, terminologies, and capacities regarding feminist MEAL and its application

“For me it’s a new thing as well. I didn’t actually realize what feminist MEAL was, because we don’t always call it that. That’s why I think it would be important to change what we call it and use Feminist MEAL more explicitly.” (Centre for Women’s Awareness and Development (CWAD), Nepal)

There is no one common definition of Feminist MEAL. Irrespective of the definitions or the terminologies they use, feminist MEAL is still grounded in practice by WROs and WLOs, and they do not necessarily emphasize specific language. It goes beyond the application of only technical aspects of monitoring, evaluation, and reporting, and is integrated into programming as well. Capacity strengthening in this area is key, and must come with financial resources from all levels, from those who support capacity strengthening initiatives with WROs and WLOs, as well as from WROs and WLOs themselves, so that they are equipped to implement this approach fully.

WROs and WLOs see the localization of MEAL as critically feminist, as they are the ones who know their context best and are present to lead MEAL processes from within it

“The work becomes easier when you know the local context. That will also ensure acceptance from the community. Likewise, we engage communities starting from the design, reporting, and data collection. We engage them because that also builds trust.” (CATAI, Nigeria)

A key aspect of feminist MEAL, according to WROs and WLOs, is that it is locally led, locally adapted, and grounded in the local context. WROs and WLOs often live in and are part of the communities they support and have



a deep understanding of what is needed to gain a complete picture of a situation, allowing for greater community buy-in. Building trust with communities via participatory MEAL is only possible when the data collector knows the local context. WROs and WLOs highlight that donors and other international actors need to be more committed to the importance of understanding local context and promoting locally led MEAL.

Co-design, participation, inclusion, and consultation are fundamental pillars of feminist MEAL and the only way to guarantee accountability to all stakeholders, especially women and excluded communities

“Designing projects and the collection of data is done together. It’s co-design, not just telling them how to do it and providing the information that donors are requesting.” (GNWP, Ukraine)

A critical aspect of WROs’ and WLOs’ conceptualization of feminist MEAL is the importance of participatory approaches and accountability to all stakeholders. Key to upholding accountability is participatory MEAL, which entails consulting with community stakeholders throughout the project cycle – from design through to implementation through to monitoring and evaluation. It remains imperative to keep all stakeholders involved and informed throughout the implementation of M&E activities. Co-evaluation with all stakeholders, though more time consuming, is also critical, as is involving communities in dissemination efforts. The theme of mutual trust, reciprocity, and transparency is also intricately linked to feminist MEAL and Do No Harm principles. Organizations highlight that data that is collected does not belong to them but is “entrusted” to them.

Feminist MEAL places primacy on the use of data and evidence to amplify the voices of women, to advocate and contribute to transformational changes

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The use of data for transformational change, for advocacy, and to amplify the voices of women and marginalized groups is critical. This role in advocacy is not without its challenges, particularly in crisis settings. The practice of using feminist MEAL approaches in the collection of data for advocacy is important for the effective prevention of and response to GBV. In addition, the lack of reliable data in this area is an issue and it is important for organizations working in the prevention and response of GBV to have data for advocacy. WROs and WLOs highlight the need for more resources to do this type of work, and in order to effectively use data for change, WROs and WLOs must be able to determine for themselves what data is most useful for their advocacy and impact.

Adaptation and flexibility are key feminist principles in conflict, crisis, and humanitarian settings

“Flexibility is key, especially in conflict situations. It can shift every day. For example, a woman was hit by shelling and our partners were delayed in reporting – this [situation] influences timelines, but we have to be flexible because sometimes donors don’t understand. The problem is not only with data, but also how much time it takes.” (GNWP, Ukraine)

For feminist MEAL processes and approaches, flexibility is imperative, and WROs and WLOs emphasize that it must allow for adaptation of approaches throughout project implementation. Organizations highlight the need for work to be based on iterative processes in order to adapt strategies necessary throughout the life cycle of a project and MEAL plan. Adaptation in crisis, conflict, and humanitarian spaces is imperative given the unpredictable, fluid and changing nature of crises. Organizations in the humanitarian sphere emphasize that the priority for them is the protection, life-saving, and urgent activities in which they are involved. WROs and WLOs call on international actors to remember that flexibility in MEAL processes is a feminist practice. Working in consortiums, networks, and collaborations is a key approach in feminist MEAL, increasing visibility, capacity, and impact of results.

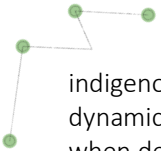
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“Organizations must understand that the issue of moving forward together is something new; not to move forward alone. The issue of advancement as a hierarchical structure is something we come from, but it is not the dynamic of feminist movements. There are many feminist approaches, and we connect a lot with the approaches from joint advancement, in a network, or in a circle.” (Fundación Surcos de Vida, Colombia)

They emphasize the importance of empowering allies and uplifting their work. This includes increasing visibility and capabilities of other WROs and WLOs in an effort toward amplifying the overall impact of their work within a shared sector and building solidarity. WROs and WLOs utilize networks of peer organizations, consortiums, survivor networks, alliances with government bodies, and partnerships with INGOs. Collaboration and partnership, however, are not limited to between organizations themselves, but with donors as well. Interviewees highlight this as a core recommendation for improvement.

Recognizing intersectional and multiple identities is critical in feminist approaches applied by WROs and WLOs

“For us, the first thing is that women are the heart of all decisions. It has to be representation of all women in their intersectionalities, for example like transgender women. They have to be included.” (Marijàn Organisation Féministe, Haiti) WROs and WLOs insist that for MEAL to be feminist, it must take into account intersectional identities including sex, age, ability, sexual orientation, religious affiliation,



indigenous ties, among others, and it must consider power dynamics. Some organizations begin with a power analysis when developing MEAL, ensuring that they incorporate this power analysis and include indicators that allow for an intersectionality analysis. Interviewees grapple with the contextual challenges that often create obstacles to collecting disaggregated data. It is difficult to collect data on LGBTQI+ populations given the security risk, for instance, and it must be done with caution and flexibility. Despite the challenges, it is viewed as critical to a feminist approach to ensure that intersectionality and power dynamics are accounted for in MEAL processes.

Using multiple Do No Harm approaches, including anonymity and confidentiality, consent and withdrawal of consent, and data security and protection approaches is central to feminist approaches applied by WROs and WLOs

“For us, confidentiality and anonymity are paramount – like the Hippocratic oath. We do not want any backlash for us as an organization or for a survivor of violence. They have to have trust and faith in us as an organization. As well we must do this for transparency. We cannot let other people have access to this information.” (Marijàn Organisation Féministe, Haiti)

Confidentiality and anonymity are prevalent ways in which organizations maintain Do No Harm approaches, especially in working with survivors of GBV or CRSV or with refugees in humanitarian contexts. Despite well-articulated global ethical standards around anonymity and confidentiality, organizations are sometimes asked for sensitive information by donors. Conversely, sometimes anonymity is not useful for promoting visibility, advocating for women’s rights, and ensuring women’s voices are heard, as at times their visibility gets lost in unequal relationships with larger organizations. Organizations working with survivors of GBV are clear that the protection of data is crucial. Some use identifiers in their databases, rather than names, while others ensure their data is password protected and encrypted.

The use of feminist indicators and participatory and qualitative methodologies are key in feminist MEAL practices, and there is a need to debunk that feminist MEAL is not a robust or systematic approach because of its flexible and adaptive nature

“We came from a different type of systematization management, where it was more qualitative/ethnographic, and we had to adapt to something more quantitative. We tried to organize it by making material where we saw that we could record everything we were collecting, and we would organize it in some way to make it easier to present. (Fundación Surcos de Vida, Colombia)

Traditional MEAL approaches are critiqued for perpetuating power dynamics between WROs/WLOs and donors and international organizations, and because the linear nature of results frameworks do not facilitate assessment of the dynamic and complex nature of social change. Some INGOs and donors with a feminist lens do

aim to instill some flexibility – for example, WROs/WLOs have been given the opportunity to design their own MEAL frameworks based on the context and need at the local level. However, there is a need to celebrate more fully the experiences and perspectives through qualitative approaches that can help capture more complex social dynamics and contexts. Methodologies and tools can also be “democratized” to promote open and transparent processes that improve programming.

Recommendations

Despite the incredible gains made by and dedication of WROs and WLOs to the utilization of feminist MEAL approaches in their work, there are inevitably gaps and a long way to go to ensure its widespread use. Not only does financing need to increase, but donors, INGOs, and international organizations need to remain flexible and cognizant of local context, while equally promoting technical capacity in this area. The following recommendations come directly from the WROs and WLOs interviewed in terms of what the donor and international community can do to elevate feminist MEAL practices for transformative change.

- ▶ Donors, INGOs, and other international organizations need to have a greater understanding that the collection of certain data can cause harm and increase risks to women’s rights organizations, women-led organizations, and activists, particularly in contexts of crisis, conflict, and humanitarian settings. Top-down and frequent requests to WROs and WLOs can have lasting consequences for these organizations and the populations with whom they work. Do No Harm and ethical considerations in MEAL must be maintained and take priority over data collection itself. WROs, WLOs, and INGOs have roles to play in advocating for “people over data.”
- ▶ Donors, INGOs, and other international organizations can contribute to increasing the technical capacity of WROs and WLOs in feminist MEAL in various ways. This might include providing tip sheets and guidance notes regarding Do No Harm principles, capacity strengthening opportunities, or institutional funding opportunities to strengthen their organizational capacity to integrate feminist approaches so that they are able to provide quality and responsive programming that is adaptive to their contexts.
- ▶ Donors, INGOs, and other international organizations should only request data and assessments that are needed to inform programming or advocacy, and that will be used, rather than insisting they be carried out just for the sake of doing them. This implies also ensuring that these actors act upon the recommendations that emerge from the learnings.
- ▶ Donors, INGOs, and other international organizations can facilitate feminist MEAL by being flexible to local context and understanding that local organizations they support have established trust and knowledge

with communities. This flexibility needs to extend to the amount of data collected, the type of data collected, and the way data is communicated. WROs and WLOs should also advocate for donors to allow them flexibility in MEAL processes to be able to implement feminist approaches.

- ▶ WROs and WLOs must work together in solidarity to promote feminist MEAL practices, use data for transformative change, and learn from one another as they do, tapping into opportunities and expertise that exist within feminist movements and networks.
- ▶ There is a need to have more global standards and guidance on feminist MEAL beyond traditional INGOs and IOs who support local organizations, which are accessible to grassroots organizations, coupled with mentoring and coaching support in their application. These standards need to be context-based and

provide sectoral-based guidance to areas like GBV, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and humanitarian response.

- ▶ Increased financing by the international community is needed both for feminist MEAL and for programming for WROs and WLOs, including financing for gender analyses, gender-sensitive conflict analysis, feminist monitoring, and qualitative impact measurement approaches, among others. With this increased financing, donors must also think about sustainability in their interventions and ensure that their commitments are long-term.
- ▶ Where contextually appropriate, donors, INGOs, and IOs should introduce “Feminist MEAL” as an explicit concept in their programs, so that the term and approach become more widely used and understood.

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Center for Childcare and Human Development (Nigeria)



Center for Advocacy, Transparency and Accountability Initiative (Nigeria)



Centre for Women’s Awareness and Development (Nepal)



Fundación Surcos de Vida (Colombia)



Helping to Leave (Ukraine)



Ukrainian Women’s Lawyer Association JurFem (Ukraine)



Marijàn Organisation Féministe (Haiti)



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