

# Feminist Evaluation and Gender Approaches: There's a Difference?

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**Background:** Feminist evaluation and gender approaches offer evaluators distinct ways of thinking and applying evaluations. A Namibian case narrative demonstrates how feminist evaluation and gender approaches, among others, resulted in a useful and used evaluation.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to provide readers with a historical overview and description of feminist evaluation and gender approaches and is intended for those who are interested in understanding these approaches to evaluation.

**Setting:** Southern Africa.

**Intervention:** A nonprofit that advocates for sex workers safety and the decriminalization of sex work.

**Research Design:** A comparative framework is used to describe feminist evaluation and gender approaches. The evaluation employs qualitative

methods that explored the reality of sex work and sex workers through both semi-structured and exploratory questionnaires. The approach was guided by feminist evaluation, gender approaches, and to a lesser extent drew on several other evaluation approaches.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Interviews and document reviews were used to collect data and content and thematic analyses were used to analyze data.

**Findings:** Feminist evaluation and gender approaches should be viewed as distinct approaches. Their use should be of interest both to evaluation scholars and to those who design, implement and/or use evaluations.

**Keywords:** *feminist evaluation, gender, gender approaches, international development, program evaluation*

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Evaluators and evaluation users regularly confuse feminist evaluation and gender approaches. This lack of clarity may be a result of the limited examples of feminist evaluation in academic journals, books, and published papers, compared with the many examples of gender approaches to evaluation. Examples of published

feminist evaluation studies may be limited either because many practitioners are hesitant to label their approach as feminist or because this approach is relatively new to the evaluation field (Seigart, 2005). In addition, discussions that focus on evaluation methods often do not include feminist evaluation. For instance Suzanne Hodgkin (2008) notes

that although an increasing number of journal articles and other published evaluation studies examine the use of mixed-method research, considerably fewer demonstrate the use of mixed methods in feminist evaluation or research.

In contrast, published examples of gender approaches in evaluation are numerous. With the term “gender” as a search word, the World Bank’s gender evaluation Web site alone identifies 33 papers, journal articles, and books on gender evaluation and gender approaches published after 2001 (World Bank, n.d.). The Web site of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (commonly known as UNIFEM) posts 111 research and/or evaluation books and articles published after 2000 that focus on women or women-focused interventions. Of the 111 publications, 53 carry the term “gender” in their title; none are labeled as feminist (United Nations Development Fund for Women, n.d.).

## Purpose of the Article

This article provides clarity between feminist evaluation and gender approaches. A comparative framework will be used to clarify the divergence between feminist and gender approaches and identify where they overlap. An evaluation example that draws from feminist evaluation and a gender approach illustrates how understanding and appropriately applying elements of each approach resulted in a useful and used evaluation.

## Situating the Author

I am a feminist, an aspiring academic, and a practitioner living in Southern Africa. I

teach evaluation and conduct evaluations in various developing countries, and in various evaluations, I have used both feminist and gender approaches.

As a feminist, I acknowledge that there are multiple realities and even numerous definitions of feminism, and I use the term “feminist” with the following understanding: “A common belief that guides feminism is that gender bias exists systematically and is manifest in the major institutions in society ... Feminism examines the intersection of gender, race, class, and sexuality in the context of power” (Mertens, 2005, p. 154).

The definitive event that encouraged me to write this paper arose when a multinational donor organization that focuses on women’s rights asked me to recruit African gender evaluation specialists. These evaluators were to form a core group of specialists that would serve as a resource to assist program managers to improve and/or judge interventions aimed at enhancing women’s lives in Africa. Theoretically, the work of this core group of evaluators could impact women-focused projects—and, therefore, women—in more than 12 African countries.

During the recruitment process, I mentioned the concept of feminist evaluation. The multinational organization’s program director corrected me for using the word “feminist,” explaining that the organization was *not* feminist and that I was not to recruit feminist evaluators. I was surprised by this reaction. At that point, I had assumed that gender approaches were closely related to feminist evaluation, with many using the term “gender” as the more accepted political term. Yet this strong reaction to the concept of feminist evaluation led me to a more academic string of questions: What are the

theoretical and practical differentiations between feminist and gender approaches to evaluation? If these approaches are different, how would understanding them and using them bring about different evaluation processes and findings? Does a feminist use feminist evaluation and a nonfeminist use gender approaches?

My initial research confirmed that the perceptions associated with feminist and gender approaches to evaluation contrast significantly (Longwe, 1995; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Longwe (1995) provides an example of how these two approaches are viewed within the international development context. She contends that most development agencies work with patriarchal host governments in the developing world context. It stands to reason that development agencies, dependent on this relationship, would not upset funding sources with “outrageous” feminist thought or theory and therefore would use gender approaches, which are less offensive (Longwe, 1995).

These initial findings encouraged my further research on the differences between feminist evaluation and gender approaches, as well as the usefulness of their application. My first step resulted in a clarification of the terms “gender” and “sex.”

### *Gender and Sex*

In the 1970s, the term “gender” was popularized as an analytical term. Anne Oakley (1982) was one of many feminist theorists who began to use “gender” to describe those characteristics of men and women that are socially and not biologically determined (Oakley, 1982). Other feminist theorists used the terms “sex” to describe anatomical differences between females and males and “gender” to refer to the socially constructed

relationships between women and men (Barrett & Phillips, 1992; Scott, 1986). The term “sex” as an analytic category distinguishes between males and females.

## **Feminist Evaluation**

### *History of Feminist Evaluation*

Feminist evaluation is based on feminist research, which in turn is based on feminist theory. Feminist researchers argue that knowledge based only on a man’s lived experience presents half a story and, therefore, a distorted perception of reality. Including women’s daily experiences enhances a person’s ability to construct theory and knowledge about a socially constructed world (Connelly, Li, MacDonald, & Parpart, 2000). Feminist evaluation has its roots in this understanding of feminist research. Feminist evaluation emphasizes participatory, empowering, and social justice agendas (Patton, 2008).

Denise Seigart (2005) provides a succinct history of feminist evaluation. She suggests that feminist theory and feminist research, influenced by the women’s movement, encouraged researchers and evaluators “to question what it means to do research, to question authority, to examine gender issues, to examine the lives of women, and to promote social change” (pp. 154–155). She further explains that over the years, feminist research has moved from feminist empiricism, to standpoint theory, and finally to postmodern feminism.

Seigart (2005) describes postmodern feminism as an approach that encourages the exploration and acknowledgment of multiple perspectives and realities in the process of research and “avoids the creation of grand narratives or theories”

(p. 155). Hood and Cassaro (2002) further explore and define feminist approaches to research by stating, "Feminism as a paradigm for social inquiry falls under the genre of critical theory. It utilizes poststructuralist notions that challenge assumptions of universal concepts and essential categories and acknowledges that 'reality' is socially constructed" (p. 28). I use this postmodern feminist definition and the understanding provided by Hood and Cassaro to explore and apply feminist evaluation in this article.

### *Defining Feminist Evaluation*

Feminist evaluation is often described as "fluid, dynamic, and evolving" (Seigart & Brisolara, 2002, p. 2). Feminist evaluation theorists tend to describe feminist evaluation as flexible and do not recommend a strict approach or provide a framework; rather, it is described as a way of thinking about evaluation (Beardsley & Hughes Miller, 2002; Hirsch & Keller, 1990; Hughes, 2002; McRobbie, 1982).<sup>1</sup>

Various feminist evaluation theorists often list six basic tenets as the fundamental elements of a feminist evaluation (Patton, 2002; Sielbeck-Bowen, Brisolara, Seigart, Tischler, & Whitmore, 2002). Sielbeck-Bowen et al. (2002) defined these six tenets as follows:

- Feminist evaluation has as a central focus the gender inequities that lead to social injustice.
- Discrimination or inequality based on gender is systemic and structural.

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<sup>1</sup> I emphasize that this section does not pretend to exhaust all feminist evaluation definitions, discussions, or explanations; rather, I provide currently accepted tenets central to feminist evaluation.

- Evaluation is a political activity; the contexts in which evaluation operates are politicized; and the personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics 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, hold, and share it. Consequently, the evaluation or research process can lead to significant negative or positive effects on the people involved in the evaluation/research. Knowledge and values are culturally, socially, and temporally contingent. Knowledge is also filtered through the knower.
- There are multiple ways of knowing; some ways are privileged over others. (pp. 3–4)

Feminist researchers suggest that feminist theory encourages a researcher to problematize gender relations. Therefore during the data analysis process, a feminist researcher does not accept existing social inequalities as natural or normal context (Flax, 1990). Feminist evaluation incorporates this theory to facilitate an analytical process. For example, Seigart and Brisolara (2002) suggest that underpinning all feminist evaluation methodology is the concept that gender inequity leads to social injustice. At its core, feminist evaluation supports the belief that inequality based on gender is systematic and structural.

Seigart and Brisolara (2002) also stress that feminist evaluation explicitly concerns itself with the concept of

knowledge. Elizabeth Minnich (1990) and Michael Patton (2002) explain that feminist approaches recognize and give voice to multiple ways of knowing, including integrating reason, emotion, and experience. Feminist evaluators recognize that relationships and interactive processes that involve emotions and intuition provide legitimate sources of knowledge (Hughes, 2002). A feminist evaluation framework would seek to recognize and give voice to different social, political, and cultural contexts that privilege some ways of knowing over others (Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002; Stanley & Wise, 1993). For example, when designing a feminist evaluation, an evaluator often places special focus on understanding and acknowledging who knows what, who shares what, and who hears what, with a particular emphasis on women and disempowered groups. Feminist evaluation acknowledges that women may have alternative explanations to men's explanations of reality and knowing (Gilligan, 1982; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

Encouraging dialogue with people not necessarily in power is not unique to feminist evaluation. Other theories of evaluation encourage dialogue with the people who are involved or affected by the evaluation process and who are not the most powerful group (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998; House, 1993; House & Howe, 1999; Patton, 1997). However, these theories do not necessarily emphasize the importance of valuing and hearing the multiple voices that diverse women bring.

Sielbeck-Bowen et al. (2002) note that evaluators who implement feminist evaluations recognize that "evaluation is a political activity" (p. 4). Evaluations always take place in political contexts. Again, this is not unique to feminist

evaluation, and other evaluation theorists also recognize evaluation as a political activity (House & Howe, 1998, 1999; Mertens, 1999; Patton, 2008). However a feminist evaluation would contextualize the research politically and socio-politically with an emphasis on how gender and other influential discourses influence each person's experience (Oleson, 2008). Feminist evaluation also overtly recognizes that evaluation is neither value free nor disinterested (Thompson, 2001). Therefore when a feminist evaluation approach is used, an evaluator would openly acknowledge that evaluation has explicit and often implicit purposes, which may lead to a significant negative or positive effect on the evaluation's stakeholders. Feminist evaluations make explicit that politics affects evaluation processes and decisions and they recognize that the evaluator's process and findings are, and should be identified as, political.

Feminist evaluators also make explicit that an evaluator has experiences, sensitivities, awareness, and perspectives that lead to a particular standpoint. In other words, feminist evaluators recognize that they bring who they are into the evaluation process; therefore, as Hood and Cassaro (2002), Oleson (2000), and Truman (2002) note, reflexivity—or an evaluator's ability to understand her or his own position—is another critical component of feminist evaluation. This reflexivity is intricately linked to every aspect of the feminist evaluation's design, including the evaluator's ability to ensure power sharing with the people, project, or program being evaluated (Patton, 1997, 2002, 2008).

Feminist evaluation processes and findings should attempt to bring about change (Oleson, 2000). Often, a driving force for implementing feminist

evaluations is to positively impact the provision of increased social justice for women and other exploited and disadvantaged people and to hear previously unheard and marginalized voices; this statement does not exclude men. Thus, a feminist evaluator often considers herself or himself as an activist. Donna Mertens (1999) also addresses this point through transformative theory and states that although ensuring that the rights of the previously excluded are heard may result in credible information concerning interventions, "transformation can only occur if this information is used to inform policies that effectively address the inequities that create the need for social programs" (p. 12).

## Gender Approach to Evaluation

### *History of Gender Approaches*

In the 1950s and 1960s, addressing the challenges that faced women in the developing world were limited to a human rights context, and interventions designed to help women took a welfare approach (e.g., providing handouts and services, such as food and family planning). The approach did not challenge women's status or patriarchal structures, and therefore, as Moser (1993) suggests, this approach was fashionable well into the 1990s. In late 2009 a rapid review of various international donor websites identified multiple projects based on this approach.

Additional approaches to women-focused interventions were developed in the 1970s, when women were beginning to be viewed as an important part of a country's growth, particularly in relation to efforts to solve population and food problems. Boserup's *Women's Role in*

*Economic Development* (1970) encouraged the international development scene to recognize women as an integral part of any intervention<sup>2</sup> aimed at changing some aspect of people's lives, and in 1985, the United Nations made that formal recognition (Pietilä & Vickers, 1990; Tinker, 1990).

Beginning in the 1970's three main gender approaches to changing women's lives emerged: (1) women in development (WID), (2) women and development (WAD), and (3) gender and development (GAD). Each approach focuses on women as an analytical and operational research category.

### *WID and WAD*

WID interventions were influenced by the modernization paradigm and suggested that underdevelopment was explained by obstacles that could be dealt with pragmatically. The WID approach was a liberal approach that emphasized a focus on poverty. These programs assumed that women were not efficient in what they were currently doing (Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Ostergaard, 1992). For an evaluation of WID interventions, statistical measurements of women's lived experiences were identified (Connelly et al., 2000).

WAD interventions made the assumption that development was a process through which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. On this basis,

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<sup>2</sup> International development interventions refer to any project, program, activity, or intervention aimed at improving the social and/or economic well-being of people living in a developing world context. Examples of interventions include preventing HIV/AIDS, increasing access to education for girls, providing water or electricity to underprivileged people, providing loans to small businesses, and addressing global climate change.

WAD interventions drew a theoretical link between women's position in society and structural changes. Intervention strategies were focused on the economic, political, and social structures of developing nations. Evaluations of WAD programs then examined changes in the macro context and assumed that if the macro context improved, women would benefit.

### GAD

The GAD perspective emerged in the 1980s as an alternative to WID and WAD frameworks, and it was influenced by the experiences of and analyses by Western socialist feminists. Although there is no single GAD approach, any GAD approach focuses on the interconnection of gender, class, and race and the social construction of their defining characteristics. In the GAD approach, gender relations are an analytical category.

In using most GAD approaches, an evaluator adopts a two-pronged approach to the study of women. A GAD-based evaluation framework would (1) investigate women's material conditions and class position and (2) explore the patriarchal structures and identify ideas that define and maintain women's subordination. The evaluator would also consider and explore the relationships between women and men. An evaluator using a GAD approach to evaluation would draw on feminist theory, assume that gender relations were socially constructed patterns of behavior, and incorporate this assumption into their research decisions and analysis (Bamberger, 2002; Connelly et al., 2000; Jacobson, 1994).

One example of the GAD framework is the Harvard Framework, originally outlined in *Gender Roles in Development Projects: A Case Book* (Overholt,

Anderson, Cloud, & Austin, 1984), which provides specific data collection categories. First, an activity profile answers the question of who does what, including gender, age, time spent, and location of the activity. Next, an access and control profile identifies the resources used to carry out the work identified in the activity profile. It also encourages data collection regarding access to and control over the resources use by gender. Finally, the Harvard Framework provides a framework for charting factors that influence gender differences in the above two profiles and the project cycle analysis, which examines a project or intervention in light of gender-disaggregated information (Overholt et al., 1984).

Maxine Molyneux and Deborah Steinberg (1995) and Caroline Moser (1993) further suggest that there are practical gender interests and strategic gender interests—a distinction that influenced the development of Moser's framework. In this framework, found in her book *Gender Planning and Development Theory, Practice and Training* (1993), Moser provides a methodical approach to examining practical and strategic gender needs.

Practical gender interests are those defined by women acting to promote perceived practical needs that they have as a part of their given gender role in the sexual division of labor. For example, practical gender needs arise out of concrete conditions; these are immediate perceived needs, such as the need to provide food, shelter, education, and health care. Strategic gender interests are derived from a critique of male domination and arise out of an analysis of women's subordination and require changes in the structures of gender, class, and race that define women's position in any given culture. Strategic interests

include attaining the goal of gender equality and tackling the issue of women's subordination; therefore they are "often labeled feminist" (Moser, 1993, p. 39).

GAD frameworks recognize that interventions may have different impacts on women and men; therefore data need to be collected from both sexes if the project is aimed at "people." In addition, most GAD-based frameworks suggest that patriarchal relationships are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. They also often assume that patriarchy exists in a variety of different cultural and economic settings to oppress women. GAD evaluation frameworks encourage the collection of data that examine inequalities in income, work roles, reproductive roles, education, and several other socially constructed concepts and use gender as an analytical category (Jahan, 1995; Moser, 1993). Moser's approach brings in a feminist way of viewing women by suggesting that different women experience oppression differently, according to their race, class, colonial history, culture, and position in the international economic order. Although there is a focus on understanding the interaction between men and women, the focus is primarily on women.

## Comparisons and Criticisms of Feminist and Gender Evaluation

Research identified several feminist critiques of gender approaches. First, a feminist criticism of the WID approach is that evaluations of programs based on this framework examine a program's ability to increase women's productivity in relation to the national and global economies, but they do not necessarily seek to understand

how or if these programs placed enormous (extra) burden on women.

Second, from a feminist perspective, the WAD approach fails to challenge male-dominated power structures, and as a result, it has not transformed existing patriarchal social structures (McClean, 2000). Also, the WAD approach often only evaluates women as a homogeneous class, not distinguishing between racial, ethnic, or other differences, and it often assumes that what works for one group of women must work for another (Connelly et al., 2000). Finally, gender approaches appear to ignore transgender, transvestite and transsexual categories whereas feminist evaluation would not exclude these groups.

What happened to the feminist ideals in these approaches aimed at improving the lives of women? Bamberger and Podems (2002), Jahan (1995), and Reid (1995) suggest that these approaches to improving the lives of women resulted from economic pressure, rather than feminist (or woman-oriented) pressure, and from development agencies (patriarchal structures), rather than feminist influences.

There are practical differences between evaluations that draw primarily on a feminist approach and those that use a gender approach. First, whereas an evaluation using a gender approach would identify the differences between men and women in different ways, an evaluation influenced by feminist theory would explore *why* differences between men and women exist (Moser, 1993). Related to that, gender evaluation frameworks do not challenge women's position in society, but rather record it. At its root, feminist evaluation challenges women's subordinate position. Gender evaluations tend to map women's position, whereas feminist evaluation attempts to

strategically affect women's lives, as well as the lives of other marginalized persons.

Second, Mohanty (1997) raises the issue that gender approaches see the world as "men" and "women." Further, she states that many gender evaluations use the term "third world woman" as an analytical category. Mohanty contends that using this term presents an artificial picture that all third world women are the same. However, she also notes the many differences among third world women, such as class, culture, ethnicity, language, age, marital status, and sexual preference, as well as other dissimilarities that result in unique and distinct needs. Moser (1993) contends that women experience oppression differently, according to their race, class, colonial history, culture, and position in the international economic order. Evaluations designed on the basis of feminist evaluation theory would tend to acknowledge and value these differences, not considering "women" to be a homogeneous category. Moser's framework acknowledges these differences, whereas most gender evaluation frameworks tend to ignore them.

Third, gender evaluation frameworks appear to assume that all women want what men already have, technically should have, or will access through development interventions. In other words, development interventions assume that equality with men is the goal of the endeavor, and gender evaluators evaluate the intervention as such. Feminist evaluation would allow for the possibility that perhaps women do not want what men possess. Therefore, an evaluator using an approach underpinned by feminist evaluation theory would potentially develop drastically different criteria, reach significantly different conclusions, provide extremely different

judgments, and suggest different recommendations than she or he would if using a gender framework.

If all women do want to be what men are, or what they perceive men to have, and the intervention results in women accessing that, would that be the main criterion of success? For example, various development interventions aim to ensure that women gain access to the workforce. An evaluation based on a gender approach (e.g., the Harvard Framework) would examine whether or not, as a result of this intervention, women did acquire access to and control of that resource.

Fourth, the written guidance provided on how to practically apply each approach varies drastically. For example, feminist evaluation encourages evaluators to be reflexive; recognize that evaluations are neither value free nor disinterested; consider and value different ways of knowing; hear multiple voices; stress the need to give voice to women within different social, political, and cultural contexts; and advocate for marginalized groups. Feminist evaluations *do not* provide frameworks that guide the evaluator. In contrast most GAD approaches provide a framework of how to collect specific gender data and do not include these critical feminist ideals in that framework.

Fifth, the general perception of gender approaches is different from that of feminist evaluation. As Sielbeck-Bowen et al. (2002) notes, the word "feminist" invokes multiple types of responses, and feminist evaluation often suggests a biased approach. Further, criticism received on this article stated that feminism is a Western concept, and therefore it challenged the appropriateness of using feminist evaluation in a non-Western context. The use of gender frameworks was not

challenged, yet gender approaches are also a Western concept and most often developed by Western donors (Bessis, 2001). Further, the same argument could be applied to all evaluation theory. Given that most formalized or published evaluation theory comes from the West, how appropriate is it to use any of these evaluation theories in the development or non-Western context? Although this debate is outside the scope of this article, I raise it to make this point; feminist evaluation, as any evaluation approach, should be considered within the context of its intended use and its political, social, and cultural appropriateness.

In other ways, feminist and gender approaches are complementary. For example, gender evaluation and feminist evaluation recognize that “values and knowledge are culturally, socially and temporally contingent” (Sielbeck-Bowen et al., 2002, p. 6). They also both provide a way to think about women’s (and men’s) roles and how data relating to these roles should be collected in an evaluation process. Feminist evaluation uses the concept of gender as an analytical category and could incorporate a gender approach as demonstrated by the case narrative.

## Case Narrative

Several years after the incident that encouraged my research, I conducted several evaluations that incorporated feminist and gender approaches. Part of an evaluation conducted in Namibia is described here as a case narrative to demonstrate the use of a feminist evaluation and gender approach and to show how combining elements of a feminist evaluation and a gender

approach can provide a strong evaluation framework.

## *Background*

A Namibian nonprofit organization (NPO) that serves to improve sex workers’ rights and decriminalize adult sex work in Namibia required an evaluation. The evaluation’s focus intended to examine the NPO’s intervention that aimed at influencing policymakers to decriminalize sex work and protect sex workers in Namibia, where the laws that criminalized sex work had not changed as a result of the NPOs intervention, and the political, cultural, and social environment made this change doubtful.

## *Initial Activities*

In the evaluation’s initial phase, I conducted a document review and interviewed the NPO’s key staff. This phase (1) defined the NPO’s current intervention, (2) described its stakeholders, and (3) informed the evaluation’s methodology and methods. During the document review, I identified various materials that were written by the NPO and that included feminist rhetoric. For example, the organization stated that it sought to problematize gender relations and developed interventions that did not accept existing social inequalities as natural or normal.

## *Introduction of the Feminist Approach*

I suggested to the NPO’s director that a feminist approach should guide the evaluation for two reasons. First, the document review demonstrated that this organization embodied a feminist way of

thinking, and second, a feminist evaluation was an appropriate methodology for an advocacy-focused intervention.

However, other evaluation approaches influenced my design of the evaluation and its process. First, I designed the evaluation with the intent that it would be used by the NPO to make management decisions, an approach heavily influenced by Michael Patton's (1997, 2008) Utilization Focused Evaluation approach. Second, I designed the evaluation with a political focus and recognition that I wanted to address marginalized groups. Evaluation theorists who influenced these parts of the evaluation included Ernest House (1993, 1998) and House and Howe (1999) who encourage an evaluator to consider the social democracy, and Donna Merten (1999), whose Transformative Paradigm encourages an evaluator to consciously analyze how power influences relationships, overtly seek ways to use evaluation results to encourage action, and ultimately question social inequity and social justice. Various additional evaluation approaches used by Cousins and Whitmore (1998) and Podems (2007) encouraged the evaluation process to include dialogue with the people involved in or affected by the evaluation and its processes.

I described feminist evaluation to the NPO's program director and explained that this approach would guide the evaluation's development and implementation. The NPO's program director had no objections to this approach. However, she did caution that the term "feminist" was not a word used in the organization, despite the NPO's feminist rhetoric, and she suggested that I did not use the word during my research or in the final evaluation document. In an e-mail to me, she wrote the following:

Can we leave the word feminist off? I am not sure my funder would like that word and it's not a word that we use. I very much like what you described but the label is a problem.

This posed a challenge: if I were to follow the feminist evaluation strictly to the letter, then I needed to label this a feminist evaluation. The NPO and I agreed that a feminist approach was useful; yet labeling it as such would likely offend stakeholders and cripple the evaluation. From a feminist evaluation perspective, most feminist evaluators would state that an evaluation is not feminist unless it is labeled as such (Patton, 2002). However, from a practical perspective, was it better to use an appropriate evaluation approach or discard it because the evaluation could not be labeled as feminist?

I could choose an approach that would provide as accurate a picture as possible and would eventually help make a political stand, or I could take a political stand in the beginning, label the evaluation feminist, possibly harm the organization and its relationships with its stakeholders, and provide a cloudy picture, at best. I decided that I would rather use feminist tenets without the feminist label because I believed that an evaluation approach guided by feminist theory would lead to credible data and useful findings. For this article, I do identify my feminist approach; however, during the evaluation and in the evaluation report, I did not make any references to the feminist label.

Prior to starting the evaluation, I took one additional step. Although qualitative research (Jewiss & Clarke-Keefe, 2007; Ryan, Greene, Lincoln, Mathison, & Mertens, 1998) and the American Evaluation Association's *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* (2004) call for

self-reflection, feminist evaluation insists that the evaluator explicitly recognize that she or he is neither value free nor disinterested. It asks evaluators to be explicit regarding their issues, values, and interests at the evaluation's onset. As Sielbeck-Bowen et al. (2002) note, "There is no pretense that somehow we all begin with a blank slate and the process is an entirely rational one" (p. 6).

I acknowledged to myself, the donor, and to the NPO that I was not value free; I came to this evaluation as a white female born in and educated in the United States and had many experiences that shaped my world view and approach to evaluation. Further, I brought my own opinions toward sex work. I explained that I believed that adult sex work should be legalized, and therefore the laws that made sex work illegal should be changed. However, I also believed that if the public was not ready for legalized sex work, then the laws should punish the user of the service, not the provider. Therefore I was not value free, and I was not disinterested in the NPO's work and the evaluation's findings.

This self-reflection influenced the evaluation process in subtle ways. It triggered a personal hyperawareness to my bias, causing me to continually question and therefore strengthen my research design, the evaluation process, and my findings and recommendations, which also encouraged my growth as an evaluator. In addition, by acknowledging my bias, I gave the evaluation users information that helped them to view my work critically.

### *Description of the Intervention*

The NPO's staff members work directly with street- and brothel-based sex workers to educate them on their legal

rights and to mobilize them to take their cases forward in a collective manner in order to effect changes to law. The intervention includes providing written information about legal rights, holding seminars, and speaking to sex workers at their places of work. In speaking with sex workers, the NPO's staff members provide information to them about their legal rights, receive information from them regarding their current issues and challenges, and counsel them on safe sex. The NPO advertises their services on flyers in the community and by word of mouth. The organization states that it serves all sex workers.

### *Evaluation Methodology and Process*

The NPO and its donor provided the following evaluation question: In what ways, if any, does the NPO's intervention impact sex workers and related legislation? On the basis of this question, the NPO provided an interview list, which included local policymakers, sex workers and their "bosses," university law professors, the local chief of police, other NPOs working in human rights, and national legislators. I added to that list police officers working in the most heavily trafficked areas of sex work and sex workers and brothels not currently engaged with the NPO. In addition, the NPO only provided the names for female sex workers, and I intended to search for and interview male sex workers.

To collect data from these groups, I developed a semistructured questionnaire informed by a gender approach. One key subquestion focused on issues of access to and control of resources, an area where gender frameworks (e.g., Harvard Framework, Moser's framework) provide

guidance. I developed questions that sought to collect information on which sex workers had access to and control of what resources. If a sex worker did not fit into a predesigned category, I created a category for that person, resulting in multiple descriptive categories. For example while I had assumed my categories were exhaustive, additional categories such as “transvestite” were added during field work.

As a result, data were collected on sex workers whom the NPO worked with and sex workers who did not have contact with the NPO and who often represented an underprivileged and unheard group. In addition to the voices from people in the groups identified by the NPO, empirical data included voices from transvestite sex workers, male sex workers who served both men and women, and sex workers who tended to work in areas that were often unseen and more dangerous (e.g., remote nonformal truck stops, the sides of dark highways).

In addition, my appearance as a white, educated, and well-dressed woman appeared to encourage a formal dialogue with identified police officials, and my blue jeans, baseball cap, and use of the local jargon resulted in additional interviews with police on the street, which provided even richer, more substantive data. For example, it was through these interviews that I was able to identify what laws were used to frighten, imprison, and otherwise harass sex workers.

The interview process resulted in rich data that described but did not seek to change various power dynamics among different types of sex workers (e.g., street workers versus brothel workers, male versus female sex workers, female sex workers in different locations).

### *Evaluation Findings and Outcomes*

Guided by feminist evaluation, the data analysis identified that to some extent the inequalities in how sex workers were treated by police, and to some extent the NPO, were embedded in socially constructed norms. For example, brothel workers were viewed as higher class and, to some extent, socially more acceptable than transsexuals who walk the street and female sex workers who service truck stops. This analysis was reinforced by police who chose to ignore the illegal brothels, yet used various legal means to harass, imprison, or otherwise frighten other more marginalized and vulnerable sex workers who appeared to threaten socially acceptable norms. To some extent, the NPO’s intervention reinforced the institutionalization of this acceptance by only working with the socially more acceptable sex workers.

Every voice added value to the findings and recommendations. Experiences currently not recognized by the NPO staff members through their current work with, for example, sex workers in brothels who had been “in the business” for several years or commanded higher pay helped the NPO understand how current laws were used to abuse those sex workers who were more vulnerable and socially less acceptable. The evaluation also described various issues, challenges, and dangers faced by different sex workers on the basis of their sex, age, ethnicity, language, education, and place of work.

These findings led the NPO to consider changing whom it targeted with the current intervention and also to consider addressing additional laws that infringed on sex workers. For example, although the NPO focused on decriminalizing sex work, the indoor sector of the sex work industry tended to be tolerated by the police;

therefore brothels were likely to continue regardless of current laws. The laws police cited when they imprisoned or elicited bribes from sex workers (and, in other cases, physically abused and detained sex workers) were municipal by-laws related to loitering or soliciting. Data suggested that these laws were most often enforced in an unpredictable manner for street-based sex workers who worked, in particular, along highways and at truck stops.

The evaluation presented empirical data that advocated for the inclusion of previously unheard groups. The evaluation did not, as House and Howe (1998) warned against, champion the rights of a group “regardless of the findings of the evaluation” (p. 235). As a feminist evaluator, I advocated for the underrepresented sex workers by ensuring their appropriate representation in the evaluation.

## Conclusion

Feminist evaluation informed my approach in several ways. It challenged me to reflect, recognize, and openly state my biases. Although a gender framework provided a useful approach to categorizing respondents and identifying key questions, feminist evaluation influenced that design by bringing in the importance of hearing multiple and underprivileged voices and encouraging the use of findings for a political and social justice cause.

I would label this evaluation as using a mixed approach, but being heavily guided by a feminist evaluation. Not labeling this exclusively as a feminist evaluation may be somewhat detrimental to moving feminist evaluation into the mainstream of evaluation. However, the article provides an example of how feminist

evaluation and gender frameworks were recognized as two distinct approaches and used to develop and implement a useful evaluation.

In sum, gender evaluation frameworks are not focused on actively changing women’s lives; they are focused on describing them. At the same time, feminist evaluation has attempted to edge its way into mainstream evaluation. Feminist evaluation endeavors to do what gender frameworks do not: it attempts to understand why interventions have different impacts on men and women and, at the same time, often seeks to change social inequity in an overtly political manner. It asks evaluators to reflect and be explicit regarding what they bring to the evaluation and recognize those potential impacts.

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