

Feminist evaluation of Canadian-funded international developments will improve outcomes and create lasting change

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Since 2017, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy has been the framework under which the Government of Canada, through Global Affairs Canada, has funded international development projects to improve the lives of some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the world. With this agenda, organizations like CARE Canada have continued to develop women's-rights-based programming¹ that challenges harmful practices, stereotypes and norms that lead women to have worse health and social outcomes.

While this work is making a real difference on the ground, to truly ensure Canadian-funded international development projects lead to transformational change for women and girls, we must extend these feminist principles to monitoring and evaluation approaches. After all, an important part of the work is measuring the real impact projects have on the lives of the people they are designed to help. The process used to do this is often known as Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL).

MEAL processes are meant to limit the amount of biased results, so historically evaluators were removed from the subjects and the information collected was used primarily to inform donors. Problematically, however, this led to the removal of target communities from the process as well, which meant that very little of the knowledge and learning derived from the data ever reached the people actually involved.

Feminist evaluation, on the other hand, recognizes that the personal experiences, perspectives and characteristics evaluators bring to evaluations and the populations they interact with can result in a particular knowledge stance. Feminist evaluation is fluid, dynamic, and evolving in its approach. Moreover, feminist MEAL approaches use a bottom-up, rather than top-down approach, by being a platform to engage and empower communities in project co-management, and by building capacity and strengthening networks of grassroots organizations, including women's rights organizations.

As an organization committed to mainstreaming women's rights and transforming unequal power relations, CARE has been exploring the application of feminist principles to our MEAL practices in recent years. This led us to ask the question, how does applying *feminist methodology* to the design and implementation of MEAL in the field improve outcomes and create lasting change? Although we are still learning, we know that feminist values help to ensure that programs are:

- **empowering**—they focus on the systemic and structural gender inequities that lead to social injustice;
- **intersectional**—they consider the individual's sex, age, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity, and how this can impact their success;
- **anti-colonial**—they are needs-based and reflect priorities established by the target population through participatory processes;
- **participatory** —they recognize that knowledge should be a resource of, and for, those who create, hold, and share it.

¹ A women's-rights-based approach invests beneficiaries as 'rights-holders', creates an avenue for their voices to be heard, and enables them to play an active role in rebuilding and development—as opposed to providing support or services on an assumed needs basis and having no say in what action is taken. (<https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1498-rights-based-approach.html>)

In particular, several monitoring practices in CARE’s *Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI)*—a women’s-rights-based nutrition project in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia—show the value of incorporating feminist methods into our work. For instance, we know that gender analysis is one of the most important pillars to design any project, especially a transformative or feminist project with a strong MEAL system. SANI’s design itself was based on gender analysis that included active participation by women in the target communities, and which ultimately defined the project’s interventions and measurement system. Specifically, CARE tailored the monitoring system to capture and track relevant power dynamics, such as attitudes toward gender norms and women’s decision-making power. And, as the SANI project approaches its end (i.e. September 2020), the project team is making plans to share this information with community leaders.

Moreover, CARE’s Community Score Card (CSC)—a component of SANI—is a community-driven evaluation mechanism that brings together service providers and service users to rate the quality of the health service on a biannual basis and to analyze problems and develop solutions together. It encourages participation of women and secures a safe space for them to communicate, prioritize and address the specific barriers that women often face in accessing services. In SANI’s Malawian, Mozambican and Zambian target communities, some commonly raised issues include: level of respect shown by health care workers to patients; shortage of drugs and staff in health facilities; and access to ambulance services in local communities. In turn, CSC fosters community-driven solutions and it strengthens relationships with local governmental and non-governmental actors. For example, in Malawi, one SANI community turned to local government for bricks to help them complete the six toilets they were building next to a health facility. CSC is not a new approach in itself, but it is a good example of feminist monitoring design led by and for the community.

Overall, SANI is benefiting from the valuable application of some key feminist MEAL principles. Feminist MEAL is not a checklist of tools; rather, it is a set of principles meant to empower the participants and put them in the driver’s seat—giving communities a voice by allowing them to prioritize their needs and to advocate for them. As such, feminist approaches to evaluating Canadian-funded development projects can increase their overall impact and lead to sustainable improvements, because *all aspects* of the project can potentially contribute to a shift in power dynamics.

About “Feed Her Future”: Feed Her Future (www.feedherfuture.ca) is a campaign dedicated to building awareness about the importance of giving women and girls access to proper nutrition, through the lens and learning of CARE’s Southern African Nutrition Initiative (SANI). SANI is a 4-year project launched in March 2016, and is being delivered in partnership between CARE Canada, Cuso International, the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD), McGill University, and the governments of implementing countries. SANI is a \$24.6 million CAD project funded by the Government of Canada, CARE and the Canadian public.

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