CoPraxis

Feminist Research and Evaluation

This issue of Co-Praxis focuses on feminist research and evaluation approaches and methodologies. At its foundation, applied feminist theory goes beyond gender sensitive approaches, which examine inequalities, to a transformative approach which seeks to understand the cause of inequalities and to challenge women's subordination. Feminist methods seek to break down the hierarchy in the researcher-participant interaction, recognize that knowledge is subjective, and apply participatory methods that empower women and others in an activism-oriented process. This Co-Praxis aims to synthesize key feminist principles and methods that international development practitioners can apply in research or evaluation.

JGG Experience

While feminist thought has influenced social and legal theory and practice, it was not a common approach in the international development sector until development cooperation actors, such as Sweden, Canada, Mexico, Germany and Colombia, began to adopt feminist foreign policies. As an interdisciplinary and multinational consulting network whose members have experience in gender equality and feminist theory, JGG began to see opportunities for explicit integration of feminist methods in capacity building, monitoring, research and evaluation mandates. However, our teams experienced challenges applying a feminist approach throughout an entire research or evaluation process when our scope of work or resources weren't consistent with feminist principles. Given these challenges the network decided to examine and discuss external literature on feminist principles and methods in comparison to our practical experience.

Key Documents Reviewed

Nida Ahmad et al, "Feminist Approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning," Sport, Gender and Development (Emerald Publishing, 2021), 191 – 209.

Kate Carruthers Thomas, "Gender at Work: Gender as a Geography of Power in the Academy" in Gail Crimmins et al, Strategies for Revisiting Sexism in the Academy: higher Education, gender, and intersectionality, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillian, 2019) 187.

Kaisha Crupi and Naomi Joy Godden, "Feminist Evaluation Using Feminist Participatory Action Research: Guiding Principles and Practices" in American Journal of Evaluation 45 (1) (2023) 51.

Susanne Gannon & Marnina Gonick "Collective Biography as a Feminist Methodology" in Gail Crimmins et al, Strategies for Revisiting Sexism in the Academy: higher education, gender, and intersectionality, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillian, 2019) 207.

Nancy Harding "Feminist Methodology" Catherine Cassell et al, "The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods" 1st ed (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018) 141.

Laura Haylock & Carol Miller "Merging Development and Feminist Evaluation to Monitor and Evaluate Transformative Social Change" (2015) 37:1 America Journal of Evaluation 63.

Krista Johnston & Christiana MacDougall "Enacting Feminist Methodologies in Research Towards Reproductive Justice" (2021) 20:1-10 Int'l J of Qualitative Methods.

Marina Cadaval Narezo "Methodologies for Collaborative, Respectful and Caring Research: Conversations with Professional Indigenous Women from Mexico" in Wendy Harcourt et al, Feminist Methodologies: Experiments, Collaborations and Reflections, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) 139.

Donna Podems, Feminist Principles Evaluation in Kathryn E. Newcomer and Steven W. Mumford (eds). Research Handbook on Program Evaluation. (Elgar Publishing, 2024)

Donna Podems, Behind the Scenes of a Feminist Principles Evaluation (Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service, CGIAR, 2023).

Marcia Texler Segal "Working Toward Global Feminist Knowledges and Practices" in Akosua Ampofo & Josephine Beoku-Betts, Producing Inclusive Feminist Knowledge: Positionalities and Discourses in the Global South, Vol 31 (UK: Emerald Publishing, 2012) 211.

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Feminist Research and Evaluation Principles

Power shift. When using a feminist approach, traditional power structures in relationships need to be reconstructed. Power dynamics based on gender and other socio-demographic characteristics influence how we obtain and interpret information. A feminist approach assesses and breaks down hierarchical power structures by engaging participants, especially those who don't usually have a voice in research or evaluation. This can be done by implementing principles such as reflexivity and using participatory approaches to empower participants to own the process.

Reflexivity/Positionality. Reflexivity requires the individual researcher or evaluator to recognize their position in society and confront the ways in which their own power may influence their approach to the data collection and interpretation process. Reflexivity means acknowledging that there is no such thing as objective knowledge and that our social positions and life experiences impact how we interpret and interact with individuals, their stories, and other data. A postmodern feminist approach to research and evaluation rejects the idea of a common narrative of women's experience by acknowledging the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination rather than a binary between all men and all women and thus enables researchers and participants to reflect on differences among women.

Reciprocity and subjective knowledge production. Recognizing that knowledge generation is subjective and relational, feminist approaches require the researcher to take proactive steps to reconfigure traditional hierarchical relations and nurture a reciprocal relationship in knowledge production. Participants, rather than the researcher alone, should identify research questions based on the understanding that women and men within the community are best placed to define their needs. This reciprocal process also requires a researcher to consistently engage participants to prioritize community members' perspectives, especially voices generally excluded from traditional patriarchal knowledge systems, on the questions and knowledge being generated.

Participation, Inclusion. Based on the above principles, feminist approaches are inherently participatory and inclusive. Ideally, participants or stakeholders are active in all phases of the research or evaluation process, including design, data collection and creating meaning from that data.

Consent. In a feminist approach, consent extends beyond the informed agreement to participate in the research. In practice, there needs to be disclosure of the design of the interview and the questions to be asked along with an opportunity to ask questions and receive answers. This approach to informed and ongoing consent addresses the hierarchy typical of the interviewee-interviewer relationship. Further, this information should be provided before the commencement of the interview process in a location known to the participant to facilitate their comfort with refusing to grant consent if desired.

Activism. Feminist research and evaluation aim to generate change based on the research results. Thus, when the data reveals social inequalities, the researcher or evaluator advocates and also takes action to promote social change based on the results. It's important to note that a researcher or evaluator can apply a feminist approach, or mix it with other approaches, without identifying as a feminist. In this case, an initial assessment of the evaluation context would help determine the appropriateness of feminist principles and methods.

Flexibility. Researchers and evaluators need to be prepared to be flexible when applying a feminist approach. Their beliefs may be challenged and thus the process needs to be flexible to respond to these challenges and to allow participants the autonomy to tell their stories and interpret data. It's also important to note that, as a flexible approach based on the principles above, the feminist research or evaluation can be applied to initiatives or topics that are not feminist or specifically focused on women. In this case a feminist approach would be useful if power dynamics and inequities are key enquiries to examine.

Feminist Methods

In this section specific methodologies and approaches found in the literature review, and that align with the feminist principles above, are organized around typical phases of research or evaluation: design, data collection, and data analysis and interpretation.

Participatory co-design

Community engagement and power mapping. To begin, a feminist design process involves the community or individuals who are actors in the subject matter of the research or evaluation. Their inclusion in the study's design seeks to break down the hierarchy inherent in the traditional researcher-participant relationship. Furthermore, involving the community in the design process allows the researcher to respond to the actual needs of the community by using their experiences and knowledge as a foundation for the work. To engage in this type of work, there is often a need to accept information contrary to the researcher's conceptions of reality, as much of our current understanding is built on masculine understandings of the world. Furthermore, researchers must consistently engage the principles of reflexivity and positionality, by analyzing their privilege and recognizing potential biases. Power mapping (Wyatt) in a community can be helpful at the co-design stage.

Peer-led (Segal). Research and evaluation subjects or communities are engaged in decisions about which methodologies to use. Including participants during the project design phase is essential to diminish the power that researchers inherently possess. In peer-led research, individuals who are part of the research community take an active role in leading the research process, from defining the research questions and objectives, to collecting and analyzing data. Participants can take an active role in selecting and implementing a variety of methods, such as case studies or focus groups. Given that these individuals share similar experiences and perspectives, they can better understand the issues that affect their community and ensure that the findings accurately represent the experiences of the community.

Capacity building/orientation (Haylock and Miller). Capacity building on the application of the selected methods with participants is important to ensure inclusion in data collection, reflection and knowledge production. The training methods used will depend on the community in which the study is being conducted and must be attentive to patriarchal constraints that may affect the individual's ability to conduct the research.

Data collection methods consistent with feminist principles

Feminist methods for data collection reject hierarchical and individualistic methods led by the external researcher or evaluator. They seek to empower, challenge power structures and foster interpersonal relationships.

Personal histories or information rich case studies (Haylock and Miller). In this method, instead of using a broad-based sampling, cases that can provide ample information about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research are studied in depth. This method often provides greater nuance and depth, as each case study is codesigned with participants. For example, in a case study conducted by Haylock and Miller, partner staff and participants first learned how to interview each other before conducting similar interviews with a variety of other recipients in their programs.

Photovoice (Haylock and Miller). This method entails recording change stories on storyboards. Participants can return to their communities and create photo essays of the top change stories they identified in their communities using digital cameras. Participatory workshops can be facilitated where participants can reflect on the information collected, discuss key themes, and ensure stories are accurately portrayed.

Constituent voice using accountability surveys (Haylock and Miller). Constituent voice refers to the opinions and perspectives of the members of a particular group or community, especially as they relate to the actions or decisions of those in positions of authority. Accountability surveys provide a mechanism for constituents to hold those in positions of authority accountable, assesses power dynamics, and inform decision-making. Accountability surveys are typically administered by confidential third parties, providing an additional layer of confidentiality and anonymity. They can take the form of written surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other methods of data collection.

Inclusive methods to interviewing (Harding). "Feminist interviews" conducted as a conversation between two partners in the knowledge-generating process. In Harding's research, she discusses a body of feminist theory that argues women do not have a language of their own, causing masculine language to be used which does not reflect women's experiences. As such, there is a need to explore silences and the half-said. Researchers need to explore with participants the aspects of women's lives that may be incompletely articulated. For example, there is a need to move beyond terms such as 'housework', and explore the hidden meaning, as such terms reduce complex activities to something straightforward. This approach acknowledges that wordlessness may signify silence rather than a lack of language. The feminist interview involves sharing understanding and minimizing power disparities by having both the researcher and participant draw on their own experiences and help each other to develop ideas throughout the conversation.

Spatial storytelling (Carruthers Thomas). This is a method used during interviews to help participants visualize themselves within the spaces they operate (including institutions, power relations). This method can be used to understand how social structures influence women's experiences, help participants break down barriers, and expose hierarchal concepts of power within organizations. The author explains two techniques in spatial storytelling: i) narrative storytelling allows interviewees to tell their stories and reflect on their gendered experiences through an ongoing experiential text; and ii) mapping involves research participants choosing a geometric shape that best represents the space in which they operate and then positioning themselves in relation to that shape. While basic shapes allow the activity to be perceptive, participants may alter the shapes to allow for flexibility and ownership in the process. The spatial storytelling method reveals hierarchies and facilitates power analysis.

Feminist approaches to data analysis and knowledge co-creation

Feminist approaches to data analysis involve the concept of collective interpretation, allowing for the integration of multiple perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the data and concepts. Central to the methods described below is the concept of breaking down hierarchical methods of data analysis by engaging in participatory approaches.

Reflective conversation (Narezo). This technique was used to generate knowledge among a group of Indigenous women from Mexico who were master's and doctoral fellows in various universities. Narezo discusses the importance of care and collaboration, which involves looking at the research as a "ceremony" that produces a collective dynamic between her as researcher and the student participants. The conversation or ceremony emphasizes mutual observation and reflection in an effort to reveal multiple representations of knowledge as an alternative to traditional data collection and analysis.

Sense-making (Haylock & Miller). Sense-making is a process through which meaning is given to program data and information, which can often be complex and ambiguous, through analysis and synthesis. Sense-making is a cognitive process that helps individuals and organizations to navigate uncertainty and make decisions in complex environments. The process should include participatory mechanisms; however, trade-offs can be made to incorporate a degree of formal synthesis and data consolidation.

Sensemaker (trademark) (Wyatt et al.) When using Sensemaker, a software used to conduct narrative research, participants are prompted to share their stories and signify the meaning of their experiences. A study prompt is provided to trigger participants to recall experiences relevant to the research. To help them attach meaning to their stories, participants are provided with visual tools and multiple-choice questions. Sensemaker then analyzes the patterns of signification data in the stories provided. This process allows for insightful narratives and contributes to the reduction of unequal power dynamics in evaluations by prioritizing the voice of the participant.

Co-authorship of research or evaluation products

Feminist approaches to authorship of research emphasize cooperation and the representation of multiple voices, while avoiding a traditional hierarchal approach which prioritizes the perspectives of the researcher.

Relational production and dissemination of research (Harding). Harding suggests feminist approaches to writing should create a relational space for production, writing and sharing, which provides the opportunity for individuals to assess their own subjective interpretation of text. She also discusses the importance of incorporating participants into every stage of the research process, including dissemination.

Reflective conversation – authorship stage (Narezo). As mentioned above, reflective conversation involves looking at research as a "ceremony" between the researcher and the participant. In the authorship stage, this involves validating each text, story, and representation with the participants, to ensure that findings are shaped by the participants and not the researcher. Narezo also discussed the use of care when producing knowledge and translating it into academic language. This refers to the written production, and emphasizing the ideas of the participants, as well as recognizing the bodies, stories and contexts that build such ideas.

Crystallization of voices (Ahmad). This technique was used by Ahmad when conducting Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) workshops with stakeholders in the sport for development and peace (SDP) sector to learn about how change occurs in sport. Crystallization emphasizes systematic collection of data while also presenting findings in a creative manner through a narrative approach that seeks to co-create knowledge and amplify local voices. The findings were presented by re-creating conversations in response to a series of learning questions within the SDP sector. To ensure the representation of multiple voices and by drawing upon interviews, email correspondence, summaries of training sessions, and post-training reflection notes, anonymized responses organized by stakeholder group, including those of the authorship team, were provided. Using this approach, the voice of the author was not privileged, and readers could freely interpret the information presented. The findings reflected a co-existence of voices, from academics, stakeholders and the authorship team to avoid a hierarchal ordering of voices, perspectives, and knowledge.

JGG Reflections

JGG network consultants from Bolivia, Canada, Colombia, Guatemala, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Vietnam shared their experience of applying feminist principles and methods during research and evaluation mandates.

Difficulty integrating highly participatory approaches: JGG consultants have found that while participatory approaches may be strong in the beginning, participants living in remote areas may not be able to join data analysis and reporting. This creates a risk that these groups will not be accurately represented in the research findings. To mitigate this risk, sufficient resources for evaluators or researchers to travel to participants (or for participants to travel to central location) are required. Researchers may also have difficulty engaging the community in the implementation of those recommendations.

Challenges faced by the researcher or evaluator: Reconfiguring power relations can be difficult in a feminist research and evaluation process. When researchers reflect on their positions of privilege and power, there is also a need to question the position of participants, and their perspectives of the researcher. JGG consultants have found that applying gendered political economy analysis can be helpful for capturing power relations in the external context, but that, furthermore, reflexivity and positionality require a certain psychological perspective, which may indicate a need for training. Donna Podems has noted that competencies such as facilitation, negotiation, communication, advocacy, and education are key to apply in feminist principles evaluation. This requires the researcher or evaluator to develop multiple skills and change roles during the process.

Funding and resources: JGG consultants have found that time and funding are constraints when applying feminist principles and methods in external evaluations. Tight timeframes and limited resources do not allow for co-design, peer-led data collection and collective sensemaking, especially when development projects have not incorporated feminist MEL approaches internally. Ideally feminist approaches are used throughout a research initiative or development project, consistent with developmental evaluation, and sufficient resources are provided for an external evaluator/facilitator in the evaluation phase.

Lack of understanding by clients: JGG consultants have found that the contracting organization may ask for a feminist approach in terms of reference without understanding the implications of a feminist process. For example, clients may formulate evaluation questions from a traditional perspective and may not view participants as decision-makers. A "fully compliant" feminist methodology would allow the facilitator and participants to formulate (or at a minimum, re-formulate) research or evaluation questions. Further, it's beneficial to differentiate the expectations of clients, implementing organizations, and participants.

Ethical considerations: Informed consent may be difficult in feminist research and evaluation, given that some participants may not understand their rights and the research. JGG consultants have found that information should be anonymized to ensure confidentiality for participants. Also, to promote inclusion participants should be asked if they want to provide their gender, rather than the researcher assuming a participant's gender.

Continuum of feminist evaluation or research – from partial to full feminist methodology

JGG consultants have observed varying degrees to which they have been able to implement feminist principles in evaluation or research. This table is not definitive, rather it is meant to generate more discussion among practitioners.

Degrees of feminist approach	Evaluation or research methods	Conditions
Traditional approach with limited application of feminist principles in a process led by an external evaluator or researcher.	The evaluator or researcher adapts the questions and seeks to apply feminist principles to the extent possible. For example, power dynamics are mapped collaboratively with participants and inform data collection. Intersectionality, positionality and reflexivity are considered by the evaluator or researcher.	The object of the research or evaluation is not feminist in its design. Learning questions are defined by the contractor (e.g., the donor) without participation of beneficiaries. The questions do not necessarily seek transformative changes to power structures. The evaluator or researcher may be able to adjust some of the questions. Insufficient resources to strengthen participant capacity and ensure beneficiaries' engagement in design, data collection, analysis and the formulation of recommendations.
Hybrid – feminist – traditional with participant engagement or peer led data collection plus evaluator or researcher led data collection.	Data is collected through different participatory methods by external consultants and also participants. While some collective reflection or validation of data may occur, the data analysis and report writing remains with the external evaluator or researcher.	The object of the research or evaluation may not be feminist in its design and implementation but seeks to reduce inequalities. However, some learning questions challenge existing power structures (formulated by the contracting agency or adjusted by the consultant) and are conducive to a feminist approach. Sufficient time and resources are available to engage participants at specific moments in the evaluation process.
Feminist evaluation or research project.	The research or evaluation design, including learning questions, is defined by community members or participants with facilitation by a feminist researcher or evaluator. Participants conduct data collection and interpret the data in the context, considering power dynamics and structural discrimination. Participants co-author the report or knowledge product and generate recommendations.	The contractor understands the benefits of a feminist approach and manages the process accordingly. The object of evaluation or research is feminist in its design and implementation, thus facilitating a fulsome feminist approach. Time, human and financial resources are available to ensure full engagement of participants from the beginning until the end of the process. The evaluator or researcher is primarily a facilitator and guide.

Feminist Research and Evaluation