

Shifting Power in Evaluation and Research

Background

On June 18 and 25, 2025, [Just Governance Group](#) hosted a two-part roundtable exploring how feminist and decolonial approaches can shift power in evaluation and research. [Part 1](#), on the feminist approach, was presented by Dr. Donna Podems, and [Part 2](#), on the decolonial approach, was presented by Serge Eric Yakeu. As evaluation and research increasingly emphasize these approaches, this Co-Praxis highlights both the commonalities and unique features of each. It also summarizes the key topics raised by participants regarding practical challenges and strategies for implementation.

What does shifting power look like in evaluation and research?

Shifting power in evaluation and research means moving from top-down, expert-driven models to community-led processes that privilege the voices of women, Indigenous peoples, local communities, and other marginalized groups. When these actors help shape findings and recommendations, research and evaluations can more effectively transform mindsets, systems, and resource allocation toward equitable goals.

Nature of the approaches

While the nature of each approach is distinct, they both seek to shift power, although from different points of departure. The feminist approach recognizes the persistence of patriarchal norms that often position

women in subordinate roles within society. It acknowledges that power dynamics—shaped by gender, class, race, sexuality, and their intersections—influence both social realities and evaluation outcomes. The decolonial approach, meanwhile, exposes the enduring cultural dominance embedded in evaluation practices, which often privilege Western epistemologies and marginalize other knowledge systems, practices and worldviews.

How do both Feminist and Decolonial Approaches shift power?

Power dynamics and structures

Both approaches center on the analysis of power by examining the relations that produce and sustain the subordination of certain populations. The feminist approach challenges the power imbalances that underpin gender inequality, while the decolonial approach questions colonial power structures and the cultural dominance of Western epistemologies.

Participation and voice

Both approaches seek to elevate marginalized and historically silenced voices in defining evaluation questions, methods, and data analysis and interpretation. The feminist approach does so by valuing the perspectives of women and people of diverse genders, emphasizing the inclusion of women with intersecting identities, multiple forms of marginalization, and varied lived experiences. The decolonial approach, in turn, seeks to ensure the voice of indigenous, local and colonized communities guide the evaluation process by valuing their knowledge systems, practices, and worldviews.



Co-creation of Knowledge

Both approaches regard co-creation as central to equitable and inclusive evaluation and research, emphasizing shared ownership and decision-making throughout the process. They prioritize collaborative knowledge production over top-down approaches by redistributing power to target groups, ensuring their early and meaningful engagement. Co-creation is seen as a way of resisting extractive knowledge production by involving local stakeholders in defining learning questions, the methods used, and knowledge interpretation. In producing knowledge, the feminist approach interrogates the dominance of patriarchal norms and gendered power structures that shape whose knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard and how priorities are set. A decolonial approach tries to restore self-determination to communities, by questioning the dominance of Western languages and metrics.

Reflexivity

Both the feminist and decolonial approaches view reflexivity as essential, recognizing that knowledge production is never neutral or value-free, and that evaluators and researchers must question their own assumptions, positions, and the power dynamics shaping their work. The feminist approach questions how “facts” are constructed, acknowledging that they can reproduce gendered power imbalances and institutionalize discrimination. The decolonial approach, meanwhile, draws attention to the influence of externally imposed, often from the Global North, epistemologies, calling for critical awareness of how colonial legacies continue to shape the practices of donors, researchers and evaluators.

Evaluation and research as a means for transformative ends

Both approaches view evaluation and research as a transformative and emancipatory process that challenges existing power structures and seeks social justice. While the feminist approach uses evaluation or research as an advocacy tool to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment, the decolonial approach seeks to use the process as a space for reflection, healing and reconciliation rather than external judgment.

Capacity Building and Skills

Both approaches recognize the importance of building the capacity of participants to foster meaningful engagement and ensure that local communities contribute to knowledge generation based on their lived experiences. Women’s meaningful participation in a feminist process begins with developing basic evaluation literacy, consistent use of terminology, contextual awareness of power dynamics, the ability to collect and make sense of data, and the confidence to engage in decision-making. In a decolonial approach, the focus is similar but places greater emphasis on cultivating critical awareness of colonial legacies, strengthening self-determination, and building collective power to interpret evidence and articulate community perspectives.

What are the challenges in applying both approaches?

The main reflections from participants in the two sessions highlighted several challenges in implementing these approaches. Consultants and donors may lack the capacity to fully understand what feminist and decolonial approaches entail; for example, the evaluation questions may not always align with the stated approach. Participants noted that changing Western-dominated frameworks in setting evaluation questions, indicators, and processes is particularly difficult. It is not always possible to implement all the principles of each approach, so practitioners should focus on the “low-hanging fruit” to begin shifting power, while other principles may remain unaddressed. Limited time and financial resources often hinder truly meaningful participation. Applying feminist and decolonial approaches to evaluation and research processes require sufficient time to achieve the transformative change they promote.