



OXFAM
Canada

FEMINIST MONITORING, EVALUATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING

Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) is based on the understanding that transformative change in unequal gender and power relations is complex and non-linear. It challenges us to think differently about what is considered evidence, pushes the boundaries of how evidence is captured, questions who gives knowledge meaning and power, and promotes social transformation.

At Oxfam Canada, we recognize the autonomy and independence of our partners in the work we do together, and we are committed to a relationship of mutual accountability and shared decision-making.

We believe that MEAL should support knowledge generation that is meaningful, accessible, and relevant to those who rightly own it - the people with whom we work.



Alem, Ethiopia - Oxfam's honey value chain project Credit: Kieran Doherty/Oxfam

HOW DO YOU APPLY A 'CRITICAL FEMINIST LENS' TO MEAL?

Adopting a **feminist lens** is a process - it involves contextualization, learning, collaboration, participation, inclusivity and responsiveness. The process itself should promote transformative social change. The feminist lens promotes the application of intersectionality to investigate the way women, girls, and individuals with diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) experience inequality and discrimination. It challenges unequal gender and power relations and encourages the formulation of approaches to bring about transformative change.

THERE ARE SEVEN KEY FOUNDATIONS TO FEMINIST MEAL

1. Feminist MEAL is an Approach

The feminist MEL process begins with an action – the choice to undertake feminist MEL and the realization that participation in this approach is a form of power. It is about the inclusion of voices not often heard. The contexts in which MEAL operates are politicized; and the personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics of those involved in the process (our partners and the people with whom we work) lead to a particular political stance. It focuses on exposing gender-based discrimination, underscoring how intersecting identities further marginalizes specific groups. Feminist MEAL does not prescribe a specific set of tools, but rather is a lens to be brought to MEAL processes overall - from the very beginning – including project design to results, ongoing monitoring activities, learning frameworks and questions, social accountability and evaluative exercises.

■ CONSIDERATIONS:

- Oxfam Canada uses feminist language strategically, and in accordance with local contexts. In certain contexts, even within women’s rights organizations, feminism simply does not resonate or is negatively viewed as a Westernized concept.
- Oxfam Canada tries to be pragmatic in our approach and focus less on naming and more on the process and principles.

2. Feminist MEAL is an Integral Part of Social Transformation

This approach positions MEAL as an integral part of social transformation rather than a bureaucratic or punitive process that is included at the end of a program for upward accountability purposes.

Feminist MEAL also supports capturing and understanding transformative changes in unequal gender and power relations, which is often complex and non-linear. It is attentive to capturing incremental change, holding ground, or even backlash as possible indicators of successfully challenging imbalances in power relationships.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Donor mandated MEAL processes can be burdensome for partners and often limiting. Gender and social power relations are complex, and embedded into the individual, household/family, community, and larger societal levels. Those are all influenced by social, cultural, economic, and political structures and institutions. Therefore, no single framework for MEAL (often a donor required Logic Model and Performance Measurement Framework (PMF) can capture all aspects of change, impact, and results - or lack thereof).
- Oxfam Canada has had success with employing small evaluative exercises throughout a program in addition to (and sometimes instead of) the traditional midterm and final evaluation (more in line with a developmental evaluation approach).
- Oxfam Canada has also had success in creating learning and reflective spaces throughout a program (such as incorporating learning events/ workshops within a project/program) that bring together Oxfam and partners to jointly reflect and make sense of 'what works' and 'how change happens.'
- Shifting Feminist MEAL to be a more integrated part of social transformation does not happen overnight. A cultural shift is necessary to move it away from being seen as a waste of time to a valuable process that supports putting feminist foundations into practice.

3. Feminist MEAL Shifts Power to Participants in Evaluations



*Mekelet village Savings and Credit scheme
- Asrase Chere helps prepare coffee for
customers in the restaurant Genzeb.
Credit: Crispin Hughes/Oxfam*

Feminist MEAL means shifting ownership of processes to program partners and participants. This approach shifts power and gives space for partners, like women's rights organizations, to be in the driver's seat on defining and implementing exercises and the use of information. In Feminist MEAL processes, partners and participants are involved in every stage of the MEAL process from the collection, analysis, writing and dissemination of data (evidence) through knowledge and learning initiatives.

Rather than an extractive exercise, Oxfam Canada prioritizes capacity building as an integral part of any Feminist MEAL. In this way, processes must incorporate time to make sense of information with participants. Shifting power in this way also means that learning and use of findings is paramount.

■ CONSIDERATIONS:

- Shifting power in this way also means that learning and use of findings is paramount and partners define final outputs (i.e. a final output may not be a chunky report).
- Oxfam Canada has attempted to use approaches like peer-to-peer evaluations instead of traditional formative evaluation to allow partners to lead the development of learning/evaluation questions, determine how they will undertake the exercise and work together collaboratively to make sense of the data they collected and learning that transpired through the peer visits
- Oxfam Canada has had success using this approach with smaller evaluative exercises where innovative techniques like most-significant change videos and photo voice have been used. Participants used videos to organize a community video night and commented that evaluation can also be fun!
- Final evaluations have not completely incorporated this approach. However, even when the evaluation is donor driven, we try to incorporate partner learning questions and capacity strengthening in a learning by doing manner as much as possible.

4. The Role of the Evaluator is as a Facilitator who Understands Relationships of Power

The role of the evaluator shifts in Feminist MEAL from an all-knowing 'expert' to facilitating collaborative processes that are empowering and are rooted in participant ownership. The role of the evaluator is to provide technical support, and pose evaluative questions based on program logic, monitoring information, and other evaluative processes. The evaluator must be in-tune with potentially sensitive power dynamics that exist and must also practice reflexivity.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Oxfam Canada has been experimenting with the idea of a “middle” evaluator, where MEL staff are integrated directly into program teams.
- Oxfam Canada has been promoting the role of MEL staff as facilitators in the evaluation process by putting partners in the driver’s seat of evaluative exercises to give them the agency to determine the evaluation/ learning questions and drive the overall process forward.
- External evaluations are important and it is even more important to be in-tune with relations of power.



Women farmers help each other during harvesting of cotton, India.
Credit: Rajendra Shaw/Oxfam GB

WHAT IS ‘REFLEXIVITY’ IN FEMINIST MEL?

A **reflexive approach** moves beyond understanding women, men, or gender diverse groups as passive participants or beneficiaries. It requires evaluators to acknowledge their own positional power and how this power could potentially impact (intentionally or not) the evaluation exercise. Reflexivity can support the re-balancing of power dynamics. It recognizes that people in all their diversity are experts

in their own lived experiences and hold critical knowledge about themselves, their households, their communities and their broader societies. Reflexive practice also requires Oxfam Canada to acknowledge its own positioning as an international development organization, the power that this holds, and requires Oxfam Canada to think differently about how we can effectively share power in all that we do.

5. This Approach Values Collective Knowledge Generation that is Context Driven

A Feminist MEAL approach generates accessible and context-driven collective knowledge, respecting that there are different ways of “knowing” and that these different perspectives bring a rich, nuanced, and diverse understanding to evaluative processes. This collective knowledge should be central in defining and advancing strategies to end power imbalances and gender inequality. Collective knowledge must be seen as both a resource and a source of power.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Language used to describe and document change can manifest existing assumptions and power dynamics. For this reason, reflection and sense-making in ways that honour context-specific experiences are vital in any exercise.
- Oxfam Canada captures unexpected changes by purposefully leaving MEAL processes flexible.
- Oxfam Canada promotes the use of mixed methodologies (particularly the use of feminist research methods) that allow partners to answer a broader range of questions to capture complex intersectional data that would otherwise be missed and enable triangulation to generate evidence that is more comprehensive
- Feminist MEAL must be rooted in intersectionality¹.

WHAT IS ‘INTERSECTIONALITY’?

Intersectionality recognizes the multiple aspects of identity that play out in people’s lives and experiences, such as gender, class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity. These elements can compound and exacerbate oppression and marginalization. Data gathering and analysis are done through an intersectional lens, recognizing the heterogeneity of communities and groups.



¹ Intersectional Feminist Frameworks – An Emerging Vision. Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. 2006

6. This Approach Provides a Learning Orientation to Evaluative Exercises

A Feminist MEAL approach fosters a learning orientation to evaluative exercises and processes, prioritizing strategic program learning that strengthens collective ownership of the program, supports evidence-based decision-making, and builds collective knowledge on effective, transformative approaches to advancing gender equality and women's rights.

■ CONSIDERATIONS:

- Increased emphasis on learning does not preclude fulfilling necessary requirements for accountability. In fact, a focus on strategic program learning gives partners more ownership of their programs.
- Being a co-learner is about recognizing that no one person has all of the answers and that we can learn together how to best advance women's rights and gender equality.

7. Feminist MEAL is Rooted in Safe Programming Guided by 'Do No Harm'

Feminist MEAL is guided by ethical and safety standards that center of the principle of "Do No Harm," which is particularly important for data collection and dissemination activities. Specifically:

- Safety of the participants and the MEAL officer/evaluator is paramount and should guide decisions;
- Referrals for assistance should be readily available, for instance to psychological support services;
- Ensuring informed and voluntary consent from all participants;
- Confidentiality is maintained at all times;
- Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions or to terminate the exercise at any time;
- Participants should understand where, when, how and why their data will be used for analysis and use of findings.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Oxfam Canada has developed guidance notes on safe and ethical research and evaluation practices for undertaking research with both adults (those over the age of 18 years) and children. The guidance notes were developed based on World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations (UNICEF) guidelines.²
- Oxfam Canada has supported the learning and orientation of Oxfam country offices, partners, and consultants on safe and ethical practices for data collection based on the above-mentioned guidance notes.
- Oxfam Canada's Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool for Gender-Just Organizational Strengthening focuses on assessing partner organizations' current capacities on safeguarding among other key domains. The capacity strengthening in this domain focuses on supporting the alignment of key internal organizational structures, culture, and practices with organizational commitments to safeguarding and the protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). While the capacity areas are inherently related, they reflect distinctions among safe and ethical programming (including MEAL processes and exercises); protecting vulnerable groups, especially children; and ensuring the safety of all staff, volunteers, consultants, partners, and people with whom we work.³

2 These principles draw from:

- *Oxfam's Research Guidelines: Undertaking Research with Ethics*, 2012
- *Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women. Building on lessons from the WHO publication*. Geneva: World Health Organization. February 2016.
- *Putting women first: ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women*, Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013).
- *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti.

3 Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool for Gender-Just Organizational Strengthening (CAT4GJO). Oxfam Canada, 2019

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