

BEYOND THE TECHNICAL AND TOWARDS THE TRANSFORMATIONAL:

APPLYING FEMINIST MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING PRINCIPLES TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS PROGRAMMING

A Discussion Paper



OXFAM CANADA

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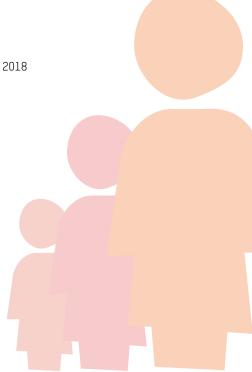
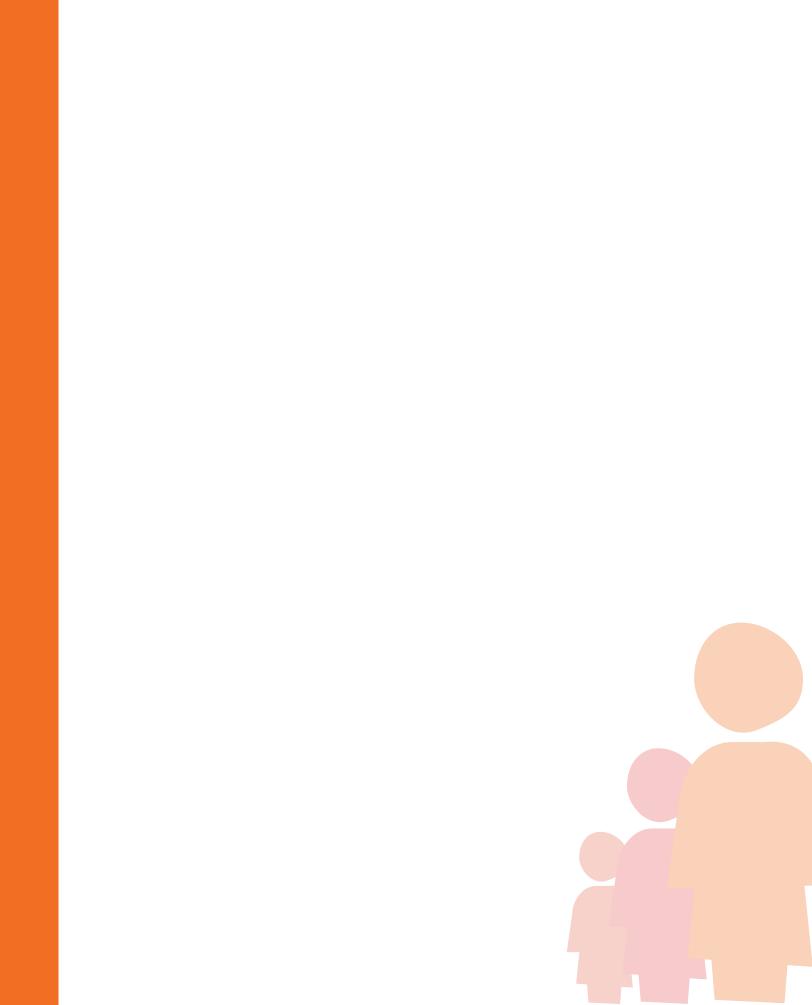


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is part of a feminist agenda, crucial for gender equality and improved health outcomes globally, and fundamental to the universal achievement of human rights. SRHR programming can be transformational when the agency, autonomy, and choice of women and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions are prioritized, including through monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

Drawing on Oxfam Canada's experience developing and applying mixed-method approaches to MEL rooted in feminist evaluation principles, this paper explores the value of applying a feminist MEL approach to SRHR programs.

THE KEY MESSAGES OF THIS PAPER ARE:

- A feminist MEL approach values the agency, rights, autonomy and choice of people involved in SRHR programming. Applying feminist MEL to SRHR programming requires authentic shifts in power relationships, putting women's rights and feminist organizations in the driver's seat.
- Feminist MEL challenges us to think differently about what is considered evidence, pushes the boundaries of how evidence is captured, and questions who gives it meaning and relevance.
- Feminist MEL employs a mixed method approach that does not prescribe a specific set of tools or methods. It is a lens brought to evaluative exercises that generates learning and values the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in their complementary role to create robust evidence for change.

THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THIS PAPER TO DONORS, GOVERNMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS ON HOW TO APPLY FEMINIST MEL TO SRHR PROGRAMMING ARE:

- Provide adequate resources to create feminist MEL systems and processes;
- Commit to integrating a feminist MEL approach to existing MEL frameworks;
- Shift the power over MEL processes to women's rights and feminist organizations and populations that are typically excluded;
- Apply feminist principles throughout the SRHR program cycle, including MEL.



1. INTRODUCTION

Working to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) globally – particularly in neglected areas such as abortion, advocacy, and comprehensive sexuality education – is feminist in its own right. Ensuring that women, girls, men, boys and individuals of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions have full autonomy over their lives, bodies and sexuality is also feminist, crucial for achieving gender equality and improved health outcomes, and fundamental to the universal achievement of human rights.

Feminist MEL and SRHR programming are united in their feminist underpinnings that prioritize agency, autonomy and choice. Globally, feminist MEL and SRHR are contested spaces where ideological battlegrounds are fought and where the agency, voice and power of women and people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and expressions are often caught in the cross-hairs. Feminist MEL challenges us to think differently about what is considered evidence, to push the boundaries of how this evidence is captured, and to question who assigns it meaning and relevance. It emphasizes the need to shift power relationships in MEL processes, encourages collective knowledge generation and values lived experience in meeting one's own sexual and reproductive health needs and aspirations.

Canada's ambitious Feminist International Assistance Policy has required Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and its development partners, including Oxfam Canada, to think critically about putting feminist principles into practice and doing development differently. Feminist MEL has the potential to deepen gender equality and produce transformational SRHR outcomes that go beyond seeing women as passive recipients of contraceptives or services that may or may not meet their needs.

Without a feminist approach to MEL, power inequities are perpetuated and SRHR interventions are not situated squarely in the feminist political economy. Moreover, challenging and changing structural and systemic relations through a feminist lens politicizes MEL processes, urging practitioners to take risks and push boundaries.

2. WHAT IS A FEMINIST APPROACH TO SRHR?

A feminist approach goes beyond targeting women and girls to address the root causes of gender inequality. These root causes persist through unequal gender and power relations, as well as the patriarchal norms and structures that shape society. There are three foundational principles to a feminist approach: intersectionality, agency and process. Applying these principles means addressing intersectional identities in participation and outcomes; understanding women and people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, not only as beneficiaries but also as agents of change and experts in their own experience, lives and communities; and prioritizing processes that seek not only results but also learning, collaboration, participation, inclusivity and integrity.

Oxfam Canada's emerging approach to SRHR includes:

- i. Improving national-level advocacy led by women's rights and youth-led organizations to advance progressive SRHR policies and practice;
- Strengthening health systems to deliver safe, quality and confidential sexual and reproductive health services and secondary prevention services for gender-based violence (GBV);
- Improving access to SRHR information and comprehensive sexuality education for men, women, people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, adolescent boys and girls; and,
- iv. Engaging adolescents, women, men and influencers to understand and transform discriminatory norms, attitudes and behaviours.



3. HOW IS IMPACT MEASURED AND WHAT COUNTS AS EVIDENCE?

Most donor-funded programs that are gender transformative, including SRHR programs, are designed, implemented,² monitored and evaluated using standardized tools such as those stemming from resultsbased management (RBM). Challenges in using these standardized tools are well documented³ and include reducing complex transformation to overly prescribed, disparate boxes, using primarily quantitative indicators that have little flexibility to adapt and course-correct as change unfolds, and a bureaucratic emphasis on efficacy and value-for-money rather than understanding how change happens. One of greatest frustrations experienced by Oxfam Canada's program staff is that these standardized tools only tell part of the story. Programs could be strengthened by capturing rich, triangulated, nuanced and intersectional data to better understand changes in gender and power relationships.

At the same time, there is pressure to demonstrate the impact of SRHR programs, and gender transformative programming more generally, through 'rigorously' generated evidence. Andomized control trials (RCT) are increasingly used in international health programs, especially in SRHR, as well as in programs to end violence against women and girls (VAWG) and GBV. RCTs, single-case experiment and double-blind studies are often viewed within the sector to produce the 'best,' most rigorously generated evidence.

The strength of RCTs lays in their ability to provide clarity of results generated in programming. However, from a feminist perspective, there are many ethical and methodological concerns about RCTs. They are less able to demonstrate how and why change has happened, or why it is significant in a given context. Aspects of programming that are difficult to measure, such as shifting discriminatory norms that stigmatize sexual and reproductive health services, invariably produce messier, non-linear results that need to be nuanced and ascribed meaning by those participating in the programs. These results should be viewed as contributions to change within broader systems.

BOX 1: FEMINIST LEARNING SYSTEMS

First piloted in the GAC/Oxfam Canada-funded Engendering Change program, a feminist learning system is interconnected, employs mixed methods and moves beyond a standard MEL system that is geared towards upward accountability. In Engendering Change, it consisted of four key components: design (including a theory of change and logic model), reflective spaces, evaluative moments and sensemaking/validation exercises. The system's strength was its learning and inquiry- based orientation, which gave it the flexibility to respond to the specific needs of partners - particularly women's rights and feminist organizations - and to focus on integrating feminist principles into MEL processes.

For more information see: Haylock, L and Miller C. (June 2015). "Merging developmental and feminist evaluation to monitor and evaluative transformative social change." American Journal of Evaluation.

4. FIT FOR PURPOSE: FEMINIST MEL

Feminist MEL has been instrumental in overcoming some of the practical, philosophical and methodological challenges described above. Over the past decade, Oxfam Canada has tried to strike a balance among measuring and assessing the results and impacts of our programs, creating robust meta-narratives that enable a broader and more collective understanding of how and why change is happening and putting our own feminist values into practice. For us - and a growing group of evaluators8 - a mixed methods approach⁹ to evaluations and MEL systems has enabled the capture of rich, triangulated, nuanced and intersectional data on changes in gender and power relationships that increases our understanding and helps improve our programming. Despite these advances, a mixed method approach has fallen short of integrating feminist principles and processes fully into our MEL work. To bridge this gap, we began experimenting with feminist learning systems (Box 1) - innovative, mixed-method systems rooted in the following six key elements of feminist MEL.¹⁰

i. UNDERSTAND FEMINIST MEL AS AN APPROACH RATHER THAN DEFINED TOOLS OR METHODS

Feminist MEL is an approach that seeks to surface diverse perspectives, emphasizing the unique views of various women and other marginalized groups so as to interrogate structural and systemic power relationships. It focuses on exposing gender-based discrimination, underscoring how intersecting identities (such as ability, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and geographic location) further marginalize specific groups. Feminist MEL does not prescribe a specific set of tools or methods, but rather is a lens brought to evaluative exercises.

Oxfam Canada uses feminist discourse strategically and pragmatically and does not force specific language or concepts. In certain contexts, even with women's rights organizations, feminism simply does not resonate or, to some, represents an overly Westernized concept. In these situations, Oxfam Canada focuses less on naming 'feminism' and more on process, guiding principles and approach.

ii. SITUATE FEMINIST MEL AS A PROCESS THAT DEEPENS SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Feminist MEL aims to support and deepen the transformation. This requires shifting away from MEL as a punitive exercise, where activities and evaluations are conducted on participants, towards a process with, for and owned by those participants. This has meant integrating smaller, more frequent spaces for reflection and regular evaluative exercises (like learning forums, Oxfam's Capacity Assessment Tool – see Annex 1 – and other peer-to-peer learning opportunities) rather than relying exclusively on midterm and final evaluations. Feminist MEL recognizes that transformative change is complex and non-linear. It is attentive to incremental change, holding ground, or even backlash as possible indicators of successfully challenging imbalances in power relationships. Applying feminist MEL to SRHR has the potential to not only strengthen service delivery and improve health outcomes, but also to give agency to those involved in programs with the resources and information needed to advance their SRHR and hold their governments to account to meet their rights.

BOX 2: SHIFTING THE POWER IN FEMINIST MEL

Oxfam Canada has experimented with the photo voice method to capture context driven transformative change. For example, Ethiopian partners were trained to use storyboards and to capture stories of change in their communities. They then went back into their communities and created photo essays of the top seven change stories they had identified in their communities. Then they came back together as a group to share the photo essays, exchange stories of change and select one story that would be videotaped for the community.

For more information see: Evallab. (2013). Engendering change case studies: Ethiopia. Retrieved from http://oxfam.ca/about/accountability-transparency



iii. PUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Shifting power means enabling partners to drive the design, definition, implementation and use of MEL exercises. For example, rather than imposing predetermined indicators in a process that risks replicating the same power structures we are trying to dismantle, women's rights and feminist organizations can use their own experience and evidence to both develop and monitor signposts of change, including indicators, that are significant to their own journeys.

For Oxfam Canada, this shift has meant prioritizing partner timelines and work plans, having an honest conversation about partners' capacity needs, and creating space for partners to identify learning questions and data collection strategies that best meet those needs. It has also meant ensuring that data collection, analysis, sensemaking and validation is carried out in an inclusive, participatory, ethical and non-extractive manner, enabling partners to define outputs (such as producing videos or photos rather than long, narrative reports) and agreeing together how data will be used and disseminated.

Oxfam Canada has used this approach successfully in smaller evaluative exercises, with innovative techniques like most-significant change videos¹¹ and photo voice.¹² However, given that final evaluations are frequently donor-driven, we have not been able to completely incorporate a feminist MEL approach at this level. Despite this, we have encouraged donors to incorporate partner learning questions and capacity strengthening as much as possible in these exercises.

iv. GENERATE ACCESSIBLE AND CONTEXT-DRIVEN COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

Feminist MEL recognizes that there are many different ways of knowing and that these intersectional perspectives should not only be sought, but also honoured. Collective knowledge generation that is rich, diverse, context-driven and accessible is critical and should be central in defining and advancing strategies to achieve sexual and reproductive rights and end power imbalances. Collective knowledge must be seen both as a resource and a source of power. For example, Oxfam Canada is experimenting with digitizing information and using real-time feedback loops (such as with cell

phones) to ensure that timely, useful data is collected ethically and readily available to partners, local officials and service providers. We also try to create spaces for reflection and participatory sensemaking of data in our MEL systems and evaluative exercises in ways that honour context-specific experiences. 4

v. SHIFT THE ROLE OF THE FVALUATOR IN FEMINIST MEI

The role of the evaluator shifts in feminist MEL from an all-knowing, objective 'expert' to someone who facilitates empowering, collaborative processes that are rooted in participant ownership. The feminist evaluator provides technical support and poses questions that support the gender transformative nature of the program, the capture of information and other evaluative processes. The evaluator must be attuned to potentially sensitive power dynamics and reflect on his/her/ their own power in an evaluative exercise. Part of the evaluator's role is to keep the principle of 'do no harm' front and centre in the process. To this end, Oxfam Canada has established a set of ethical and safety guidelines for research and evaluation, particularly for our programs to end VAWG and GBV.15 We are also exploring how these guidelines can be adapted for our SRHR programs.

vi. ADAPT PROGRAMMING BASED ON FEMINIST I FARNING

Feminist MEL prioritizes strategic learning, which strengthens collective ownership of the program, supports evidence-based decision-making and builds collective knowledge on effective, transformative approaches to advance women's rights and gender equality.16 Focusing on learning does not mean that accountability falls by the wayside. In fact, focusing on collective knowledge and ownership often increases partners' investment in the program and has the potential to empower individuals and communities with greater voice and accountability for SRHR. Feminist MEL can create opportunities for those involved in programs to be meaningfully engaged in holding partners (like Oxfam Canada) accountable to the delivery of programming that meets their needs. It also recognizes that no single person or organization has all the answers, and that gender transformation is challenging, non-linear and risky. To challenge and change gender power relations, we must collectively document, learn and share strategies that best advance women's rights and gender equality.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS: APPLYING A FEMINIST MEL APPROACH TO SRHR PROGRAMMING

A feminist MEL approach to SRHR programming can help tell the story of women's and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities' lived experiences while deepening transformative change and realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights. It captures and values context-driven, diverse experiences in meeting sexual and reproductive health needs and aspirations, while broadening definitions of what constitutes evidence and shifting power relationships. In order to implement such an approach effectively, women's rights and feminist organizations must take the wheel to reflect on their own experiences, to define what and how change is to be measured, to decide why the resulting information is important and how it will be shared. In the process, NGOs and donors must be challenged to be braver and bolder in applying feminist principles to MEL.

Feminist MEL is an emerging approach and its application to SRHR – a fundamentally feminist area of programming – warrants exploration. The following recommendations provide concrete ideas about how SRHR stakeholders, including donors, governments and civil society organizations, can begin to integrate feminist MEL in their programming.

i. PROVIDE ADEQUATE RESOURCES TO CREATE FEMINIST MEL SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

- Provide discrete budgets for feminist MEL processes and systems that incorporate learning exercises throughout the SRHR program rather than financing formative and summative evaluations.
- Acknowledge that the power shifts essential for feminist MEL require more time and flexibility than other MEL approaches. Women's rights and feminist organizations are well-placed to lead feminist MEL processes, but are often under-funded and overstretched. They need human and financial resources to lead and deliver.

ii. COMMIT TO INTEGRATING A FEMINIST APPROACH INTO EXISTING MEL FRAMEWORKS

- Integrate feminist MEL with other evaluation approaches and exchange experiences on applying feminist MEL in SRHR programming. Donors must be open to trialing new approaches, investing in organizations that do so and supporting the identification of and learning from success as well as failure. Implementing agencies whether governments or civil society partners should advocate for and apply feminist MEL where possible.
- Move away from conducting only summative and formative exercises toward smaller, strategic, and dynamic learning exercises that consistently employ feminist principles.
- Establish systems that encourage the use of mixed methods of data collection to monitor and evaluate SRHR change at individual, organizational and movement levels.
- Instil a 'do no harm' approach in MEL processes, including by establishing a secure complaints mechanism.

iii. SHIFT THE POWER OVER MEL PROCESSES TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS AND POPULATIONS THAT ARE TYPICALLY EXCLUDED

 Put women's rights and feminist organizations in the driver's seat to lead MEL processes. This will require Northern-based entities to listen to these



- organizations, facilitate their leadership and acknowledge their own positional power.
- Build the capacity of partners in SRHR programming (including NGOs) to implement feminist MEL processes.
- Acknowledge the systemic, structural and intersectional barriers faced by diverse groups of people in meeting their sexual and reproductive health needs and rights and address these barriers

 for example, by including populations typically excluded from MEL processes and enabling co-learning and community control over MEL.
- Prioritize the use of indicators that are developed and defined by partners and the people SRHR programs seek to support.

iv. APPLY FEMINIST PRINCIPLES THROUGHOUT THE SRHR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS, INCLUDING MEL

- Appreciate the utility of a feminist MEL approach in understanding the impact of realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- All stakeholders should consciously apply feminist principles to the full cycle of SRHR program development and implementation, including design, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ANNEX 1

PUTTING FEMINIST PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE: CAPACITY ASSESSMENT AND BENCHMARKING TOOL

WHAT IS OXFAM CANADA'S CAPACITY ASSESSMENT AND BENCHMARKING TOOL?

First developed for the GAC/Oxfam funded Engendering Change program, Oxfam Canada's Capacity Assessment and Benchmarking tool (CAT) is a participatory self-assessment exercise that supports partners to identify their capacity strengthening needs and design a context-specific action plan to build their capacity.

HOW DOES THE TOOL INTEGRATE A FEMINIST APPROACH?

The CAT creates a reflective space that shifts power to partners, putting them in the driver's seat to name their organizational strengths and challenges, and to define an action plan that identifies the best strategies to target their challenges. Going beyond the contribution of one specific project, the tool allows an organization to track its own organizational strengthening journey. The CAT process brings together the entire organization, including human resources and financial teams, program specialists, senior management, and administrative and support staff. It facilitates a conversation that surfaces and honours the diverse knowledge, expertise, and experience that each member of the organization brings to the table. In the spirit of nothing about me without me, partner organizations decide what information is shared and with whom.

HOW DOES THE TOOL CAPTURE A NON-LINEAR, COMPLEX JOURNEY?

The CAT produces a numeric, quantitative scoring as well as qualitative information on organizational capacities. In Engendering Change, partners conducted in the CAT in the first year of the program. Afterward, they engaged in activities, such as gender action learning, that deepened their understanding of how to integrate a gender transformative approach into their organizations' policies, procedures, programs and deep culture. When the CAT exercise was repeated in the second year, scores were generally lower than in the previous year. During a follow-up conversation, partners remarked that because of the action learning exercises, they better understood the journey their organization needed to take to become more gender transformative and therefore gave themselves a lower score.

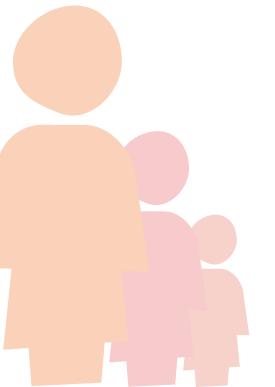
Based on the success of Engendering Change, a version of the CAT has been adapted for Oxfam Canada's new programming to end VAWG and GBV and for our SRHR programs.¹⁷



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 Retrieved 16 May 2018, from https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file-attachments/a-feminist-approach-final.pdf
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- 7. See S. Van Bell, S. Rifkin, B. Marchal. (2017) "The Challenge in Evaluating health policies and programs: the case of women's participatory groups to improve antenatal outcomes." BMC Health Services research 17:697; S. Pollack. (2012). An Imprisoning Gaze: Practices of Gendered, Racialized and Epistemic Violence. International Review of Victimology, 19(1), 103-114; D. Majury, L.P. Rankin, and D.E. Conners (2015) Working with Men and Boys to De-Normalize Violence Against Women and Girls: The State of the Field, Ottawa: Carleton University.
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- 9. Mixed methods seek to integrate social science disciplines with predominantly quantitative and predominantly qualitative approaches to theory, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. For a full definition, see M. Bamberger. (2012). Introduction to Mixed Methods in Impact Evaluation. Impact Evaluation Notes, 3. InterAction. Retrieved 16 May 2018, from https://www.interaction.org/sites/default/files/Mixed%20Methods%20in%20Impact%20Evaluation%20(English).pdf

- 10. The six tenets draw in part from learning captured in: C. Miller and L. Haylock, 'Capturing changes in women's lives: the experiences of Oxfam Canada in applying feminist evaluation principles to monitoring and evaluation practice' in C. Sweetman and K. Bowman (eds), Gender, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, Practical Action, 2018; L. Haylock and C. Miller, 'Merging Developmental and Feminist Evaluation to Monitor and Evaluate Transformative Social Change', American Journal of Evaluation (37:1) 2016.
- 11. The International Women's Health Coalition explored best practice with non-traditional data capture at a 2015 conference on feminist MEL for programming in Comprehensive Sexuality Education. See K. Austin-Evelyn. (2015). A Friendly, Feminist Approach to Monitoring and Evaluation. Retrieved 16 May 2018 from International Women's Health Coalition blog: https://iwhc.org/2015/05/a-friendly-feminist-approach-to-monitoring-and-evaluation/. Participants at the conference presented a variety of tools, including "mobility mapping" that enabled young girls in India to use art and drawing to map where they felt safest in their communities, or new technologies in Sudan that leverage the use of cellular phones to collect information about who can access CSE, as well as photo voice.
- 12. Photo voice is a community based participatory methodology used to document and reflect a reality in a given moment in time. It is conceptually influenced by feminist theory and Freirian concepts of social action and critical consciousness (N. Wallerstein, E. Bernstein, (1988). Empowerment Education: Freire's Ideas Adapted to Health Education. Health Education & Behavior, 15(4), 379-394. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/109019818801500402, or R.W. Strack, C. Magill, & K. McDonagh, "Engaging youth through Photovoice" Health Promotion Practice. 5: 49-58 http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/R Strack Engaging 2004.pdf)
- 13. See, for example, the GAC funded program Power-Up: Women shaping their future with technology: https://www.oxfam.ca/news/oxfam-canada-launches-project-to-%E2%80%98power-up%E2%80%99-women%E2%80%99s-political-participation-in-indonesia-0
- 14. See this paper, Annex 1: Putting Feminist Principles into Practice: Capacity Assessment and Benchmarking Tool.
- 15. These guidelines incorporate the key tenets of the WHO guidelines of "Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence against Women" and try to give examples and practical tools of how to do this work. World Health Organization (2001). Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence against Women. Retrieved 31 May 2018, from http://www.who.int/gender/violence/womenfirtseng.pdf.
- 16. L. Haylock and C. Miller. (2015). Merging Development and Feminist Evaluation to Monitor and Evaluate Transformative Social Change. American Journal of Evaluation. 37(1):63-79.
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