

**VOPE name: Feminist Issues Topical Interest Group-American Evaluation Association**  
**Country: United States**

**“Promoting Feminist and Gender Responsive Evaluation Approaches”**

***A Brief History of the Feminist Issues Topical Interest Group***

In 1992, at the American Evaluation Association (AEA) annual meeting in Dallas, a group of feminist evaluators, after a session that involved all the past presidents of AEA, reflected not only on the fact that these were all white men, but on the paternalistic manner in which certain questions had been answered. These women were deeply engaged in evaluation practice, identified as feminists personally, philosophically and politically, and had come together informally prior to this time to support each other and to discuss ways in which they might broaden the evaluation enterprise and encourage greater diversity of thought and participation and instill an appreciation for the important and valid role that social justice aims can play in evaluation work. At the time, ideas about the appropriate role of the evaluator were more narrowly defined than they are today and Participatory Evaluation and other forms of collaborative efforts in which the evaluator assumed (or could assume) the role of advocate, at any stage of the evaluation, were still contentiously debated by some. The idea that there could be such a thing as Feminist Evaluation was not taken seriously by others in the field.

But these were highly respected, strong and determined women. Between 1993 and 1997 these feminist evaluators collaborated with each other to offer AEA sessions and presentations that addressed gender inequities and the lack of gender representations within evaluation, focusing on the need for gender-responsive evaluation. Concurrently, the demographic composition of the field was changing; membership of the organization increased and the proportion of women among those professionals surpassed that of men.

At the 1997 AEA annual meeting in San Diego, the Feminist Issues in Evaluation TIG was formally approved by AEA. Donna Mertens, Joann Farley, and Elizabeth Whitmore, among others, were instrumental in the formation of this group. In an attempt to raise the profile of what they saw as critical and legitimate concerns for the field, they began to work on a proposal for a volume on Feminist Evaluation for one of the leading scholarly journals for their profession, “New Directions in Evaluation.” The process proved to be long and arduous with frequent requests to the authors of the proposal to prove the merit and worth of the volume. It lay dormant for a period. After considerable efforts, they felt that the project might gain more traction with newer voices and invited Sharon Brisolaro and Denise Seigart to take on the role of proposing a new volume. That volume- *Feminist Evaluation: Explorations and Experiences- No. 96-* was published in 2002. It is the only New Directions volume on Feminist Evaluation to date; however, an new volume edited by Brisolaro, Seigart and Sengupta showcasing multiple authors on feminist evaluation and research is under contract to Guildford Press for submission in the fall of 2012 with anticipated publication date of 2013.

From 1997 to 2011, the Feminist Issues in Evaluation group members have conducted surveys on Feminist Evaluation, written letters to AEA regarding gender-balanced representation on expert panels and discussions, and have focused increasingly on soliciting and providing quality educational programs and workshops for evaluators at each annual AEA conference. The group has recently begun a blog and launched its own website in addition to collaborating on the upcoming Feminist Evaluation volume.

### ***What is Feminist Evaluation?***

Our work has resulted in a model of Feminist Evaluation that is founded on basic principles: The first is that evaluation is a political activity; evaluators' personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics come from and lead to a particular political stance. The contexts in which evaluations operate (projects, contexts, interactions) are politicized and imbued with asymmetrical power relationships. As a result, Feminist Evaluators approach a project seeking to understand the political nature of the context from the very beginning of the project through reflexive processes, engagement with stakeholders, open-ended inquiry, and establishing trust among research participants.

Feminist Evaluation also holds that research methods, institutions, and practices are social constructs. As social constructs, research and evaluation methods, institutions, and practices have been influenced by dominant ideologies, including patriarchy. Those practicing Feminist Evaluation work to counteract the influence of limiting ideologies on methods by mixing methods, by using inclusive and participatory approaches, and by choosing culturally and socially appropriate methods.

A third principle is that there are multiple ways of knowing. Feminist Evaluation honors and searches for multiple ways of knowing, in part through deep and real engagement of a range of stakeholders. As a result, Feminist Evaluators may seek the answer to questions such as: What ways of knowing are valued in this (cultural, social) context? (e.g., stories, emotions, artistic representations) Do these ways of knowing vary by stakeholder/participant group? Which forms of knowledge have the highest credibility (and does this depend on the source of information)?

The next three 3 Feminist Evaluation key principles are related to social justice. For example, an important approach to recognizing and addressing inequality is to begin with gender. We don't assume that you end with gender, however. Feminist Evaluation identifies gender inequities as one manifestation of social injustice. Discrimination cuts across race, class, and culture and is inextricably linked to all three. Gender inequities are an important **point of departure** for evaluation and FE begins its investigation by examining sex and sexual identity; however, for Feminist Evaluators multiple identities and cultural-political contexts are critical to the understanding of program dynamics and outcomes.

A fifth principle is that discrimination based on gender is systemic and structural. It is embedded in our major institutions: schools, religious institutions, media, government, and, certainly, pop culture. Efforts must be made to uncover policies and practices that lead to discrimination if programs and outcomes are to be more accurately understood. Feminist Evaluators ask: What is the nature of structural and gender inequities within this context? What are the consequences of these inequities? What are the consequences of bringing systemic and structural inequities to light?

Finally, Feminist Evaluation holds that the purpose of knowledge is action, that action is an ethically and morally appropriate response of engaged inquiry. The degree and kinds of action need to be negotiated and must be sensitive to the lived realities of the people affected by our work long after we have moved on to other projects. Within Feminist Evaluation, there is a strong belief that we have a responsibility to those who provide information, who share of their lives and time, and that research is for a purpose, should be used for good.

Feminist evaluation is not restricted to particular methods and can be combined with other models.

An illustration of a feminist evaluation is a comparative evaluation of school health programs in the US., Australia, and Canada led by Denise Seigart . The case study provides a means of exploring the challenges of incorporating feminist research approaches into such an evaluation. While conducting case studies of school based health care in these countries, she found that inequities in the provision of health care exist and are often related to gender inequities. Racism, sexism and classism were all noted, due to religious, economic, and cultural influences; all of these played a part in the quality and accessibility of health care in these countries. Examples of gender inequities in access to health care included the disproportionate influence religious organizations had on the provision of health care, the impact that tying health care to employment had on women and children, and the valuing (or devaluing) of women's work with regard to the provision of health care for children in schools. Reflections on the challenges of implementing an evaluation from a feminist perspective, as well as discussion of the potential for fostering community learning through a feminist evaluation approach, in the context of evaluating school-based health care are presented in the forthcoming Guilford text mentioned earlier.

### ***Strategies***

The Feminist Issues in Evaluation Topical Interest Group (TIG) consistently strives to present sessions and workshops each year at the Annual AEA conference which discuss the integration of gender responsive evaluation approaches and methods that integrate feminist theory. In the past, we have used the TIG newsletter to disseminate information about feminist evaluation efforts, highlighting individual practitioners. On occasion we have asked members to attend annual meeting sessions not typically open to feminist ideas to raise questions about gender or social equity. In the past several years, we have cosponsored sessions with other TIGs interested in issues of social justice in order to encourage others to think about gender equity as well as to continue to push our own thinking and practice.

For example, in 2010, in an effort to broaden the spread of feminist and gender-responsive evaluation, the Feminist TIG connected with the International and Cross-Cultural TIG and United Nations (UN) Women to promote international feminist and gender-responsive evaluation approaches. Together, the two TIGs offered a half-day workshop on gender responsive evaluation and invited UN Women to participate. As a result, in 2011, UN Women collaborated with the AEA in a joint program to increase the number of gender-responsive evaluators. UN Women funded registration and travel awards for evaluators who had shown “leadership in and contributions to the evaluation profession or to gender-focused development in your country of practice.” As part of this collaboration, the two TIGs and UN Women jointly developed a curriculum on approaches for gender-responsive evaluation and co-managed a one-day Gender-Responsive Evaluation workshop. Although UN Women did not continue to provide bursaries for international gender-responsive evaluators, the collaboration between the two TIGs in promoting gender-responsive evaluation internationally continues. A joint workshop proposal is planned for 2013.

### ***Progress and Achievements***

We consider the publication and success of the *New Directions in Evaluation* volume on Feminist Evaluation (2002) to be an important achievement of feminist evaluators. In 2011, one of our members published an article on Feminist Evaluation in a *New Directions for Evaluation* volume focused on young evaluators.

To date, the Feminist TIG has been responsible for the facilitation of many development workshops and presentations at the AEA annual conference. Initially, the number of sessions

which mentioned “gender” in the title or abstract were less than those that mentioned “feminist”. In 1998 the word gender appears twice in the program, whereas the word feminist appears 9 times). However, over the years, “gender responsive” has become a much more acceptable term and the word “feminist” has fallen out of favor. This trend has likely been influenced by the use of “gender-responsive” terms by international aid organizations.

In 2012 there are forty presentations that include gender in the title or abstract. These included panels, presentations, and roundtables focusing on the following issues: health or human services; cultural context and competency; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender issues; social justice and/or advocacy; Feminist Evaluation or gender-based approaches; international development and evaluation; methods or evaluation framework focused; capacity building; policy; and collaborative approaches.

In 2012 there are eight sessions that mention **feminist** in the title or the abstract. These include the following:

- Feminist Issues in Evaluation Topical Interest Group Business Meeting
- Poster: Poster 125: Cultural Complexities and a Feminist Collective Public Health Center: Responsively Evaluating a Pilot Program for Trans Masculine Hormone Therapy
- Feminist Lens Focused on Evaluations: Revisiting Standard Evaluation Designs and Methods to Offer Tools and Strategies That Infuse Feminist Principles of Praxis into the Evaluation Process
- Complexities of Feminist Evaluation: Three Studies
- The Complex Ecology of Everyday Life: Socially Constructed Definitions, Nonverbal Cues, and Interpersonal Interactions that Perpetuate Gender Inequity and Power Asymmetry
- Roundtable Rotation I: Health Educators Becoming Evaluators: The Struggle From Within the Agency Framework
- Roundtable Rotation II: The Threat of Missing Values: The Challenges of Evaluating Older Women Landowners
- Involving Stakeholders in Evaluation Alternative Views
- Feminist Approaches to Evaluation Research: Problems and Prospects for Enhancing Credibility and Social Justice

In addition, the Feminist Issues TIG also attempts occasionally to foster discussion on the *Evaltalk* listserv, an online discussion group focusing on participant generated topics and questions. However, this strategy has not been terribly successful. Comments related to feminist issues have generally been attacked fairly quickly by evaluators who do not consider the topic worthy of discussion. The TIG members have in general avoided engaging with AEA members in this format, as the discussions often turn to disparaging remarks. Therefore, we regard this as an environment that is not friendly to discussion. Although we have not collected data on frequent contributors to *Evaltalk*, our experience has suggested that those participating in this format (particularly those most active in posting responses) may not be representative of the organization as a whole

Recently, the TIG has begun contributing to the fairly new *AEA 365 tips*, a format available to all AEA members and the external community of evaluators. The format provides short, useful tips

and resources for everyday practice. To date there are 10 entries within the AEA365 blog dealing with feminist issues and many more that include gender as part of the topic.

### ***Key Challenges***

Our sessions primarily or exclusively draw professionals already interested in the topic of feminist evaluation. We struggle to engage more evaluators, those outside our inner circle, so that we are not “singing to the choir”. The sessions offered at the AEA Conferences have become more popular over the years, but we need to continue to expand our reach and articulate our relevance. Those sessions that are labeled as dealing with “gender responsive” topics are generally much more popular than those labeled as “feminist”, thus causing some reflection on the part of group members regarding the language that should be used when preparing presentations, white papers, and even proposals for evaluation projects.

Another challenge is the fact that many of those contributing to the development of Feminist Evaluation are independent contractors or have academic or professional positions that leave little time to dedicate to writing.

We have co-sponsored panels with various AEA TIGs including the International, Multi-ethnic, Lesbian, Gay Transgender, and Bisexual, Indigenous Peoples, and Quantitative TIGS in an effort to widen our conversations. These have included collaborative sessions with the International TIG in the past that showcase the work of development professionals working in gender responsive frameworks alongside those working on feminist evaluations. How to best disseminate key ideas and values while simultaneously remaining true to our principles is an ongoing discussion.

### ***Lessons Learned and Next Steps***

We have learned a great deal on our journey. One of the many important lessons that we take with us is the importance of involving as many people as you can in your work. We all have busy lives and few of us have the luxury of sabbaticals or research positions with significant time dedicated to writing. It is important to share ideas and responsibilities for practical as well as strategic reasons. Through broader involvement, we also benefit from diverse ideas and increase our ability to interact with and reach diverse audiences.

Another important lesson is to encourage young and new evaluators to participate and offering them mentoring and guidance. New and young evaluators push us to think differently, to clarify our concepts, and to keep our examples and ideas fresh and relevant. We are conscious of the importance of sharing what we know and have struggled to achieve as well as the importance of continuing to learn and grow. Especially because our approach is not mainstream, finding others to carry on and continue to shape the work is critical.

One approach to involvement is to offer half day or full day workshops for beginning evaluators or for those who are new to feminist evaluation. Not only does this contribute to the quality dissemination of the model but such interaction can be energizing for all involved. Not incidentally, offering a workshop at the annual conference also reinforces the legitimacy and need for feminist evaluation.

We have also learned that, in embracing our ideals and working to create a new reality, we do not underestimate the importance of acting strategically in the current reality. Times change, leaders change, and needs demand different responses. The strategies and action once effective may lose their power and need to be replaced. Even the illusion of legitimacy does not mean that action is not needed. We must do more than grow slowly and certainly must do more than talk amongst

ourselves. We need to continue to take strategic actions if we want to make our vision a reality, if we truly want to work for equity and justice.

Publishing is one of the strategic actions we have undertaken as a means of disseminating information about how to do feminist evaluation to practitioners and students as well as encouraging others to rethink their practice. We are currently completing a volume on feminist evaluation and research that can be used by professionals and as a textbook in university classrooms; it is scheduled to be published in 2013. We hope that the volume itself, and the educational opportunities offered through its promotion, will reinvigorate and expand our efforts as well as educate new cadres of evaluators.

Our group will continue to offer workshops and presentations at AEA annual conferences. We will continue to engage with other TIGs in cross-listed presentations and workshops. One member is considering soliciting materials for use by instructors presenting feminist evaluation ideas in introductory evaluation, sociology, and other social science courses. We are committed to continuing to work with each other and to contributing to the development of feminist evaluation.

### **Key References:**

#### ***Feminist Evaluation***

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#### ***Feminist Research***

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## Authors

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