

Multiple Voices, Shared Realities: Gendered Inequities in the Evaluation Profession

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Background: When the International Evaluation Academy (IEAc) convened a forum to explore how the evaluation field should transform in response to the current polycrisis, it created an opportunity for self-reflection. That opportunity invites a critical examination of gender inequality and power hierarchies within the profession itself. For program evaluation to address the polycrisis meaningfully, it first requires an honest, inward-looking reflection on how women evaluators engage, and are engaged with, as practitioners and leaders in the field.

Purpose: Despite the rising prevalence of gender equality rhetoric in the evaluation field, little has been published about the dilemmas and barriers that women evaluators have encountered in their professional evaluation journeys—dilemmas and barriers that have shaped their practice, advancement, and leadership experiences. This article aims to fill that gap.

Setting: Global evaluation field; VOPEs and donor-funded organizations.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Feminist narrative inquiry (qualitative design). This design draws on two core components: a qualitative narrative approach using feminist standpoint methodology, and a reflexive autoethnographic approach. The research provides depth, context, and interpretation rather than generalizability or prediction.

Data Collection and Analysis: Memoing, critical dialogue, and qualitative interpretive analysis.

Memoing: A systematic process of writing analytic notes throughout the evaluation to capture emerging insights, reflect on patterns, question assumptions, and document how interpretations and judgments are developed over time.

Critical dialogue: A structured, reflective exchange among evaluators and key stakeholders used to test interpretations, surface different perspectives, challenge biases, and strengthen the credibility and use of the evaluation findings.

Qualitative interpretive analysis: An approach that examines qualitative evidence through iterative coding, comparison, and contextual interpretation to identify meanings, relationships, and explanatory themes relevant to the evaluation questions.

Findings: Systemic gendered power structures persist within the evaluation profession, shaping women's experiences, limiting recognition, and reproducing inequities even in spaces that claim to promote equality. Meaningful, transformative change in evaluation is impossible unless the field critically examines and addresses its own internal hierarchies, norms, and blind spots regarding gender and power.

Keywords: *feminist evaluation; gender equality; program evaluation; VOPEs; professionalization; transformation; leadership.*

When the IEAc issued a call for papers, building on their use of the Three Horizons methodology, we encountered an aspirational vision for the future of evaluation that aims to contribute to addressing the polycrisis and to an external focus aimed at transforming our field (Ofir et al., this issue). While inspiring, it prompted us to pause, reflect, and realize that transformative change externally cannot occur without first attending to the conditions and dynamics that shape the profession itself.

We are four evaluators who see evaluation as both relational and transactional, and who, as evaluators, are influenced by our positionalities, experiences with evaluation and in the evaluation field, our perspectives on the role of evaluation in society and organizational contexts, and our gender. Our experiences suggest that interactions within the profession are often shaped by power, politics, and deep-rooted institutional logics, which can affect how evaluations are conducted, whose voices are heard, and whose agendas are prioritized.

To frame this reflection, we situate our narratives within Horizon 1 of the Three Horizons framework (see Ofir et al., this issue for Three Horizons definitions), where we describe our experiences within dominant institutional structures, established professional norms, and path-dependent practices that sustain gendered hierarchies. Here, power often remains hidden, embedded in professional norms, institutional routines, and expectations that portray inequalities as simply “the way the system works.” By sharing our stories, we reveal how these structures are experienced, negotiated, and embodied in the daily professional lives of four cisgender women evaluators. We applied rigorous analysis to our four reflexive stories to illustrate how systemic inequalities are sustained not only through formal systems but also through routine interactions and professional expectations that conceal power and normalize inequalities.

Our narratives offer descriptive insights that suggest the field look inward and critically examine its assumptions, norms, values, and institutional arrangements before pursuing external change. Anchoring our reflection in Horizon 1 aims to support readers in engaging with Horizon 2 and, eventually, Horizon 3: the space of visionary, often disruptive innovations. Understanding the constraints and dynamics of the current horizon through a feminist, inward-reflecting lens is key to imagining and realizing more equitable and transformative futures for the evaluation field.

Methodology

This research article is grounded in feminist research and uses an autoethnographic methodology. Our approach recognizes positionality and lived experience as a valid and necessary source of knowledge, particularly for examining systems in which power operates relationally and is often rendered invisible through formal institutional processes (Harding, 1991; McHugh, 2020). Specifically, we used a feminist standpoint epistemology, sharing our narratives and situating our research within an argument that knowledge produced from marginalized positions can yield more critical and comprehensive insights into institutional systems than knowledge produced from neutral positions (Harding, 1991). From this perspective, we treat our personal narratives not as sources of bias but as empirical evidence that exposes the assumptions and exclusions embedded in dominant knowledge practices (McHugh, 2020). We link our experiences to the broader evaluative context and present our narratives for readers to consider and reflect upon.

Researchers

The article is written by four program evaluators. Donna Podems is a cisgender white woman born in the United States, with over 25 years of experience in evaluation and 30 years of residence in South Africa. She has served on multiple national and international evaluation boards and has worked in more than 25 countries. Sonal Zaveri, an Indian national, has worked in community mobilization, strategic planning, and evaluation for over 30 years. She, too, has served on various national and global evaluation boards, founded regional evaluation and gender networks, and worked in more than 30 countries. Originally from Russia, Svetlana Negroustoueva is a global evaluation professional with over 20 years of experience across evaluation offices in donor-funded organizations; she has actively contributed to international evaluation networks in the US and globally. Weronika Felcis has nearly 20 years of experience in evaluation and over 15 years in public policy analysis, having lived and worked in Poland and Latvia, served on regional and global evaluation boards, and is a mother of four.

This is our first coauthored article. Our backgrounds, education, cultural beliefs, ethnicities, and ages are among the variables that shape what we see, what we experience, and how we interpret those experiences. Telling our stories is not about claiming universal truth; it is about

sharing our experiences. Our reflections are intentionally direct. Our narratives are raw, deliberate, and, at times, intentionally uncomfortable, a mirror to a reality that is often silenced.

We have not used AI to write this article, since our reflections are a distillation and deep analysis of our lived experiences. We are also cognizant of ongoing concerns regarding gender bias and limited nuance in AI algorithms, which have been shown to reproduce and amplify dominant perspectives while marginalizing alternative viewpoints, the issues that are central to the argument advanced in this article (Barry & Stephenson, 2025).

Overview of the Four Narratives

We each offer a narrative that illuminates how power operates within the evaluation landscape, demonstrating how actions that appear neutral or even supportive can, at times, reproduce the very systems they seek to disrupt.

Donna and Sonal share an example of a global-level research process that overlooked gender equality as vital to transformation toward an equitable society; they describe their experiences with this pattern across multiple settings. Weronika reflects on a tension between evaluation contexts, in which she found her contributions recognized and valued within the voluntary sector, yet not afforded the same recognition or remuneration in the for-profit business sector. Svetlana's narrative spans multiple evaluation settings, tracing how similar, often implicit barriers to gender equality persist across contexts and re-emerge in different forms. The final narrative, provided by Donna, is a brief account of a long journey that illustrates how women in VOPE leadership can be formally included yet systematically unheard.

VOPE Agenda-Setting

The leadership of an international voluntary organization for professional evaluation (VOPE) conducted a structured research process to identify priority areas in the field of evaluation to foster an inclusive and transformative future. While the analysis highlighted critical issues such as decolonization, Indigenous peoples, climate change, and biodiversity, one of the most persistent and systemic causes of inequality, gender inequality, was notably absent from the research findings.

Gender equality was not identified through the VOPE's research; rather, it required strong

individual advocacy to be included as an add-on. We found it striking that the research process, intended to guide evidence-based agenda-setting, failed to identify gender equity as a critical issue for transformation for an equitable society. The lack of gender equality as a priority for a transformative future highlights how systemic blind spots can persist within structured, resource-intensive research, revealing how dominant research (and researcher) perspectives shape knowledge construction and what is recognized as important.

There are several reasons why we see gender equality as a vital part of a transformative future for an equitable society, and why we were surprised that the VOPE's research did not identify it as a priority. Globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, and fewer than 10 percent of survivors report their assault due to fear, stigma, or institutional inaction (World Health Organization, 2021). Financially, the global gender pay gap remains at 20 percent, meaning women earn only 80 cents for every dollar men earn for similar work (International Labour Organization, 2023). In education, 129 million girls worldwide are out of school, with those in conflict-affected areas facing twice the risk of exclusion compared to boys (UNESCO, 2022). Global trends reveal that progress toward gender equality is very slow, with full parity projected to take more than 123 years (World Economic Forum, 2025).

And there's more. The unequal distribution of unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities continues to constrain women's economic participation and advancement (World Economic Forum, 2025). Women remain grossly underrepresented in political power, highlighting persistent structural barriers to leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2025). Leadership remains male-dominated, with women occupying just 28 percent of management positions globally and constituting fewer than 10 percent of heads of government (UN Women, 2023). In agriculture, where women comprise 43 percent of the global labor force, they receive less than 15 percent of land ownership rights, significantly constraining productivity and food security (FAO, 2023). Climate change further compounds inequality, with projections showing that by 2050, up to 158 million more women and girls than men and boys could be pushed into poverty, highlighting how environmental crises exacerbate gendered vulnerability (UN Women, 2024).

These statistics show that gender inequality is not an isolated or even hidden issue; it is embedded in the structures and systems in which we live and work as evaluators, and therefore it is vital to

understanding evaluation's role in supporting equitable (and transformational) social change. How did the VOPE's research process not identify gender equality as a fundamental issue to address?

The VOPE research process likely failed to identify gender equality as a priority because it relied on dominant research paradigms that present themselves as "neutral" or universal, yet are historically grounded in Western, male-centered ways of knowing that often render women's experiences invisible. Feminist scholars have long argued that mainstream research reproduces systemic blind spots by treating male experiences, priorities, and power structures as the norm, while overlooking the gendered nature of inequality, labor, violence, leadership, and knowledge production itself (Harding, 1986; Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019). Feminist research challenges these assumptions by insisting that whose voices are included, whose experiences count as evidence, and who defines the research agenda fundamentally shape what is recognized as a social priority.

Without an explicit feminist or gender lens, even rigorous and resource-intensive processes can unintentionally reproduce patriarchal biases and fail to see gender inequality as structural and interconnected with issues such as climate change, conflict, poverty, and decolonization. As Sandra Harding argues, "strong objectivity" requires examining how power relations shape knowledge, while Donna Haraway emphasizes that all knowledge is "situated" rather than neutral (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Harding, 2016). Feminist evaluation and research, therefore, remain essential because they make visible the experiences, inequalities, and forms of exclusion that conventional approaches routinely ignore.

The omission of identifying gender inequality through an empirical research process suggests how evaluation agendas can reproduce existing hierarchies and blind spots, even within an organization that articulates a commitment to equity and transformation. It further demonstrates how dominant voices drive knowledge construction and what is considered important and valued within the evaluation field.

We now pass the article to Weronika Felcis, who writes in the first person, which allows her to reflect on how she practices evaluation and on the subtle, quieter, and at times obscured ways she encounters power dynamics. Her account highlights how these dynamics underpin broader systemic patterns of privilege and hierarchy that are complex and often difficult to recognize, confront, and address in her work as a practicing evaluator.

The Evaluator I Became in Unpaid Spaces

In this narrative, I examine my journey through a feminist lens, exploring how my early career grew in environments shaped by cultural expectations about work, caregiving, and professionalism. For a long time, the choices I made, such as moving between sectors, adjusting workloads, and seeking flexibility, felt entirely personal, shaped by many empathetic, collaborative, and supportive women and men who influenced my path. Only later did I understand that these choices were part of broader gendered patterns that affect many women's careers in the evaluation field. These patterns developed gradually, often quietly, over years of navigating expectations about availability, commitment, and responsibility.

In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where evaluation developed through donor-funded programs and public administration reforms rather than academic traditions, these dynamics took on specific cultural forms. Early in my career, I encountered what Joan Acker (1990) terms the "ideal worker" norm, which is an expectation of uninterrupted availability and responsiveness that was woven into procurement cycles, project timelines, and professional judgments of reliability. These norms were not imposed maliciously; they were inherited from hierarchical administrative cultures and sustained by continual pressure to secure the next project.

Many male colleagues thrived within these structures, and several supported and encouraged me; yet the system itself remained misaligned with the realities of caregiving. Joan C. Williams's (2004) concept of the "maternal wall" became increasingly visible once I became a mother, though not only in the way the literature describes it. For me, it was less about others assuming I was less committed and more about an internal unraveling: the sense of doing a double shift, of slipping out of the rhythm I had once mastered. Even when colleagues trusted me, I felt myself drifting toward roles that offered flexibility, simply because that was the only way to keep moving without breaking. Cultural norms in CEE still privilege authority, technical mastery, and presenteeism, even as public discourse slowly moves toward more egalitarian ideals. This tension creates a dual expectation for women: to excel professionally while embodying traditional care roles, resulting in persistent structural strain, no matter how supportive individual colleagues may be.

When the "ideal worker" expectations gradually, and sometimes painfully, started to clash

with my responsibilities as a primary caregiver, I found recognition and belonging in voluntary evaluation associations. These networks, both national and regional, operated under different values. They focused on empathy, care, and collaboration; they acknowledged the real constraints of people's lives; and they created flexible, relational environments where many women, though not only women, could participate meaningfully. Drawing on Tronto's (1993) and Held's (2006) ethics of care, these networks organized work through interdependence: sharing tasks, adjusting workloads in response to life circumstances, and placing relationships at the center of collective effort.

Yet, as I became more deeply involved in voluntary organizations, the contrast between the values that drew me in and the realities that shaped my paid work became impossible to ignore; what felt nourishing and collaborative in these spaces did not translate into the material opportunities governed by the evaluation market. In voluntary organizations, a structural paradox emerged. Voluntary evaluation networks offer relational, flexible, and values-driven spaces that many women gravitate toward precisely because they accommodate caregiving and resist the rigidity of donor-driven evaluation work. However, these spaces are structurally disconnected from the resource flows that define who receives paid assignments and institutional recognition. Women's voluntary leadership often brings visibility, prestige, and symbolic recognition. Still, it rarely translates into the material opportunities, such as funding, project invitations, or policy influence, that comparable contributions generate for men in similar roles. As feminist scholars explain, care and volunteer labor, disproportionately performed by women due to gendered socialization, are essential yet systematically undervalued (Lynch, 2007; Tronto, 2013).

This dynamic reflects what Nancy Fraser (1995, 2013) describes as the divide between recognition and redistribution. Women's contributions in voluntary spaces are recognized symbolically. Yet the material structures of the evaluation market, such as funding systems, procurement requirements, and tender cycles, continue to reward forms of labor that more easily align with masculinized norms of availability and mobility. Men who take on voluntary roles generally do not face the same loss of access to paid opportunities, because their labor remains legible within dominant professional norms. It took me nearly 15 years to fully recognize this pattern in my own life.

My introduction to feminist evaluation methodologies deepened my understanding of these patterns and reshaped my approach to evaluation in paid settings. Applying feminist reflection helped me see the gendered assumptions embedded in work and volunteer environments: the overreliance on women's unpaid care work, the gender-blindness of institutional designs, and the persistent prioritization of competition and economic growth over care, reciprocity, and community.

Feminist evaluation principles (Podems, 2024, in press) taught me that data alone cannot transform systems unless the evaluative process itself attends to care, trust, and equity. Without empathy, evaluation risks reproducing the very hierarchies it claims to challenge. Feminist approaches restore what dominant paradigms marginalize: care, connection, and reflexivity, not as "soft" values but as foundational components of credible, ethical, and transformational evaluation.

Recognizing these patterns has also helped me feel less alone in my own story, and for anyone navigating the same tensions, this story may be a reminder that such struggles are not personal failings but reflections of larger systems. If feminist evaluation were genuinely embraced within the paid evaluation market, and if VOPEs critically examined the patterns embedded in their own structures, these value-driven spaces could meaningfully inform more equitable ways of organizing paid work.

While my story unfolds in Eastern Europe, mainly in Poland and Latvia, Svetlana Negroustoueva's journey begins in Russia and then moves to the United States, West Africa, and finally Europe. She shares her experiences next.

Practicing Feminism in Evaluation: Building Change from Within

Over the years, I have developed as an evaluator, collaborating with various international development organizations, from the now-defunct United States Agency for International Development (USAID) contractors and the World Bank in North America to the African Development Bank (AFDB) in West Africa, and most recently with Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), an agricultural research-for-development organization headquartered in Europe. Throughout this journey, my involvement with feminist evaluation has included using it and advocating for it, carrying its flag within VOPEs as both a mentee and a mentor. My professional experience demonstrates that

efforts to incorporate feminist perspectives into evaluation practices often lead to broader reflections on organizational contexts beyond evaluation itself. This feminist approach involves not only integrating concepts such as cocreation, intersectionality, and equity into evaluation frameworks but also critically examining the power structures that influence how evaluations are conducted. Feminist evaluation is more than just technical work; it requires courage, persistence, and a willingness to challenge institutional norms that, for example, prioritize hierarchy (and, in doing so, existing power structures) over human well-being.

My involvement with feminist evaluation began long before I knew the term “evaluation.” Growing up with a mother who worked for the Soviet Women’s Committee, I observed both the progress and the contradictions in women’s roles: highly educated and capable women limited by the double burden of gender equality within a patriarchal system. Despite the Soviet Union’s official commitment to gender equality through employment, education, and political participation, these policies hid deeply rooted patriarchal norms. (Harden, 2002).

Later, during my advanced studies in Russia and the USA, and through international work, I observed how deeply ingrained gender norms are and how their expressions differ across regions, countries, and organizational contexts.

My early professional work with the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program, primarily funded by the now-defunct United States Agency for International Development, introduced me to a “gold standard” for collecting nationally representative data across more than 90 low- and middle-income countries. These data offer vital statistics on fertility, family planning, and maternal and child health, as well as on household composition, decision-making, control over earnings, and attitudes toward violence. This information helps to better understand women’s status in different contexts and how these factors relate to health outcomes. While DHS data have influenced national policies and international programs, they also reveal ongoing gender inequalities, such as disparities in women’s access to healthcare, decision-making power, and exposure to violence (The DHS Program, 2024). For feminist evaluators, DHS data and similar household-level data, such as from the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), act both as evidence and as starting points for deeper analysis, highlighting how structural inequalities are embedded in our daily health, employment, and agricultural practices and social systems, and

stressing the need for evaluation approaches grounded in feminist principles and justice.

Professionally, my experience collecting DHS data, followed by codeveloping gender and HIV indicators (Bloom & Negroustoueva, 2013) among many others, consistently revealed a clear pattern: Tools existed, and the data told stories of inequality, but reluctance to act on them persisted. Despite substantial, high-quality evidence on the benefits of women’s empowerment for food security, nutrition, and productivity, these insights have not led to structural or policy changes. Progress has been slow, not for lack of data, but because gender norms and institutional biases continue to constrain action (Njuki et al., 2022). While evidence alone doesn’t change systems, a feminist evaluation offers the theoretical insight needed to understand what does: Power and values shape how evidence is collected, interpreted, and acted upon.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to work with feminist evaluators as a cochair of the feminist topical interest group under the American Evaluation Association (AEA), and of EvalGender+, a global, multi-stakeholder partnership dedicated to advancing gender-responsive and equity-focused evaluation (GREE) worldwide, as well as being a member of the European Evaluation Society (EES) gender topical group. These professional spaces went beyond formal affiliations; they fostered learning, growth, and genuine connections. In these environments, I found female mentors who challenged and supported me, peers who generously shared their wisdom, and friends who understood that our work is as much about transforming ourselves as it is about changing systems, including the places in which we work.

Through collective reflection and dialogue with evaluation peers across continents who share my values, I learned and was constantly reminded that feminist evaluation is not just a methodology; it is a way of seeing and being. It requires courage to question hierarchies, humility to listen deeply, and compassion to honor lived experience as knowledge. In these circles, I discovered what it means to practice solidarity: celebrating one another’s successes, holding space for vulnerability, and committing to creating environments where power is shared, learning is mutual, and relationships are valued as much as results.

During this journey, four key thematic lessons shaped my understanding of how to apply the ideals suggested by Podems’ (2024) feminist evaluation model (FEM) within institutional settings and networks, including VOPEs. However, these lessons were not learned through success or celebration. Instead, they were hard-earned insights gained from my experiences that exposed

gaps between what organizations and the field of evaluation overall claimed to value and what they were actually willing to do.

I learned repeatedly that evidence for gender inequality must be relentless. I observed strong findings on gender inequality shared at high-level meetings where data clearly showed disparities in women's access to services and opportunities, only to be met with polite nods and silence. Reports were praised, and shelves full of them, but the actions needed for women's equality remained just recommendations. I remember leaving rooms after speaking with full conviction, holding stacks of evidence that should have sparked urgency. Instead, I was told to "wait for the right timing," to be "strategic" about what was recommended, or that suggestions needed to better align with "how the system works." When evidence of women's lack of access to services or even gender-based violence was minimized or ignored, it became clear that without persistent advocacy, the fight for gender equality often faded into bureaucracy. I had believed evidence would drive change toward women's equality; instead, I learned that power determines implementation.

I encountered the concept of performative commitment (Wang, 2025), also known as symbolic compliance (Taheriruh & Moshtari, 2024), which describes situations where an organization's public commitment, in this case to gender equality, conflicts with its actions. In the places I worked, I saw a wide gap between talk, decisions, and actual practices regarding gender equality. I attended meetings where gender equality was touted as an objective, a goal, and a public commitment. Yet, I faced resistance when I promoted feminist evaluation approaches, which were dismissed as "emotional" or "unrealistic." Recommendations based on clear quantitative evidence to support promoting gender equality were ignored. I observed gender units tasked to address gender equality turning into symbolic checkboxes, and people labeled as "gender experts" who knew the terminology but avoided evidence-based advocacy because it threatened comfort or challenged authority. Across the efforts and organizational set-ups little inward-facing reflexive practice was seen as a time-consuming luxury. Speaking up about unfair practices risked professional isolation. It was a hard truth: Feminist evaluation and the push for gender equality within organizations claiming to support it aren't always welcomed.

A third difficult realization was the truth that women don't always support other women. This was confusing at first, but it becomes understandable. In male-dominated environments,

competition often replaces solidarity (Pillay-Naidoo & Vermeulen, 2023). I saw women who finally reached leadership roles protect their hard-won status by distancing themselves from other women, reinforcing rather than breaking down patriarchal expectations. At times, it was painful to learn that women can also replicate the exclusion of other women. I found that true solidarity among women within patriarchal systems isn't automatic; it requires deliberate effort and courage, and the importance of male support in that system should not be underestimated.

The mentoring I received from feminist evaluators outside my workplace was crucial to my growth as an evaluator and shaped how I wanted to mentor others. I have supported my mentees by creating space for self-reflection and professional development, encouraging vulnerability, and sharing power by learning with and from them. Notably, when mentoring younger women within various organizations using this approach, I often encountered conflicts with organizational norms. Mentoring was frequently viewed as an act of performance management: shaping someone to meet existing expectations rather than questioning those expectations. When I encouraged my mentees to speak up in meetings and share their often new insights and ways of thinking, these young women sometimes were discouraged from questioning decisions or challenging the norm because it made them appear unprofessional or ungrateful. I watched talented young women shrink back, not because they lacked ability, but because the organizational structures demanded compliance rather than growth. The kind of mentoring I believed in, where lived experience is valued as knowledge and leadership develops collectively, felt radical, almost subversive. Practicing a feminist form of mentoring quietly became an act of rebellion.

My work has shaped me into both a feminist and a feminist evaluator. I have repeatedly learned that evidence alone cannot change systems; it takes persistent advocacy. I realized that organizational promises of gender equality can sometimes be performative and that solidarity among women must be intentionally cultivated in male-dominated spaces. Although feminist mentoring supported my growth, I discovered barriers to implementing it in some organizations. This kind of mentoring can quietly and effectively challenge norms and reshape leadership and processes. These lessons show that feminist evaluation is more than a methodology; it is a practice grounded in courage, persistence, and deliberate action. In organizations that claim to support gender equality, we need to confront inertia and reject complacency. Feminist evaluators

must ensure that our actions align with our values and recognize how challenging that can be.

With that final thought, I now pass the article back to Donna Podems to share the fourth and final story.

Women in VOPES: The Paradox of Presence and Powerlessness

There are women who hold influential leadership roles within VOPES. I have served in leadership positions in both national and global VOPES and have had many meaningful, positive experiences. However, I have also held VOPE roles where my experiences as a woman evaluation leader were, to say the least, frustrating: from being denied space to be heard, to being given space only to be spoken over when male colleagues were not, to having my ideas reframed in board meetings and subsequently credited to others. Before sharing a brief story, I anchor my narrative in feminist scholarship.

Feminist backlash dynamics place professional women in a double bind, forcing them to choose between being respected and being liked, thereby limiting their access to status and power. Women's labor is often devalued or appropriated, and their ideas are frequently ignored, rephrased, and ultimately credited to men (i.e., the "Matilda effect"; Rossiter, 1993). The cumulative effect of these dynamics, ongoing microaggressions, the burden of unrecognized emotional and relational labor, and the persistent gap between responsibility and recognition contributes to inequality, gradual exhaustion, and eventual disengagement (Rudman et al., 2012; Diel & Dzubinski, 2023). Similarly, feminist research shows that women leaders are often expected to manage emotions equitably and lead relationally, work that remains structurally unacknowledged and psychologically draining (Beharrie & Mabitsela, 2023). When women leaders resist, withdraw, or step back in response to these conditions, they are often labeled disruptive rather than understood as reacting to inequitable circumstances (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This body of literature documents a recurring pattern and offers a lens through which I understand my own experience.

For more than four years, I volunteered with a VOPE to support the organization's evolving governance structure. On the surface, I was included and formally given a seat at the table, where I presented recommendations grounded in years of research and co-construction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and evaluation experiences. Yet when I presented these ideas, they were repeatedly

dismissed or ignored. The constant need to defend the legitimacy and importance of years of collaborative research became emotionally and intellectually exhausting. Those with the greatest decision-making authority then appropriated and reframed elements of the work to legitimize decisions that reflected their own priorities. Watching elements of the research be selectively used to support predetermined agendas, ultimately reinforcing existing power structures, was disorienting.

In the process, I increasingly came to be viewed as "difficult," a label often attached to women who persistently challenge decisions, advocate for change, or refuse to acquiesce to dominant voices. Eventually, I resigned. To those who had not witnessed the reasoning behind that decision, my departure may have appeared to reflect disengagement or a lack of commitment. In reality, it was the result of a prolonged struggle to be heard in spaces where both my contributions and the collective work I represented were repeatedly marginalized. Over time, the cumulative effect of exclusion, dismissal, and the need to continually defend the value of this work eroded my capacity to continue, and stepping away became the only viable choice.

My experience reflects broader patterns identified in feminist scholarship on leadership and organizations. Leadership and decision-making often reproduce the hierarchies and gendered power dynamics of wider society (Ridgeway, 2001). Women who are confident, direct, and forthright are frequently characterized as difficult or overly assertive, while the same behaviors in men are regarded as evidence of leadership and strength. Such differential interpretations reflect enduring patriarchal norms that shape perceptions of authority and legitimacy. Conversely, women who conform to expectations of deference and agreeableness are more readily accepted, reinforcing norms that prioritize compliance over agency. This dynamic further entrenches a system in which women are encouraged to be accommodating in ways not expected of men (Heilman et al., 2024).

Stepping back after years of effort and relinquishing a transformative vision I deeply believed in was profoundly painful. Equally difficult has been witnessing an organization that once embodied hope and collective purpose struggle to live up to the values and aspirations it publicly espoused.

Situating the Above Narratives

Thus far, we have shared our collective stories. We wanted the reader to engage with our stories and reflect on their significance in their own lives before attending to the more traditional aspects of a journal article. We hope that our stories have engaged your thinking on a personal level. With these narratives swimming in your head, we now invite you to a brief introduction to feminism and feminist evaluation, and then illustrate the journey by which the narratives came into being.

Feminism and Feminist Evaluation

Feminism is both a theory and a practice that seeks equality between women and men in social, political, economic, and intellectual spheres. It challenges patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny, viewing gender inequality not as an individual issue but as a structural and systemic problem. Rooted in the response to historic and ongoing discrimination that limits women's rights and participation (Bowles & Duelli Klein, 2024; McCann et al., 2020), feminism is also a "practical struggle" grounded in action and advocacy for justice (hooks, 2000). Its core beliefs hold that human equity is essential, that gender inequality creates social injustice, and that gender-based disparities are systemic (Podems, 2018; Schaeffer & Zaveri, 2023).

Feminism is not a Western idea but a universal pursuit of dignity, fairness, and justice that manifests across diverse cultural and social contexts (El Saadawi, 2018). Although feminist scholarship has developed globally, its underlying principles transcend geography and culture, aligning with broader movements for social change. Feminism adapts to local realities while maintaining its central commitment to equity and the dismantling of all forms of oppression (Graness & Kopf, 2024).

A feminist evaluator, or someone who practices feminist evaluation, need not claim the label or be an expert in feminist theory to practice feminist thinking; what matters is a conscious alignment with its values and a willingness to engage with them during the evaluation process (Podems, 2024). A person doesn't have to identify as a feminist to draw on feminist evaluation. Finally, as LaVelle and colleagues (2024) note, everyone brings personal values to their evaluation work, while Podems (2018; 2024; in press) emphasizes that feminist evaluators make these values explicit and intentional. Being a feminist evaluator, or someone who draws on feminist evaluation, is therefore less about identity and more about

conducting evaluation processes that actively challenge inequality and promote gender equality (Podems, in press).

And this is where the stories of four feminists, who are also evaluators, begin. We write to reveal the quiet patterns that uphold power hierarchies within professional evaluation structures. We want these stories to speak clearly and unapologetically, transforming what has long been whispered into a collective call for change. We also acknowledge the likely intersections of our experiences with those of Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities in the evaluation profession. We invite their stories to be heard alongside ours. At the same time, we recognize our own privilege as four educated cisgender women given the platform and freedom to reflect and publish, and we hold that awareness as part of the story we tell.

Group Reflection

The International Evaluation Academy's thematic focus for a special edition of JMDE served as the catalyst for a formal, critically engaged article informed by our shared experience as women in evaluation. Although this field frequently positions itself as a mechanism for transforming and advancing equality and social justice, our experiences highlight a persistent, though not always perpetual, disjuncture between these stated ideals and the visible and invisible internal structures that shape our professional hierarchies, influence participation, and constrain our trajectories as women evaluators and leaders in the field. The existence of gender inequality in a profession that outwardly promotes gender equality is ironic.

Subsequent conversations via email and WhatsApp enabled us to examine our respective narratives in greater depth, with deliberate attention to preserving the individuality of each voice rather than collapsing diverse perspectives into a single composite account. We prioritized reflexive and rigorous interpretation through three main avenues: memoing, critical dialogue, and qualitative interpretative analysis. The approach enabled us to surface both convergence and divergence within our experiences and to situate these within broader questions of power, gender, and professional legitimacy in evaluation. In doing so, we conclude that, despite its transformative rhetoric, the evaluation field remains bound by residual patriarchal logics and power structures that require explicit recognition and sustained challenge if genuine equity and systemic change are

to be realized, and if evaluation is to fulfill its transformative role in a polycrisis.

Individual Reflection Using Reflexive Memoing

We analyzed our observations through repeated readings and reflexive memoing, which helped identify patterns across the narratives while remaining attentive to their specific contexts. This core qualitative research method involved each of us writing personal, analytical notes (memos) about our data, processes, and biases, actively reflecting on how our identity, background, and worldview (positionality) influenced our understanding and interpretation. These narratives underwent an iterative process in which all authors challenged and interrogated one another to bring clarity, shared meaning, and deeper insights. These processes further drew on the feminist narrative methodology, which demonstrates rigor through transparent analytic processes, reflexive positioning, and theoretically informed interpretation (Keefe & Fisher, 2020).

From a feminist perspective, narratives are seen as sites where meaning, identity, and institutional norms intersect, making them especially suitable for examining professional cultures and epistemic hierarchies. (Maynes et al., 2008; Woodiwiss et al., 2020). In our study, we explored our narratives within the field of evaluation, explicitly challenging positivist assumptions that distance and detachment are prerequisites for rigor, and instead emphasizing reflexivity, relationality, and attention to power as methodological strengths (Keefe & Fisher, 2020).

Analytical Framework

While we used autoethnography to guide our approach, to ensure rigorous analysis and to structure our critical dialogues and analysis of how gendered power operates within the evaluation field, we organized our thinking around Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of social structures, which provided a nonfeminist yet compatible theoretical framework. His concepts helped us examine the structural mechanisms through which patriarchal norms are reproduced in evaluation spaces. Specifically, we used the concept of capital to identify how different actors in the field accumulate and mobilize economic, social, cultural, and symbolic forms of value to gain credibility and influence.

Bourdieu's concept of capital supports the transparent interrogation of our stories and shows how recognition and legitimacy are unevenly

distributed, often aligning with existing gendered hierarchies rather than merit alone. His notion of habitus further supports our feminist, reflexive approach by drawing attention to the internalized dispositions and professional behaviors evaluators adopt to "fit" within dominant norms, which significantly influenced our engagement in this process and is historically shaped by patriarchal expectations that at times permeate the evaluation field around authority and expertise. His concept allowed us to conceptualize evaluation as a structured social arena organized around competition for prestige and influence, while the idea of symbolic power enabled us to examine whose knowledge, methods, and leadership styles are deemed legitimate (Bourdieu, 1991; Cornwall, A., 2020). Taken together, these concepts provided an analytical lens that revealed how power operates not only through explicit decision-making structures but also through everyday practices, forms of recognition, and professional norms that sustain gendered inequalities within the evaluation profession.

Finally, and consistent with narrative inquiry, the aim of our article was never statistical generalization but analytical and theoretical transferability, achieved through depth of engagement and systematic interpretation of narrative data (Maynes et al., 2008; Ballantine et al., 2021).

We are not claiming that there is universal gender inequality in evaluation, or that everyone in the field perpetuates it. Its inconsistency is often subtle, unnamed, and unevenly experienced, which can make gender inequality easy to dismiss. One woman remarked while reading this article, "It's not my experience," implying that what is described may not be credible because it is not universal. Similarly, a male reviewer suggested that we should conduct a survey and speak to more women before suggesting that gender inequality exists in the profession. Yet inequality does not need to affect every woman or be visible to everyone to be real. Social inequalities rarely operate in uniform or predictable ways; rather, they emerge as uneven, contextual patterns that are often normalized and therefore difficult to name or recognize.

Responses from women such as "That's not my experience" or from male reviewers to "Collect more data" can unintentionally silence those already at the margins by implying that if a problem is not experienced by multiple women, it is not valid for any woman. But where there is smoke, there is often fire: Singular accounts can reveal deeper structural dynamics that broad patterns alone may fail to capture. Recognizing and giving a platform to these narratives is therefore essential not only for

understanding how gender inequality operates within the evaluation field, but also for interrogating how knowledge is constructed, whose voices are legitimized, and what counts as evidence in a profession that claims a commitment to social justice.

Not All ~~Men~~ in Professional Evaluation Spaces

Each of the four authors has had experience with justice, equity, and fairness through service on evaluation boards and in conducting and managing evaluations. We have engaged with people of all genders who are kind, supportive, and engaging, and who value voices equally. So what's the issue? Imagine a woman walking down a corridor, and she has to choose one of three identical doors to begin her career as an evaluator. Behind two doors lies a room where people are kind, welcoming, and eager to support her and collaborate with her on the evaluation journey. The opportunities are boundless. Behind the third door lies a very different room.

Behind that third door is a room that feels cold the moment she enters. The laughter is loud, but it's not shared; it's at her expense. When she speaks, her contributions are often overlooked or disregarded, as if her voice does not matter. Her ideas are ignored until a man repeats them, then suddenly praised. When she asks to be treated with respect, she's told she's too sensitive or emotional. When she stands her ground, she is branded a troublemaker, her expertise is dismissed, and her voice is sidelined to protect male dominance and existing hierarchies. Over time, the small exclusions add up: She's left off essential emails and invited to key meetings only at the last minute, making it difficult to be prepared. And then she is quietly passed over for opportunities because of her lack of preparedness or attendance. The message becomes clear: her voice is tolerated only when it does not disrupt existing power structures. That room doesn't just stifle her voice; it reshapes her confidence and threatens to derail her career.

The problem isn't that she chose the wrong door. It's that the third door still exists. Until that door disappears completely, gender equality in the evaluation profession will remain an illusion for many women evaluators.

We recognize that our article is limited by our experiences, by the experiences others have shared with us, by our academic readings, by the space given to us to write this article, and by the resources available to complete it. While our article focuses on women, it doesn't diminish other types of

inequalities that exist in our field; as someone once so eloquently said, just because we want to save the whales doesn't mean we ignore the penguins.

Conclusion

We write from a place where hope, commitment, frustration, persistence, and solidarity come together in the evaluation field to envision something better. By sharing our stories, we seek to reveal what has long remained unspoken: the existence of gendered and power hierarchies and the silences that shape whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized in the evaluation profession. For the evaluation field to effectively address the polycrisis, it must uphold the same standards of reflexivity, accountability, and transformation internally as it advocates externally.

We recognize that experiences of explicit and subtle power, as well as unconscious bias, vary and are not universal. Each of us has encountered opportunities for collaboration, mentorship, and meaningful leadership across different institutions and roles, and we acknowledge the many individuals of all genders who actively support women evaluators. However, these positive experiences do not erase the gendered power dynamics and imbalances that persist at both personal and structural levels within the evaluation profession. We share our stories as cisgender women evaluators who continue to face legitimacy gaps, structural disadvantages, and disproportionate emotional and relational burdens within spaces that publicly endorse gender equality.

To foster meaningful change amid the polycrisis, the evaluation field must scrutinize its own biases, flaws, power structures, and traditions. Essentially, eliminating that third door is vital to ensure the evaluation field genuinely reflects its spoken values, which include promoting just and transformative futures. Power dynamics, whether subtle and normalized or overtly exclusionary, affect how knowledge is created, which perspectives are valued, whose work remains hidden, and ultimately, who defines the profession's goals, standards, and future path.

By sharing our experiences and vulnerabilities, we hope to encourage reflection among those who have experienced gender inequality and those who may not have recognized its manifestations in the profession. Our intention is not to assign blame but to foster greater understanding, attentive listening, and meaningful dialogue about how gendered power dynamics shape professional experiences. Identifying and examining these dynamics is both a scholarly and an ethical act of accountability. A

profession committed to advancing gender equality externally must also be willing to reflect critically on its own structures and practices. We therefore invite colleagues across the evaluation community to engage openly with these issues, listen carefully to diverse experiences, including those that differ from their own, and consider the opportunities these perspectives offer for learning, institutional change, and the continued development of a profession grounded in equity, inclusion, and justice.

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