WFD

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for Women's Political Participation Programmes

WFD Learning Paper

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Introduction

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is a field of continually growing importance in international development. The drive to measure and understand impact has two key motivations: first, demonstrating to donors that programmes are being successfully delivered and are achieving the promised results; and second, understanding how and why change does or doesn't happen and feeding these lessons back into programmes to improve them.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating directly in over 40 countries, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer and more inclusive, accountable, and transparent. In recent years, the organisation has increased its commitment to mainstreaming gender and inclusion more broadly, in its programming and throughout the organisation. The MEL team at WFD have recently developed some innovative approaches to MEL for democracy support, including the adoption of the outcome matrix approach and a digital database to capture delivery. As the gender and inclusion focus has developed throughout WFD, the MEL team have been working to understand how our monitoring, evaluation, and learning can be gender sensitive and effectively measure change in women's political participation (WPP).

The literature on women's political participation is clear: meaningful change in the participation of women in politics goes beyond counting the number of women involved in a given activity, project, or institution, or the existence of laws and policies that might have unexpected consequences or simply not be enforced.[1] What is more, gender theorists have demonstrated that participation and leadership by women – in politics, but also in other spheres of life – might look very different to established ideas about participation and leadership.[2] In sum, counting women or counting laws is a flawed way of measuring and evaluating women's political participation. But it is not immediately obvious what to do differently.

This paper will discuss WFD's key principles for measuring women's political participation and how our MEL systems support it. Many of these principles respond to specific challenges in MEL for women's political participation. This paper focuses on measuring women's political participation rather than doing feminist or gender-sensitive MEL in general, but clearly there is significant overlap between the two. It will also provide examples of tools and indicators.

1. Principles

Transforming systems of inequality

> 'Transforming gender power relations is the last frontier of social change. While changes in the social power relations of North-South, developed-developing, race, class, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, etc. are also difficult to achieve, patriarchal norms are embedded and normalized within each of these power structures, such that challenging and transforming them is a doubly daunting task.'[3]

At WFD, we accept that gender and social inequalities are systemic and understand that our efforts to support and improve women's political participation operate within the context of these systems. For programmes aiming to enhance women's political participation to be effective, on some level they must address the transformation of gender relations. So, MEL practitioners need to find ways to measure changes to the structural causes of gender equality.[4]

Rao and Kelleher (2002) provide a useful tool for understanding the domains of change required to transform gender power relations (Figure 1). This is mirrored in WFD's corporate theory of change. Our four broad output areas are capacities (capabilities; resources); processes (formal rules and policies); incentives and attitudes (consciousness; informal norms); and linkages and relationships (exclusionary practices).
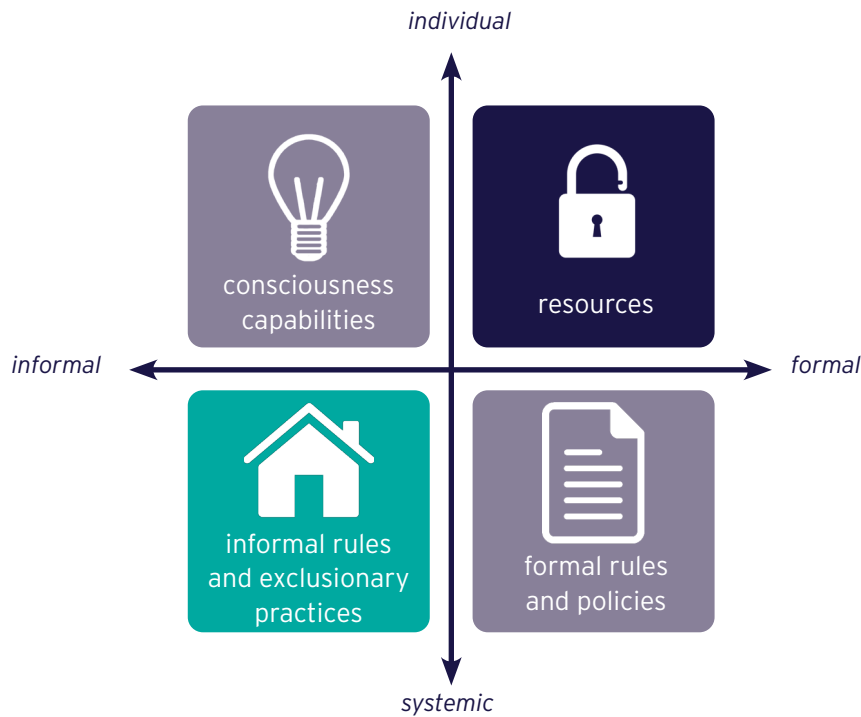
Figure 1: Rao and Kelleher's domains of change[5]

When designing MEL for women's political participation, we ensure that we take note of these different dimensions of change and where they are being addressed by the programme, and ensure that we are measuring them. For example, if a programme provided resources to female candidates to support their constituency work, we would measure the impact of those additional resources. In doing so, we would acknowledge the impact of existing power structures on women's access to resources and have a genuine understanding of how change happened.

Holding the line

Smee (2013) argues that 'deciding what and how to measure progress is itself a political decision and tends to reflect the priorities of decision-makers'.[6] The literature strongly argues that standard measurements for women's political participation fail to understand a fundamental aspect of social change – backlash. In this case, the decision makers want to tell linear success stories, but the fact is that attempts to influence social norms and dismantle structures of inequality face resistance. Social change can generate opposition from those it challenges, and so measuring backlash, resistance or negative reactions is incredibly important to understanding how and why change has or has not happened.[7] Faced with this resistance, simply 'holding the line' and avoiding regression of rights, opportunities, and representation of women can also be understood as a significant achievement, and backlash could be an indication of progression.[8]

At WFD, we accept these positions and our women's political participation programmes monitor backlash. In some cases, we use a theory of action to accompany our theory of change, where we anticipate backlash and identify ways of measuring and responding to it. In other cases, we include an indicator tracking backlash and resistance, and our flexible 'other outcomes' sections of our reports mean that our teams can report when unexpected outcomes occur.

A suggestion made by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) was that programmes could develop a theory of constraints to work alongside the theory of change. The idea is not fleshed out in the article but is proposed as a tool for 'tracking the way that power structures are responding to the challenges posed by women's rights interventions'.[9]

Long-term vision, medium-term goals

Literature on this topic highlights the fact that there is often a discord between what organisationss are asked to measure, what they are expected to achieve, and the length of their programmes.[10] The changes that programmes on women's political participation are working towards, particularly when we take note of the broader structure of attitudes and norms, can take years, if not generations, to achieve.[11] Pursuing steady, incremental change is the right approach. It minimises backlash, it is more sustainable, and works with power structures, rather than trying to bypass them. Such an approach is beyond the timeframe of standard donor funding cycles that tend to be short-term. It does not sit comfortably with such donors, who spend lots of money for short-term gain, expecting to see greater changes after years of organisations over-promising on what can be achieved.[12]

At WFD, while we have a long-term vision, we set medium-term, achievable goals. This ensures both that we can deliver what we have been asked to, but also that we can properly use our MEL to understand how change is happening and get into the nuances of what has and has not succeeded.

Learning and flexibility

A key element of MEL at WFD is the L – learning. Catalysing social change is complex and unpredictable. No country in the world has achieved gender equality or fully dealt with patriarchal power structures, and so there is no blueprint for how to do this. In fact, the more we learn about the barriers to and intersections of women's (in)equality, the more complicated the project becomes. Therefore, we have got to approach the task with an open and critical mindset, continuously assess our efforts, integrate this learning back into our programmes, and document and share the learning beyond the organisation.[13] We also need to be able to adapt our programmes in light of this new learning.

As a democracy support organisation, working in unpredictable political environments, responding and adapting to changes is a key part of our programming in all areas, including women's political participation. Our MEL processes include quarterly learning sessions where we can get into the detail of programme successes and challenges and generate this learning. Our technical advisory unit and research department generate expert research and materials for programmes on WFD's key thematic focuses (including women's political participation). In addition, WFD is a member (currently co-chair) of the Gender and Development Network (GADN)[14] through which it contributes to a sector-wide learning initiative.

2. The women's political participation MEL toolkit

Beyond the more general principles discussed so far, there are some specific approaches that WFD takes to the tools we use for measuring women's political participation.

Logframes and linear change tools

Criticisms of logframes are not new or confined to women's political participation, and across all of our work at WFD, we are aware of the limitations the tool has for complex change in political systems. However, for women's political participation programmes, the logframe, and other linear change tools, 'flatten the change process into [one-dimensional] cause-effect relationships that cannot capture and measure complex social changes, and may even mislead us about how these occur'.[15] As discussed above, change in women's political participation is messy, complex, and certainly not linear, and this presents a problem when attempting to use logframes for MEL. For example, the assumption that training leads to selection, which leads to election, hides the impact of structural inequalities such as lack of financial resources, caring responsibilities, or hostility from peers. It would also obscure any backlash that resulted from the successful election of a female candidate. Another criticism of logframes is that they discourage innovation and learning, which as discussed above, is central to building our knowledge base on 'what works' for women's political participation.[16]

At WFD, our MEL approach devalues logframes. Logical frameworks hinder our capacity to adapt programmes to changing circumstances and they do not provide the opportunity to assess progress in a way that truly

demonstrates the incremental changes in attitudes, behaviour, and practices of the individuals and institutions we work with. Therefore, we avoid them where possible. Where donors insist on using the tool, we try to include our outcome matrix tool to measure outcomes.

Mixed methods of measurement

The literature is in agreement that a mixed methods approach to data collection and measurement is essential for capturing changes in women's political participation. It places importance on qualitative data, which provides often richer, more nuanced information.[17] However, it also notes that some women's political participation practitioners and activists can claim that there is no place for quantitative data.[18] Yet if chosen carefully and with intent, there are aspects of changes to women's political participation that can be quantified – denying this reinforces the idea that women's political participation is 'just something that can't be measured'.

One of the methods advocated for in the literature is outcome mapping, a variation of which is WFD's preferred method of measuring outcomes. WFD's outcome matrix approach is a qualitative tool to measure small behavioural changes at four different levels. It is highly customisable to each programme and context and does not stipulate a single pathway to change, although there is an element of linearity across the levels. We support the outcome matrices with case studies or contribution analysis of important changes, where we are able to dig into the detail of the change. Importantly, this method is focused on contribution not attribution, which is supported in the literature.[19] With an eye to transparently understanding and learning about what our programmes can and cannot achieve, we acknowledge that our programmes are unlikely to have been the sole factor influencing the change. We can gain more useful and actionable insight by acknowledging this and focusing on what we have contributed.

Measuring attitudes

It is vital that when we measure changes in women's political participation, we include the attitudes and perceptions of women themselves.[20] In the end, they are the ones whose choices make the change. It is vital to understand if our perceptions of change translate into women perceiving their position differently. For example, a programme might have contributed to a change in the parliamentary processes for dealing with gendered violence against politicians. However, if the women themselves do not feel this actually makes them safer, then it is hard to claim a success. At WFD, we always ask the women we are working with if their attitudes and perceptions have changed – or if they agree with ours – to better understand our successes and challenges.

This is not to negate the wider, impact-level goal of generating normative shifts in the attitudes and perceptions of power holders to improve the participation of women. But so long as this long-term goal exists, we can measure our progress towards lower-level change, in part through understanding women's perceptions.

High level indicators

WFD is rarely in a position to influence gender equality at a national scale and therefore we do not often use high level, international indicators on gender equality in our MEL system. However, the literature has some useful advice about how to use these and which ones are most appropriate.[21]

Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) suggests a helpful framework, with four indicators that provide an accurate representation of efforts to eliminate discrimination against, and increase the participation and influence of, women at all levels of public and political life.[22]

These are:

- proportion of seats or positions of power held by women (and women from marginalised groups and low-income households)
- perceptions of female politicians about the impact they are having on policy
- public attitudes towards women as leaders
- number of women's rights organisations in the country and their perceptions of progress made towards women's political participation.

These indicators are designed to measure whether representation is resulting in influence and power, and potential transformative changes in gender relations.

What does change look like?

It is not always clear what changes we should be monitoring for. This is at the crux of the issues of measuring women's political participation.[23] Research suggests that women 'do leadership differently' and are faced with range of specific barriers, the removal of which will be key to advancing their political participation.[24] When working towards full and meaningful participation, just counting participation isn't enough. This section details some suggestions from the literature about areas that could be included in MEL frameworks as indicators or areas of inquiry. To ensure that all dimensions of change are included, it is organised around WFD's four output areas.

Changes promoting the participation of women in politics

Capacities

- growth in knowledge and skills
- resilience in the face of challenges, backlash or similar[25]
- improved media engagement
- increased confidence
- access to additional resources and support.

Processes

- creation/improvement of institutional responses or positions on inclusion and participation of women
- implementation of systems preventing violence against women in politics
- changes in political parties' or other political institutions' candidate selection processes
- creation of 'gender-sensitive' institutions (for example, changing imagery and language used through to changes in working hours and childcare support)[26]
- creation/improvement of quotas and other affirmative action
- access to financial support enabling women to run for elected office.

Incentives and attitudes

- changes (positive or negative) in attitudes of others in the context, particularly looking out for backlash
- women promoting socially just policies once in power (care, family, health, education, peace, climate change), and longer-term, these being adopted[27]
- changes in women's attitudes to and perceptions of their own and other women's positions[28]
- increased perceptions of effectiveness of female MPs by constituents
- inspiration drawn from other female leaders or feminist issues being on the public agenda.

Linkages and relationships

- improved access to political networks for women, particularly repurposing existing informal networks
- creation or strengthening of women's party or parliamentary networks and caucuses
- improved access to fundraising and financing opportunities
- improved relationships with constituents
- improved connections between female politicians and candidates with civil society.

Changes as a result of women's inclusion in formal political process:

- increased attention to constituency work by female MPs or representatives
- lower levels of corruption in the political system
- more cooperative leadership styles
- changed policy focus to welfare, health, education, clean water and environment
- prioritisation of women friendly policies such as sexual and reproductive rights, childcare, and prevention of gender-based violence.

Conclusion

Improving women's political leadership is never simply about adding more women to democratic institutions - it is a complex and disruptive process that challenges age-old power relations. Delivering programmes on this topic requires an adaptive, learning-centred approach, and this in turn requires a MEL system that is collecting and producing relevant and accurate data, analysis, and insight. WFD is certainly not the first organisation to think about how to operationalise these needs. We are building on the excellent thinking that has already been done and demonstrating that we can effectively measure change by adapting our MEL to be to gender-sensitive.

Endnotes

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