

Negotiating Fieldwork Politics in Development Evaluation: A Case Study of a Women's Empowerment Project

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Abstract

This paper is an experiential review of two major challenges faced by the author in carrying out fieldwork in development evaluation for a women's project. The paper reviews two particular challenges that are common but often neglected in field work of this nature. The first challenge is being male and studying projects meant for female beneficiaries in an African culture. The second challenge comes from eliciting information from donor dependent communities who understand the value of information given to donors as far as their livelihoods are concerned. Despite the importance of the latter issue, this area of study has a dearth of information. The article is based on experience from development projects evaluation in Zimbabwe, but more specifically from a gender project evaluation exercise in Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe. Recommendations are made on how to safeguard the reliability of collected field data in the face of these challenges.

Key Words: Evaluation, fieldwork, gender, empowerment, curbstoning, donors, politics

1.0 Introduction

This paper is based on reflections from a fieldwork exercise that was carried out to evaluate levels of women's empowerment in a Women's project in Matabeleland North in Zimbabwe. The author also draws from a variety of other experiences in evaluation field work. The paper discusses some of the challenges that the researcher had to deal with in fieldwork relating to the nature of the research being carried out. The nature of the problem was two-fold. The first set of problems was associated with the fact that this was a gender project. The first part of this paper will comment on gender related issues in evaluation fieldwork. Secondly, the paper comments on emerging issues that affect the authenticity and validity of evaluation research data in aid dependent communities. Therefore, the paper is divided into two major sections. The first one deals with gender related data collection politics and the second one deals with development evaluation related data collection politics in aid dependent communities and how they were both dealt with.

The project being evaluated was run by a Women's organisation whose primary objective was to empower women through various avenues. The projects included income generation through making traditional crafts, candles, soap and cooking oil. The project also assisted women with leadership skills development, marketing enhancement for local women's products and conservation farming training. The evaluation sought to achieve two major objectives. The first one was to determine the impact against specific project indicators that the aforesaid interventions were having on the livelihoods of the participating women and the households that they belonged to. The second key objective was to evaluate the levels of empowerment that these women were receiving. The purpose of this second objective was to ensure that the project was achieving high level and sustainable empowerment for women. For this second objective the evaluation made use of the Women's Empowerment Framework and also partly drew from the Moser Framework on issues of strategic and practical gender needs.

The second objective of the evaluation thus sought to establish the levels of empowerment that the project was affording women according to the Women's Empowerment Framework's five levels of Welfare, Access, Conscientisation, Participation and Control. Three major types of data collection tools were employed. These were focus group discussions, key informant in-depth interviews and structured questionnaires.

2.0 Section One: Gender Politics in Fieldwork

2.1 Being Male and Researching on Gender

The first challenge that had to be dealt with in this evaluation project was that the initial Principal Researcher (the author of this article) was a male carrying out gender research. Being male and researching on gender is often questioned from a feminist perspective. (Weston 1993, p.346; Lamphere, Ragoné & Zavella, 1997, p.4). It is often assumed that men cannot fully comprehend women's issues because of the fact that they are male and not female. They have not experienced what it means to be female. Therefore, they cannot fully and truly represent women's perspectives. If this argument holds water, it meant that the principal researcher could not come out with a fair and objective understanding about issues of women's empowerment and the impact that the interventions had on the project participants. It remains an issue of contention whether or not men can fully apprehend women's issues as a different gender species. However Falen (2008, p.165) asks the pertinent question:

Can ethnographers overcome cultural differences, but not gender differences? Or is gender another category like ethnicity, class, religion, and age, which the anthropologist must unavoidably encounter and hopefully minimize in the quest to understand the Other? Furthermore, is it possible that a researcher may actually benefit from membership in a different gender category?

Falen's argument suggests that being a male may actually help in understanding women better just like a foreigner studying an outside culture may have certain insights into the culture that are usually taken for granted by the insiders being overly accustomed to it. Men find themselves pitted against women as the 'other' in this particular instance. However, the 'insider' 'outsider' position does not easily apply in gender because both men and women are insiders to the culture that shapes the same gender dynamics. Moreover, men, in feminist circles are often perceived as the orchestrators of women's subordinate position in society. They thus cannot be expected to speak on their behalf. The effect of this view on male researchers carrying research on gender is that they often feel unqualified to speak about women. It is however important to note that even so, the outsider's view of the 'inside' is needful in research for comparative purposes. Lamphere, Ragoné & Zavella (1997, p.4) argue that the opposite is true in that "any formulation about women [has] to include men, since gender is socially constructed and produced relationally." Gender is not the study of women but the study of the relative positional state of women and men in various spheres of life including politics, the economy and the work environment. This approach suggests gender research is and should not be the exclusive preserve of either females or males.

Besides the conceptual academic and feminist ideological issues of perception related to being male or female, there are other practical reasons why males may be challenged in carrying out research projects on gender especially in certain cultures. One of those concerns has to do with how males and females interact in the process of collecting data. Research shows that in some cases women may be willing consciously or unconsciously to only divulge some information to female researchers and not male researchers. Padfield & Procter (1996) in an article entitled, 'The effect of the interviewer's gender on the interviewing process: A comparative inquiry', show that in their gender research there were certain topics that female respondents only volunteered to give information about to a female researcher. In the particular case in point, the female respondents only divulged that they had done abortions to a female researcher. The research team was composed of two people, a male and a female. They interviewed a group of young women concerning aspirations to work and family. The male researcher was Ian and the female researcher's name was Mo. The following is an account of their findings on abortion:

In Ian's twenty interviews, no woman spoke of having terminated a pregnancy. However, six of Mo's interviewees told of their own abortions... When re-interviewed in 1994 by Mo, two of Ian's original interviewees mentioned that they had had abortions. Both of these had occurred prior to the interview with Ian. (Padfield & Procter, 1996, p.361)

The two researchers conclude that the respondents added extra and sensitive information when responding to the female researcher, but they responded precisely and to the point with no extra and sensitive information divulged to the male researcher, Ian. This evidence suggests that gender relations are an issue in gender sensitive research. Besides issues of information retrieval and interpretation by males and females, the other practical political problem with being a male researcher researching on gender was that that access to females in many African societies, as is the case with most other conservative cultures, is limited.

This is particularly so if you are a middle aged male researcher (as this researcher was) researching on young women. Cross gender interaction at this point is usually treated with suspicion especially by male guardians. In one of his interviews with Benin women, Falen (2008, p.166) points out that, 'I interviewed and spoke with women both formally and informally, even speaking privately to young unmarried women (my long term friendships with their families created the necessary trust)'. It is insinuated that without trust there would have been no acceptance to interview young women. One way of encouraging trust is to have female researchers in the team. However, the author's fears were fortunately not confirmed because it turned out that most of the project participants were over the age of fifty years and suspicions are lowered at that age. The area where the project was located has been heavily affected by Rural-Urban and Rural-Diaspora migration, leaving mostly elderly people in the rural areas.

In view of the barrage of arguments and practical considerations concerning males researching on gender, the author had to initiate a strategy to address the issues. A female researcher was incorporated as a co-principal researcher. The influence of the female co-principal researcher on the final research product is a matter for further research. However, her involvement in the research legitimised what would otherwise been a highly objectionable process from a feminist and academic perspective. Further to that, the entry of the researchers into the field and access to women became much easier and less suspicious with another woman being involved in the process as a co-principal researcher.

3.0 Section Two: Development Evaluation Politics in Fieldwork

Negotiating Access to the Research Population and the Use of Agency Guides in Evaluation Fieldwork

Evaluation exercises may be broadly divided into two: internal and external. Internal evaluations are carried out by internal project staff who preferably have some expertise in the exercise. External evaluations are normally carried out by hired external consultants. The exercise that we carried out fell into the latter category of external evaluation. We came in as external consultants. One of the key problems of external evaluators is that although they may be experts in the area of evaluation, their knowledge of the organisation, its activities and the beneficiaries is usually extremely limited. This necessitates the assistance of the organisation being evaluated for the evaluators to find their way around in data collection. I will focus here on our experiences on data collection in the field and the politics of having a project guide from the organisation being evaluated. The researchers requested for a guide from the organisation to take the team to sampled places to meet the population. The use of the guide from the agency also gave us some experiences which would be useful for evaluators embarking on fieldwork related to the one that was done in this particular project.

Firstly, the guide made our job easy because she knew the routes and she was also well known by the community because she was a field officer in the organisation. This is an important point because routes in the communities that were being investigated are not fully fledged roads. They are frequently small roads developed by the communities developed over many years by people using them as the need arose. An outsider would find it virtually impossible to locate the places even with the aid of a good map. The roads are not there on the map. Although, the field officer from the agency was not involved in data collection in the strict sense, she literally became part of the research team almost operating as a Research Assistant. Her role was simple, she was supposed to lead us to sample sites on the map where the agency had running projects and introduce us to project participants who were then interviewed. Her presence in the team was notable in terms of the data collection exercise and the eventual research output in many more ways than we had expected. A number of lessons were drawn from the experience.

Her presence did not only give us directions to the sites but it also ensured that we were readily received by the project participants because we were introduced by someone that they were already working with and whom they trusted. The lesson here was that the politics of access to research populations and fields can be minimised by integrating known individuals in the research team even if they are not researchers themselves. Alexander and Richman (2008, p.74) note that such Research Assistants;

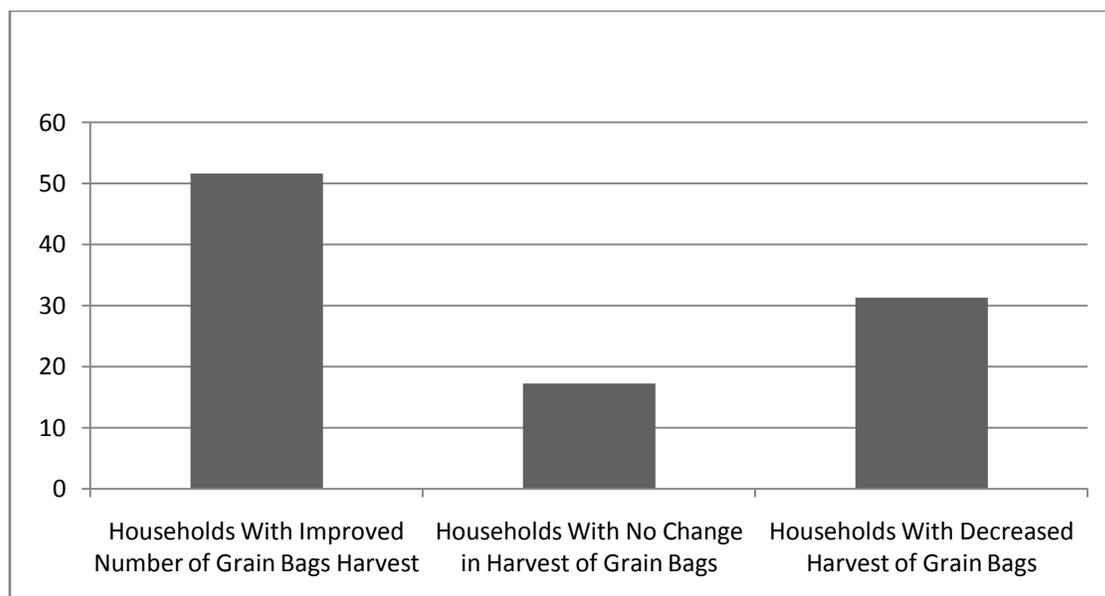
... because of their familiarity with the social and physical environments of the target research population, possess contextual knowledge that provides improved access to an otherwise highly restricted group, enhance rapport-building capabilities, and greater understanding of the language unique to the study population.

The arrangement was profitable. However, this arrangement can be costly if you have a big research team where individual households or representatives need to be interviewed. This might mean that every single team member of the research team must have a local guide or an assistant which may balloon the cost of the evaluation exercise. That can be very expensive when operating under limited budgets. There are a number of alternatives to this issue. One alternative is to employ data collectors who are from the research population being examined so that they can play a dual role of access facilitator and data collector. (Alexander & Richman, 2008). In rural development project evaluation, as our case was, this alternative may not be available because of educational skills requirements. Most rural populations have very low educational qualifications which make it hard to find skilled research assistants in the community. In the communities that we sampled for evaluation in this research 51.56% had primary school education, 20.31% had junior secondary school level education, and 17.19% had ordinary level education. 10.94% had no formal education at all. None of the people were employable for data collection at the level we needed. There were no post-ordinary level qualification holders.

This challenge was navigated by asking the organisation to call project participants for project meetings where the agency guide would introduce the researchers. Researchers would then purposively sample participants for interviews after the introduction. This reduced the necessity of individual guides. The economic benefits were very clear. However, the sample became biased because in most instances, it was only members fairly close to the meeting centre that were able to attend. Thus, the sample became more of an accidental sample making it less reliable in its empirical value.

In spite of the glowing picture given of the usefulness of the agency guide, there were certain research ethics and political issues that arose. The research population clearly enjoyed a working rapport with the agency guide, often welcoming her in song and celebration. This created a political dilemma for the research team. The close connection of the guide and the population meant that the population could not openly discuss some downbeat issues about the project because of her presence. A number of illustrations about how data collection was affected can be cited from the data. Reference to one particular example illustrates the issue. We sought to collect data on the food security situation of participants and how project involvement had impacted on their food security. The structured questionnaire had two quantitative questions on food production. The first question asked how many bags of grain on average participants were harvesting before joining the Women's project being studied. Participants would state a number. The second question asked the participants how many bags of grains they were harvesting now on average after joining the project. The quantitative difference between the two responses would indicate whether on average there had been an increase or a decrease in the food security situation of the household after joining the projects being evaluated. The outcome of the responses is shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Bar Graph Showing Percentage Distribution of Increase in Household Grain Harvests

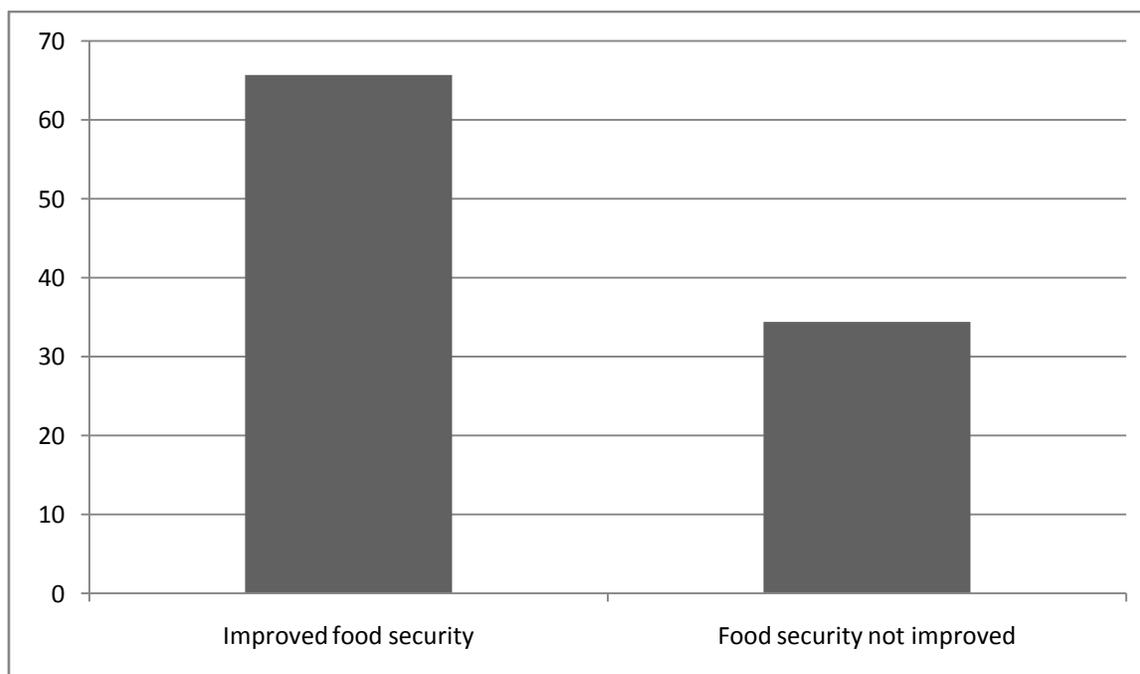


Source: Evaluation Data

The bar graph above shows that statistics showed that 51.56% of the project participants that responded to the questionnaire had actually experienced an increase in household food security to one level or another. There were wide variations in the actual percentage increases. It was evident that the agency had had a significant impact on food security amongst the participating members.

There was however a third question relating to food security in the structured questionnaire. The question was, 'Has your household food security situation improved ever since you joined LWC projects?' As noted earlier statistics showed that 51.56% of the population had increased food security. The third question was not based on statistics but on the qualitative evaluation judgment of the individual participant respondents. Respondents were asked to say whether or not their food security situation had improved at household level after joining the LWC projects. The picture here was different from the statistical inferences given above as seen in the pie chart below.

Figure 2: Bar Graph Showing the Qualitative Assessment of Participants about Household Food Security



Source: Evaluation Survey Results

The pie chart above shows an interesting deviation of results. Although both pie charts show that over 50% of project participants had had an increased food capacity, the actual percentages differ. The statistical calculation from the first two questions put the number of households with improved food security at 51.56%, whereas figures collected from the qualitative opinion of the participants put the number of participants with increased food security at 65.63%. There was a difference of 14.07%. This is a statistically significant difference. This 14.07% consists of project participants who, in their qualitative judgement, the project had increased their food security yet the statistical analysis of their harvest showed either a decline or no change. The same question was asked differently twice, and the answers varied. Why would the answers vary?

There are a number of possible explanations for this. The first one is that food security might have increased because of other non-grain crops which the questionnaire did not ask about. The questionnaire only asked about the number of bags of grain harvested. This explanation does not hold water because the area that was being evaluated only grows grain crops (maize, millet and sorghum) as staple food. The other possible explanation is that food security might have increased for the 14.07% through increased project incomes enabling them to buy grain instead of growing it. Again this explanation is nullified by evidence on the ground. Most participants who did not record an increase in grain harvests also either had no increase at all from project income or the increase was minimal. Having settled these possible alternative answers to this puzzle, this leaves one major possibility – the responses in the qualitative question were falsified.

I argue that the data from the quantitative questions was more reliable than data from qualitative question requiring a 'Yes/No' answer. The resultant data must have given a true reflection of the food security status in their households. The second question which allowed for qualitative judgemental answers left room for personal emotional judgements to be exposed. Because, the participants shared a special relationship with project staff, there was a desire to portray their work in good light to strangers (the researchers). Evidence showed that for the highlighted 14.07% there was no food security growth, yet they felt that the organisation had improved their food security through its projects. There is a sense in which researchers were perceived as outsiders and intruders into the harmonious existence of the project staff and the beneficiaries. This falsification of data brings us to the next item of discussion concerning the politics of fieldwork in development evaluation.

3.1 The Politics of Trust in Evaluation Field Work

The ability to gain trust in the researched population is important especially if the population feels that it may become socio-economically vulnerable as a result of the research (Magolda, 2000). Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) recount some of the difficulties faced by researchers who are not trusted by the research population. Makhamreh points out in their research on social workers in a Jordanian hospital that,

Gaining the trust of staff in both hospitals was challenging. I had to prove that I was working only as a researcher, and that all I was concerned about was gaining knowledge. When I first came to both hospitals, I was associated with the hospital management. I was afraid that the employees would think that I was working as a management spy... (Al-Makhamreh & Hundt, 2008, p.14)

The social workers feared that Al-Makhamreh was a spy for the hospital administration staff working at proving that Social Workers were not desirable in the hospital set-up. In their view, this threatened their jobs and she was not going to get much true information from them. The researcher had to devise ways to be trusted. Al-Makhamreh's experiences relate to what might have caused the problem in our data collection.

3.2 The NGO Syndrome and the Politics of Data Collection

Falsification of research data is an age-old problem in fieldwork. It is one of the issues that researchers involved in evaluative research must particularly contend with in the field. Despite the importance of this issue, it hardly appears in research literature. Falsification of data by researchers in the field at various levels has been given reasonable attention in the academic and professional circles of research. The concept is also referred to as 'curbstoning'. Curbstoning is '... a term used to characterise 'fabrication or falsification of data 'on the street''. (Alexander & Richman, 2008, p.73). The American Association of Public Opinion Research [APPOR] (2003, p.1) points out that,

Survey researchers have an obligation to truth in data collection and in reporting of survey results... To be effective, the commitment must extend beyond the principal researcher to all survey staff, including interviewers.

It is true that the validity and reliability of research findings depend on the 'obligation to truth'. However, falsification of data by field respondents has not been given the same amount of weight as that often given to researchers and their teams. Perhaps this is because of the fact that it is much easier to professionally and legally deal with professional researchers than to deal with field respondents who give falsified data. Nonetheless, the difficulty of dealing with a field respondent who gives false data does not evaporate the problems that come with false data originating from field respondents. This article shares some of the experiences that this researcher had in the particular fieldwork under discussion.

One of issues I had noted in earlier evaluation surveys was that rural communities seemed to be wary of people collecting development data. Many people in the rural areas in Zimbabwe have had a long intimate relationship with the non-governmental organisations especially in the volatile period of famine and distress in this past decade. There is evident carefulness when dealing with people who ask questions relating to how the NGOs work in their communities. They know that NGOs operate on the basis of needs identified by way of various research types. It is also known that NGOs also assist people on the basis of the levels of affluence after needs assessments. More affluent people are less preferred, in favour of the poorer community members. This has had the negative effect of priming prospective beneficiaries to understate their real asset bases.

People may deny possession of cattle for example by claiming that the cattle they have belong to another person under a custom called 'ukulagisa' (loaning cattle for milk, manure and draught power only). Villagers will also frequently deny that they have children who work in the city or in the Diaspora in order not to be perceived by NGO personnel as financially well-to-do. Several instances have been recorded in communities of villagers fighting over the submission of false information in order to benefit from NGO services. Development evaluators conducting fieldwork need to appreciate these facts. Observation in the field suggests that the NGO syndrome in Zimbabwe has led to a carefully conditioned and calculative rural community that is difficult to extract valid data from. Nencel (2005, p.353) argues that amongst certain research populations like prostitutes lying by respondents can be '... a way of managing information (and) ...at the same time it offers protection.' She further notes that 'Telling the truth can ultimately be used against them and could have severe repercussions in their private lives... lying serves to protect, to negate, to fantasize and to be accepted. It is a means to sculpture one's identity.' (ibid, p.354).

One solution to this problem is that academic researchers conducting evaluation research to are introduced clearly as people of academic interest. Research remains to be carried out to ascertain this argument, but it would appear that anyone associated with donor money is likely to receive ready-made donor associated answers which attract aid and development projects. Project participants understand that evaluation research has implications for further funding. Alexander and Richman (2008, p.82) point out that in their research some Research Extenders (Research Assistants) pointed out that, 'People may be afraid of not participating in the survey because somehow they think it might affect the services they receive.' People know that surveys have practical implications on funding. Solving the problem by introducing academic researchers properly only partly solves the problem. Professional development evaluators would very much remain with this dilemma of falsified data. Triangulation of data collection methods may assist in comparing data collection outcomes. However, in cases where there is a discrepancy between data collected using different methods, this may only lead to further questions about what went wrong, rather than pointing to what went wrong. There is need to urgently study and devise mechanism to deal with respondents falsifying data in evaluation data collection. The issue of respondents falsifying data is more complicated than when dealing with researchers falsifying data. It is not amazing that the American Association of Public Opinion Research (2003) has come up with recommendations for dealing with curbstoning but nothing has been recommended concerning respondents falsifying data.

4.0 Conclusion

This article has discussed both common and future issues of inquiry in fieldwork especially in development evaluation pertaining to gender issues. The issue of whether being male or female affects research activity and output on gender research remains debatable and an area of further inquiry. However, this researcher hopefully managed to sidestep the issues by balancing the research team in such a way that both male and female considerations are taken on board. The balancing act was done by co-opting a female researcher and a female guide. There is an emerging area of interest that has not been fully studied showing a growing inclination by rural communities to present pre-packaged data for development researchers and evaluators. This is an important area requiring urgent inquiry for which this paper provides no quick-fix solutions. One of the essential ways of overcoming the problem at least partly is through building a trusting working relationship with communities being studied, and a dynamic employment of research methods such as triangulation and techniques to detect such anomalies in data collection.

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