



Interview

“Evaluation is a human necessity, a religion with a small ‘r’ and a technical exercise”: An interview with Florence Etta [negra], Nigerian evaluator

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Can you tell us who you are and what your current professional activities are?

I describe myself as a feminist because I'm committed to uplifting, assuring and ensuring the rights of women; but not a radical feminist, I'd like to describe myself a bit more carefully, as a cultural feminist, the reason being that there are shades in feminism and some of these are steeped in culture so, yes we agree on the major thrusts of support for women's rights and women's issues but there's a slight difference between a radical feminist and a cultural feminist. I'm a cultural feminist also trained in the Psychology of Education.

I was trained to be a teacher and evaluation is integral to this work. I taught in higher education institutions in Nigeria, where I come from, for 16 years. Then, just by chance, my family moved out of Nigeria to Senegal where I started working in international development with the International Development Research Center (IDRC). Then we moved from Senegal to Kenya and I spent 6 years working with IDRC in a very exciting evaluation position. Joining IDRC brought my research and evaluation work into full stream and sharp focus and I have since remained in the field. It was the first big bet Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D) program on the continent with an in-house monitoring, learning and evaluation team and that was where I was. That was very interesting for me so that was my stint in IDRC. When I finished in IDRC I became an independent consultant and since then I've been doing independent consulting and evaluation in ICT4D, in social sectors. In terms of my practice of consulting, I do research and evaluation with a gender equality lens. Sometimes it's difficult, especially if the commissioner is not interested in gender issues.

I've been also active in the global evaluation spaces, I was on the board of the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS), and I was also the 6th President of the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA). I have been a member of the following evaluation societies; Canadian Evaluation Society, European Evaluation Society, Kenyan Evaluation Society, and South-African Monitoring and Evaluation Association. As the President of AfrEA 2009 – 2012, I took membership in these associations to understand how they work on the inside. I was also a founding member and now a fellow of the Nigerian Association of Evaluation and I currently belong to three global evaluation networks. EVALSDGs¹ is one of them and being in that space allows me to bring knowledge of the SDGs to the evaluation community and other stakeholders. I belong to EvalGender+ because that's my natural home as a feminist

¹ EVALSDGs is a network that gathers public policy makers, institutions and consultants that advocate for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) achievement and evaluation.

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and a gender activist. I also belong to EvalIndigenous and for me that has been perhaps the most exciting space to date.

I am Nigerian by birth. I have unabashedly African values and I'm committed to "africaness" but I guess I can say I am a citizen of the world. And what keeps me in the evaluation field? Passion and commitment to show that research and evaluation do and can contribute to changing development outcomes for Africans, poor and marginalised people everywhere and especially for women and girls. So that's me in a nutshell.

What is evaluation for you? What do you take into account when making evaluations? What values anchor or guide your work in evaluation?

For me Evaluation is a human necessity, a religion with a small 'r' and a technical exercise. It is a human necessity because all human endeavours need to be assessed so that judgements can be made about them.

And why do I say religion with a small r? It's because it has to be believed. If you don't believe in it, you won't value or push it. The time we saw the greatest movement in monitoring and evaluation in Kenya was when the President Mwai Kibabi and his cabinet wanted to show people what they were doing. They believed in the value of evaluation to show what is working, so they wanted to show people what they have done to address the problems they encountered. So if you don't believe in the value of evaluation you will not invest in it.

As a technical exercise, it must be well done, balanced and count on sound techniques and tools – if not it jeopardises the two earlier dimensions - the necessity, and believeableness.

Do you think that evaluation has effectively helped to guarantee fundamental rights for people and supported countries in their development trajectory? What does your experience reveal?

No. A big no, and why is that? First and foremost I want to say that what we call development evaluation now, when it started, it was concerned with the evaluation of aid. Donors put money to support development projects in beneficiary countries and got the governments to report on the use and results. They have to report the aid national budgets. So every dollar that goes to development projects needs to be evaluated very seriously because it had to be reported upon to donor country constituencies and or the relevant bodies.

So development evaluation took this color of donors asking how the project is doing and it unfortunately became a process of policing and often policing of the money. One of the 5 principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness is 'Alignment' and alignment is all about the money. Two-thirds of the indicators are alignment-related suggesting that beneficiary country systems should be aligned with donor country systems so they can much more easily track the money. It wasn't therefore about what good the interventions were doing, it was not necessarily a learning exercise. It was not about "what worked so we can make it work "better" but rather about "was the money spent right?"

This was all over the world, and I'm not excusing anybody, I'm not excusing my governments or Africa for that matter, there's corruption everywhere. Governments have to try and make sure that the money intended for particular interventions is adequately used, but they're not going to be obsessed, they don't need to be obsessed. They should find out "Did good come out of this project?" and try and stop the stealing after all there's stealing everywhere.

The point is, instead of looking at what we can learn from evaluation most of the countries, most of us in Africa and other developing countries, got the sense that evaluation became an instrument of control and policing by donors. From that history, we have a situation where even now, most people do evaluations and evaluators have been taught from that perspective. We have been taught techniques and tools of evaluation from this perspective



and made to believe that if we only use them right we will be seen as objective. Whose objectivity if you are using tools and techniques that have been created and carved and finished totally and completely within another cultural context, medium or different philosophy?

Why is the topic of gender so important in evaluations? How do you effectively mainstream a gender approach into evaluation practices? How do you work with it? What are the challenges?

Gender transformative evaluation is key to unveiling, understanding and offers pathways for changing gender and power relations. We need to understand this notion of gender, understand how it affects people. People are born man or woman or they choose to present and be taken and be treated as a man or a woman or something else. So, our sex is a significant dimension of who we are, of our personalities. If we have chosen it or we have accepted it that colors our lives, sometimes it actually colors your life outcomes and it is incontestable that outcomes and human privilege is based on a few things.

One of those things is your sex, your color or your socioeconomic status. Your color and your gender cannot be hidden, often and the truth is human privilege is not something that is legislated, it just happens... you get it if you're in certain spaces, you're sitting in certain places or you belong to certain groups. Throughout the course of history humans that have privilege hold on to it, they don't let it go very easily and so the basis of human privilege is demonstrable in people who have and people who don't have. People who can and people who cannot do certain things.

In a sense, most societies are based on privilege. there's not a lot of societies that have equality as of nature. The Second World War generated the 1945 consensus around rights. Human rights became accepted in a sense as something to strive for. So we have the Declaration of Human Rights. Some of them are natural rights, some of them are forced. One of those rights is gender equality, women's rights. So thankfully we have something, a document, a consensus that the fact that you are a woman means that you should have the same rights or equal rights as men, because men's privileges are immense just by being a man. So I'm really grateful for the 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So in that sense, we have a global framework to struggle for rights, so that's why I think that it is important.

But, in this sense, why are we thinking gender in evaluation?

The point is that all development interventions influence people differently, and sometimes they influence women differently from men. And we - either those of us who are researching development, who are doing development, who are legislating for development whatever space we occupy that has any small authority - must be interested to see the differential influences or impact of development interventions on men, on women, older people, younger people whatever the dichotomies or differences that we're on to. It is imperative. It is something we need to do, to find out how the interventions that we support, that we encourage, or that we ourselves promote, influence different people differently and that for me is the basis for trying to get gender responsive or gender transformative evaluation as a common good.

Thus we have a situation where there are development interventions and then we have privileged positions, men privileges, city privileges, color privileges, descent privileges. Within all these different intersectionalities we at least try and get women a reasonable fare from development projects. How can we do this? From my experience, some evaluation frameworks are better than others when you're committed to gender equality. This is the family of evaluation approaches that promotes participatory empowerment, collaboration etc to give voice to non-evaluators etc. For instance, the Outcome Mapping (OM) approach is very dependent on how people see outcomes. The OM approach and process make you, the evaluator, give attention to different kinds of people involved in the intervention and the related results among them.



In my own personal small role as a member of the Africa Gender & Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN) we have developed an M&E approach which includes a practical or operational dimension and a conceptual framework. The practical elements are targeted at evaluators: What can you do when you have an evaluation to make it more gender responsive and/or transformative? It suggests how to make evaluations gender responsive and/or transformative through creative twining of the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria with key gender and development elements. But for us, this is like the last piece of the puzzle; the smallest piece yet most critical, that is where we would love are expected to make a big push.

What AGDEN has proposed in terms of its Conceptual framework?

AGDEN has proposed a framework for national evaluation systems, referred to as an "ecosystem approach" for engendering evaluation. It recognizes three levels: the first is the macro or national level, we're talking about national strategies, national policies, national laws and primary to this is the constitution. So we have to start from there and look at the constitution, or similar high level government document/s. A significant question at this level is 'Is there a national M&E policy?' Do these high level documents and strategies where available give any opportunity for equality between men, women, other disadvantaged groups? Do they give voice? Do they say women and men have equal rights? If they do, then the conclusion is that the macro/national level is gender responsive and can support gender transformation which is fabulous.

The second is the meso-level which is the next level down and concerns the ministries and agencies of government. It filters the macro/national level. At the meso-level you want to ask "Does the ministry or the organization have any monitoring or evaluation policy?" Policy papers that may be binding on the ministries need to be investigated. Is it there evidence of gender equity in them that is statements that support equality?

Then there is the microlevel, which is the individual evaluation level. It is at this level that the practical approach kicks in where we provide guidance about what you can do to make the evaluation gender responsive or transformative.

In 2019, we were commissioned by Twende Mbele to undertake a gender diagnostic study of the Kenya national systems. The interesting thing is: Kenya adopted a new constitution in 2010. The process of getting the constitution was awesome, it was absolutely participatory, simply incredible. The Constitution contains a whole chapter on the Bill of rights, which is extensive and guarantees equal rights to both men, women and other disadvantaged groups. So yes, we have that and we also have institutions funded by taxpayers money in Kenya that address rights for example the gender and equality commission and two human rights commissions: one that is the government human rights commission and another that is supported by donors. On the other hand, is there, at this national level, anything close to a national policy of evaluation? In Kenya, the policy has been drafted and re-drafted, but is still not approved either by the government (i.e. the cabinet) or the legislature. So there is no national evaluation policy to interrogate.

The next level are the ministries or other agencies of government. Let's take the Ministry of Planning for example, if you want to monitor and or evaluate government projects, you should have some kind of infrastructure in the ministry to support that. Indeed there is a department of Monitoring and Evaluation in the Kenya national planning ministry and this department is a small department given much more energy during Mwai Kibaki presidency, riding the wave of progressivism. The government had a national strategy for development which they wanted to monitor closely so they created this monitoring system called the National Monitoring and Evaluation System, NMES. It sits in the planning ministry as a directorate. But after a couple of years and a change of government, it doesn't seem to be doing very much. The other thing is that the Ministry of Planning seconds staff - called Economic officers - to every Ministry and they are supposed to support the monitoring of the development projects



but they have no evaluation training, they are primarily economists. So, what we found was that at the macro level, at the highest, there is strong support for engendering evaluation but the meso level was very weak. If the meso level is weak, can you imagine what is going to happen at the micro level?

We also looked at the micro i.e. evaluation level in the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education. They had better monitoring, but not evaluations. On the education side monitoring information i.e. data for progression between classes, results of terminal examinations and classes, how are students performing was routinely collected. On the Health side, the number of HIV and malaria cases was also available. So in these two ministries a culture of collecting and reporting data exists, but it doesn't come naturally to disaggregate the data by gender to see what pictures are emerging. Now when you come to evaluation, what I have found is that in terms of methods or the evaluation questions, they are often gender blind or, if they are gender aware, very minimalistic. Even in the evaluation process, the evaluators themselves don't feel compelled to try and open the gender box.

So basically what we're trying to say is that to engender national evaluation systems, we must walk and work at these three levels. What we are suggesting is, wherever you find yourself you should use that space appropriately with the strategies that are adequate for that space. If you are a government minister, deputy, the head of a ministry or officer, then look to a national policy. If there's no national policy to graft your work on to, try a ministerial policy or if you are an advisor to a minister, say "how about having an evaluation policy that is engendered for your ministry?"

What have you personally done as an evaluation practitioner?

First I have taught other evaluators. The first thing you do is look if there is any evaluation question that remotely reflects gender equality. Often there's none, and when there is none, either in the terms of reference or in the evaluation questions, you negotiate to say "how about this? We could do this, couldn't we? Does that look like something you'll want us to do?", so we negotiate that. I'm currently doing an evaluation in the agriculture sector and there was very little about gender and I said "oh, by the way, we think that this review would benefit from a gender equality perspective, you know?". And their response was "we are not looking at it in that sense." On the continent where up to 70% of the agricultural work is done by women, how would you not look at it in that sense? Really? If you're trying to improve agricultural practices you have to look at it with a gender lens,

You ask how is engendering evaluation working? Not working very well, it's difficult. Gender equality is still very contested, because of male privilege, strong male privilege. Any kind of privilege has a very strong hold on people and privilege doesn't go away easily, it needs a battle to loosen it up.

Let me give you the example of Kenya again, because that's where I live... This Constitution, this really great constitution, heralded as one of the best on the continent when it was finally promulgated in 2010. One of the clauses said that the legislature must pass a bill that eventually becomes law that prohibits any one gender from holding more than 2/3rds of the posts and positions in any government establishment. We are in 2020, 10 years since the constitution was adopted and the parliament has not been able to pass that bill. So a couple of months ago, based on that same Constitution, the Chief Justice of the Federation called on the President to sack the entire Parliament because they had been unable to make this constitutional provision into law. The truth is that the bill has come onto the floor of the house up to five times and each of those five times the numbers of members present in the house have not been sufficient to move it forward.

I have another example. We in AGDEN have done some work on the Paris Declaration. We literally took the 12 indicators and tried to engender them, and proposed, for each of those indicators a gendered version of those indicators to see how that could be adopted. During



the time when the Paris Declaration was being discussed, before the Busan Conference, I was invited to the OECD-DAC in Paris to present these gender indicators. It was a GenderNet meeting, OECD gender officers were there, the GenderNet members were there. I presented the indicators and said "This is what we have developed" and the Chair of the meeting, an old white man said with a wave of his hand something like "Yeah, too many!". Once he did that nobody else would say anything else and that was the end of that conversation. I was so disappointed, so very heartbroken, because that action literally just put the lid on that work. So the contestation is real, but we struggle to do what we can in those little spaces. At the micro level, it's also very hard, but we try to do it one evaluator and evaluation at a time and hope that at some point the message will go far.

We have observed, in Brazil and other countries, a significant interest in anti-racist evaluation. How do you see this agenda? How does it present itself in your work and in the work with African countries?

I would prefer to call it decolonizing evaluation rather than anti-racist. And that is coming up increasingly in the last couple years. In fact as I speak, a couple of us have been asked by Wits University, in South Africa, the one hosting the Center for Evaluation and Results - Clear Africa to do short videos on decolonizing evaluation and basically what that is trying to say is: what is authentically African? In other words 'What does Made in Africa Evaluation mean?'

Because there's often this notion that evaluation is an alien concept to us. As a people I grew up in a small town, I was familiar with the chiefs, leaders and settings in small towns. The small town was organized in age grades/groups, so you belong to your age group, once you're old enough you can start doing things together and holding meetings if you want, to decide "Let's do this, let's do that" and the hierarchy, was very clear, there were age group chiefs, chiefs of small parts of the town and high chiefs as well as the town chief. If the chief wanted to know something, they would ask the chiefs, what's going on here, what's going on there, if something bad happens in the town, they have ways of finding out and ways of carrying out punishment so you cannot say that there is no evaluative thinking. The way you do it, where you come from may be slightly different from the way we do it here but to assume, just because you don't recognize it or you don't see it, that it is nonexistent, it's a bit farcical.

What is happening now is the thinking around Made in Africa Evaluation. Bagele Chilisa has been at the heart of this. She did a piece of work basically trying to understand, underscore and make the rest of us appreciate the ubuntu philosophy. The African philosophy of life is collective, it is participatory, not individualistic and so the movement now is to try and understand this 'Made in Africa evaluation' in all its ramifications and expressions.

As Africans we value togetherness. Togetherness is central to our own existence. And formal western education has made us go from the collective to the individual, from cooperation to competition, from everybody wins to winner take all. And most of us spend the largest amount of time in formal education and in that process what we're doing is imbibing the values that come with formal education. You in Brazil gave to the world Paulo Freire and he was the one who taught us that what we get in formal education is oppressive, it is not freedom.

When you're trying to think in another person's language it's very difficult and so we're expected, as a people and we've probably come to assume it, that competition is now our tradition, whereas I grew up knowing that when you had significant work to do in your farm or in your compound or in your small village, you called people, you didn't do it alone. In that setting it would not be one person that would take the glory for the work, it was "we did it, the work is done, so we're happy".



And that is sort of happening in the African Evaluation Associations. Every time we have a conference, where you have the most concentrated training of evaluators, we have dozens of workshops and three quarters of the people offering workshops come from non-African (often) northern institutions. In these workshops we get taught techniques, e.g. of RBM, logic models, other frameworks etc. But not the thinking behind the techniques. We are not provoked to ask, "If the question is like this maybe you should try this method". You don't even know how to be eclectic because you don't sufficiently understand the assumptions behind any particular tool, technique or method. And the most interesting thing is you get trained there and you get rapidly sucked into the networks of practice whose language is the taught technique e.g. RBM language and so all you're hearing is a repetition and reinforcement of the same techniques. In a sense you are not allowed even to think outside the box. So you are either a participatory evaluator or this kind of evaluator or that kind of evaluator and so we don't have the luxury of trying to say "Hey, something else may be here". At some point we must come to terms with what's going on, and perhaps we will need to ask the question "What is this about? Is this about learning what works in my situation, in my context?"

At the last European Evaluation Society conference in Thessaloniki, a very respected British evaluator said to me "So what is this, what is all of this noise, Florence, about made in Africa evaluation?" I told him "Don't worry, when I find something that explains it I'll send it to you". I found it very condescending, as if we are joking. For me, all we're saying is let us decolonize the practice of evaluation and really evaluate with culturally based competencies and contextually sharpened lenses.

And what cultural based competency means is that you need to understand the context, to understand the culture where this evaluation is happening, to understand what the beneficiaries themselves have been through, how they have been immersed, how the intervention might have mixed culturally and what it has produced. This will enable us to understand the impact of colonization and try to deconstruct it. There's a space there for each group that feels like an outsider to reclaim itself and that is, to me, what decolonization is all about.

Political decolonization happened and it was self-evident, countries got independence. But the mental decolonization is a much more difficult and insidious process because often we do not hold the mirror to our faces to allow us see the process. For instance: as an African, I struggle with the fact that most educated Africans value things that are northern i.e. European, North American, etc. I believe that the formal 'western' education that we have has been so successful that we don't know that's what we're doing, privileging non-African values etc.

Someone's asking me how has Africa contributed to the world. The fact that we don't have those great big concrete monuments, temples and things like that is because we built with mud. It was a most ecologically sensitive and respectful way to build so the forest can reclaim it in 2 years of neglect and you don't see anything when you come back. If we had built with concrete like those great big civilisations and cities, the forest would not come back for a long long time, it'd take longer to regenerate. So in terms of ecological sensitivity we treated forests and rivers and things of nature almost like gods and so we treated them with that kind of respect. But of course that is, to the average capitalist, that is nonsensical. It's happening in your Brazil, where the forest's are going like wildfire.

Any final comments?

This year we had a small project, and we were basically trying to work with parliamentarians to see how they can push a gender equality and equity national evaluation policy. A year before, we had done the study on the national evaluation system. We found that there is no Standing Committee in the parliament that deals with monitoring or evaluation of



government projects or policies, what they have is a caucus - Evidence-Informed Decision - Making Caucus that started out very weakly, very slowly. One member of the house decided to move the caucus and its message forward so we supported them and worked with them to launch the strategic plan. However, the major point is, they're voluntary, there is no official support from the parliament. As a Caucus, it's not a standing committee. This proves my point that evaluation as a human necessity, is a religion with a small "r" and a technical exercise.

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