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Bringing a Feminist Curiosity to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

Tracing Feminist, Postcolonial, and Development Theories in Feminist MEL

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Abstract

Critical theories, specifically feminist, postcolonial, and development theories, inform and shape much of the practice of international development, by both criticising current conventions and procedures as well as introducing new ways of thinking. One current frontier within development practice involves reimagining Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) practices according to feminist principles, which is referred to as feminist MEL. However, in the context of feminist MEL, the connection between theory and practice is not always clear. This research aims to contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice by exploring the case study of one organisation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and their early-stage development and conceptualisation of feminist MEL. More specifically, it aims to understand how their interpretation of feminist MEL practice draws from theory by analysing how feminist, postcolonial, and development theories are interpreted and presented within official documents and interviews of staff members from WILPF. The findings show that WILPF's interpretation of MEL coherently draws inspiration from critical contributions to feminist, postcolonial and development like black and intersectional feminism, decolonial approaches, and 'liberating' perspectives on empowerment. These insights underscore the significant role of theory in shaping development practice, suggesting that an intimate, symbiotic relationship between theory and practice leads to more reflective and adaptive approaches. Additionally, they raise questions for further research on whether grounding practice in progressive theory can help resist cooptation and 'rendering technical.'

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List of Abbreviations

AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
GAD	Gender and Development
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning
MSC	Most Significant Change, a tool for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in which partners prioritise and decide which stories of change to report on
PME	Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SDP	Sport for Development and Peace
UN	United Nations
WAD	Women and Development
WID	Women in Development
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

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1. Introduction

The field of development is constantly changing and evolving in terms of thematic focuses and the tools and strategies it promotes. This is especially salient when it comes to considerations of gender. Gender approaches have emerged and evolved since the conception of international development after World War II, and there is still much progress to be made in the ways that development practitioners conceptualise and work with such lenses. One current frontier within the realm of development practice is that of feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), which seeks to reimagine and improve a common practice that often ignores, superficially considers, or even perpetuates gendered power structures and systems.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Historical Roots of Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

The emergence of feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning is situated within the greater context and trajectory of gender and development. The beginnings of international development as a field overwhelmingly ignored women and instead focused exclusively on increasing the productivity of men and their access to markets (Beck, 2017, p. 140). The work of Ester Boserup (1970) contributed significantly to identifying this blind spot, as she argued that women had historically contributed to global development, and that development initiatives at the time harmed women (Beck, 2017, p. 140). This revelation, in combination with the concurrent liberation struggles of the time, spurred the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985, with its numerous conferences to aspire to include women within development work. This initiated the Women in Development (WID) approach to development projects.

The WID approach often invoked the rhetoric that the integration of women into development initiatives would lead to greater equity and efficiency. However, critique was leveraged at this approach (often from Marxists and critical feminist perspectives) that simply integrating women into unequal systems and markets, more specifically the international capitalist system, would

not lead to true inclusion and equality. Furthermore, this approach often relied on a conception of gender as solely men and women, where "the focus was on understanding gender difference with the accompanying stereotypes of men as dominant and women as victimized" (Harcourt, 2016, p. 167). Instead, critics asserted that an approach was needed that went "beyond a focus on macroeconomic growth to include issues of social and economic justice and transformation" (Beck, 2017, p. 141). Instead of simply using the 'add women and stir' approach, it was necessary to conceptualise gender as a set of social relations and consequently question international systems and structures that relied on gender ideologies.

A second paradigm within gender and development was consequently introduced: Women and Development (WAD). This new approach was far more critical of the connections between gendered inequalities and capitalist production, although it still relied on the social constructions of binary gender and would often focus its initiatives solely on women. Additionally, contention and disagreement arose surrounding "WAD emphasis on the material valorization of women's contributions to the capitalist market as a solution to women's poverty and inequality" and its consequent ignorance of women's reproductive labour (Icaza & Vázquez, 2016, p. 64).

The most current approach emerged from these objections to WAD, referred to as Gender and Development (GAD). This paradigm is the result of feminist theorising from a variety of perspectives, such as critiques from black, Chicana, and postcolonial feminists against essentialism. It incorporates intersectionality as "an analytical perspective to understand how multiple social oppressions are not only interrelated but bounded together and influenced by race, class, gender and ethnicity as social systems" (Icaza & Vázquez, 2016, p. 64). Rather than solely targeting all projects and initiatives towards women, GAD instead "brings 'gender', and not only women, into the analysis of development and its concurrent power relationships between masculinities and femininities" (Icaza & Vázquez, 2016, p. 64). The GAD approach aims to identify how power operates, and consequently attempts to mainstream gender analyses rather than solely including women in development work.

Gender mainstreaming has become a commonplace and oft-lauded tool within modern development practice. Yet, this incorporation has also introduced co-optation: treating "'gender' as an issue of efficiency – in the market or as in the state – rather than being addressed as a question of social justice" (Icaza & Vázquez, 2016, p. 65).

1.1.2 'Rendering Technical'

Once-radical and progressive frontiers often lose their political and transformative potential through the process of upscaling and operationalisation. Tania Li (2007) has contributed significantly to exploring this issue within development practice, which she refers to as 'rendering technical.' This concept captures the process in which complex social dynamics and issues are reduced to technical problems requiring technical solutions. It refers to the representation of "the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics . . . defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed" (Li, 2007, p. 7). Ultimately, the act of 'rendering technical' ensures that issues are depoliticized.

Within the context of gender and development, Pearson (2019, p.161) explains that the introduction and integration of gender within development projects "meant that technical staff of development agencies welcomed a translation of what might be seen as quite conceptual and complicated gender analysis into terms and frameworks that could be applied to gender-focused development activities." However, gender mainstreaming has not lived up to its transformative potential, and the work of activists and feminists in rethinking gender and development has predominantly prompted a bureaucratic response: "organizations have tended to insert gender-sensitive declarations and aspirations into their mission statements and policy documents with an absence of effective structures to ensure compliance and accountability" (Harriss, 2019, p. 167). It is against this backdrop that feminist MEL has been developed and introduced. However, to understand the value of feminist MEL, it is important to first introduce traditional approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning.

1.1.3 Introducing Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

The modern development apparatus ensures that organisations must seek grants and funding to implement their initiatives. Such funding is often conditional and delivered with stringent requirements-often in the form of demonstrating efficiency, results, and ultimately, success. MEL, which refers to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning but may also include reference to Planning and Accountability, is currently an integral part of development work. Practitioners work with MEL by systematically collecting, analysing and interpreting data regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of a certain program. Grounded in a belief in evidence-based decision-making, it often uses tools such as logical frameworks, indicators, and reporting templates. These conventional processes make up the current mainstream approach to MEL among development practitioners, hereon referred to as 'traditional MEL.'

Traditional MEL practices have been critiqued for their perpetuation of unequal power dynamics between donors and their recipients. The act of extracting data from people in the global South, who hold less power and resources, for the purpose of upwards accountability also reflects that evaluation "has become a colonial prejudice that reinforces uneven and biased power relations" (Chilisa & Mertens, 2021, p. 162). Additionally, traditional MEL often favours quantitative data and standardised evaluation metrics which may simplify, or completely ignore, complex social outcomes. These issues surrounding traditional MEL are especially salient for organisations working with gender and women, since the disproportionate focus on gender as 'smart economics' ensures that resources for women's rights are distributed according to considerations of economic participation and efficiency, rather than social justice or human rights. Bowman & Sweemtman (2014, p. 203) argue that the "focus on efficiency and economic participation potentially limits development programming - and MEL - to focus on the 'economic empowerment' of individual entrepreneurs."

1.1.4 Introducing Feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

How can feminist development organisations work progressively within such conditions? Luckily, many feminist development practitioners believe that MEL has the potential to be a tool for change and progress (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014). While working within the confines of a field where projects and initiatives must produce measurable results to secure funding for their important work, feminists have developed a new frontier within development practice: feminist approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning. Feminist MEL is a lens which reimagines Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning practices according to feminist principles. This lens allows for a variety of different tools and techniques, united by their intention to disrupt power hierarchies and further social justice.

It is important to not confuse feminist MEL with gender approaches to MEL, which is a legacy of the GAD paradigm. Gender approaches to MEL often provide one rigid and precise framework and are more likely to treat women as one homogenous analytical category. As Brisolara et al. (2014, p. 127) note: "Most would agree that gender approaches are perceived as less threatening than feminist evaluation since gender approaches do not overtly seek to challenge the social, political, or power status quo." Feminist MEL, however, explicitly seeks to both examine and challenge power inequalities and unequal systems and structures.

1.2 Research Aim and Questions

Motivated by what Cynthia Enloe (2004) has termed "a feminist curiosity," this thesis refuses "to take for granted the current state of affairs as natural or given" and instead seeks to explore feminist MEL as an alternative approach to mainstream development practice (Beck, 2017, p. 149). Given the nature of feminist MEL as a frontier, further research is necessary to shape the direction of its development. With this in mind, this thesis seeks to better understand how MEL processes can be transformed to improve development practice and ultimately be tools for progressive change.

More specifically, this thesis aims to analyse the case study of one organisation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and their early-stage development and conceptualisation of feminist MEL, to understand how their interpretation of feminist MEL practices draws from theory. Critical theories, specifically feminist, postcolonial, and development theories, have informed and shaped much of the practice of international development, by both criticising current conventions and procedures as well as introducing new, progressive ways of thinking. However, in the context of feminist MEL, the connection between theory and practice is not always clear. To contribute to bridging this gap, this thesis aims to make the theoretical foundations of WILPF's interpretation of feminist MEL more explicit, and to identify ideas and contributions from academia that have not yet made their way into the practice of feminist MEL. The aim is to contribute to a greater theoretical understanding and continued curiosity about how feminist MEL can continue to develop by drawing from new contributions from feminist, postcolonial, and development theories.

In pursuit of this aim, this thesis sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. *How are feminist, postcolonial, and development theories interpreted and presented within the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's feminist approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning?*
   a) *To what extent are the interpretations of these various theories compatible with one another? Do they contradict each other, and if so, how?*
   b) *Which ideas and contributions from these theories are not present within WILPF's interpretations of feminist MEL, and how do they constitute potential opportunities for further development of WILPF's feminist MEL?*

This thesis will be structured as follows: first, I will explore the existing literature surrounding feminist MEL. This will provide greater insight into the current discussions and knowledge about feminist MEL, while also elucidating the lack of academic attention being paid to the topic. Then, I will present my theoretical grounding by presenting the three key theories that will guide

my analysis: feminist, postcolonial, and development theories. Thereafter, I will discuss my methodological approach and research design. This will lead into a discussion of my major findings and conclusions, until I finally present the conclusions and implications of this study for further research.

2. Literature Review

This section will present a review of existing research that addresses the topic of feminist MEL. It will explore recurring themes within the literature, including issues within traditional MEL processes, the development and conceptualisation of a feminist approach to MEL, benefits of feminist MEL, and applications and case studies of feminist MEL. Ultimately, this review will demonstrate that my research will fill a gap in the literature by bridging the gap between the practice of feminist MEL and its theoretical underpinnings.

2.1 Issues with Traditional MEL

Given that feminist MEL is a frontier within its field, much of the literature on the topic explains why it is needed by pointing out the current flaws and issues with the status quo of traditional MEL practices. Two overarching themes emerge within the literature: (1) traditional MEL is not able to effectively capture complex social change, and (2) traditional MEL entrenches unequal power dynamics and neocolonial approaches to development.

Miller and Haylock (2014) provide an overview of the first theme, the inability to capture complex change, within their case study of Oxfam Canada's implementation of feminist MEL. "Trends in the current aid environment, including the predominance of the logical framework approach and the emphasis on results that are relatively easy to measure, pose significant challenges for understanding and capturing how changes happen in women's lives" (Miller and Haylock 2014, p. 292). Much of the literature argues that development work, particularly with feminist aims, is often non-linear. In a critical review of current M&E approaches conducted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), the authors argue:

"Women's rights work is engaged in a complex dynamic of change that often engages both the formal realm of law, policy, and resources, as well as patriarchal and other oppressive social structures, cultures, beliefs, and practices…The linearity of many tools – especially widely used methods like the Logical Framework or "LogFrame" – have been problematic because they flatten change processes into cause-effect relationships that cannot capture and measure complex social changes, and may even mislead us about how these occur" (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010, p. 17).

This sentiment is also present in Brisolara et al. (2014), when they discuss how traditional MEL associates measures of success with a linear trajectory of results. This is problematic because it can encourage evaluators to interpret non-linear change (or potentially undesirable consequences, like conflict) as failure when in fact they may simply be an indicator that power relations are changing, since this may cause resistance and conflict in the short-term. Traditional MEL therefore does not allow for alternative views of development which are "more consistent with lived realities—a reality where change and empowerment is often met with resistance, and where things can get worse before they get better" (Brisolara et al., 2014, p. 217).

In addition to not accounting for non-linearity, the current literature also suggests that traditional MEL is not adept at capturing long-term, sustainable change. This is expanded upon extensively in the critical review conducted by AWID, in which Batliwala & Pittman (2010, p. 10) explain that most traditional MEL tools are intended to measure individual, often isolated, projects and programs rather than the impact of wider movements. This blind spot is further perpetuated by the political assumptions about the state of the world and socio-political contexts that are built into traditional MEL tools. Batliwala & Pittman (2010, p. 12) argue that political stability is assumed within such frameworks, "that democratic rights, law and order, an impartial judiciary and police, due process and access to redress, rights of association, civil liberties, an independent media, etc. are inevitably present and surrounding change processes in a larger safety net." However, they claim that these conditions can not be assumed, particularly within environments where "women seek radical change" (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010, p. 12). By ignoring the reality of the contexts in which initiatives of structural change are pursued, traditional MEL frameworks

may distort our interpretations of the degree of success of these initiatives. Ultimately, Batliwala & Pittman (2010, p. 10) argue that traditional MEL frameworks therefore might interpret short-term change as sustainable change, and thus conflate the two. They explain that, in reality, women's rights actors often find that although short-term change might occur, it is also common for larger power structures to accommodate a smaller degree of change, while "deeper transformations in the status quo do not necessarily occur" (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010, p. 10).

Another issue with traditional MEL that emerges within the existing literature is that it may contribute to neocolonial approaches to development and entrench unequal power dynamics. In rationalising and outlining their explicitly decolonial approach to evaluation, Ahmad (2021, p. 198) explains that they were inspired by the work of Lugones (2010), who argues that colonial, capitalist ideas and conceptions about gender, race, and sexuality rely on "categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic." Ahmad (2021, p. 198) then explains that this argument is relevant to the field of MEL because "this logic manifests in the establishment of categories, dichotomies, and hierarchies present in most SDP MEL as it relies on logic framework (logframes) to set its course." Additionally, Ahmad (2021) explains that one key pillar of decolonial theory which is relevant to MEL is that of (re)conceptualising knowledge production. Ahmad (2021, p. 197) draws from Mendoza (2015, p. 114), who asserts that colonialism relies on the idea that "European knowledge production was accredited as the only valid knowledge, [and] indigenous epistemologies were relegated to the status of primitive superstition or destroyed." This provides insight into the knowledge hierarchies that, unless explicitly identified and countered, are often present within traditional MEL practices. Inspired by feminist critiques of MEL, Ahmad (2021, p 197) explicitly tried to avoid this issue with traditional MEL by deciding to "not approach the workshop process as "experts" seeking to "empower" local staff with "our" knowledge of MEL."

Other literature on the topic also often acknowledges and problematizes the power dynamics that are perpetuated throughout traditional MEL approaches, often by discussing the relationship between donors and recipients. In the introduction for an issue of *Gender & Development*

devoted to MEL, Bowman and Sweetman (2014, p. 211) note the danger of rendering MEL technical and reducing it to "repetitious, time-consuming technical tasks, involving flow charts, logical frameworks and lists of 'indicators' which need to be generated to keep donors and managers happy and 'feed the beast.'" Batliwala & Pittman (2010, p. 9) take this point one step further, and discuss how this need to 'feed the beast' turns MEL tools and indicators into ends instead of means, and ultimately ensure that "measurement is used more as a tool of enforcement and accountability to the donor than as a means of understanding and learning what works and changing strategy if necessary." The tendency towards using traditional MEL practices for enforcement and accountability entails that it may also be used as a punitive tool "if the indicators chosen at the outset turn out to be inappropriate and the data generated reflects poorly on the project / implementing organization, it negatively influences funding decisions" (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010, p. 15). As such, many texts within the literature identify the power that donors have (and also note that most donors are situated in countries that have historically been colonisers), and explain how this power may manifest itself through the use of MEL in terms of setting the agenda, deciding the indicators, and ultimately deciding whether an initiative is a 'success.'

2.2 Developing and Conceptualising Feminist MEL

Another prominent theme within the literature on feminist MEL concerns the conceptualisation and presentation of what a feminist MEL actually is. This encompasses both the history of the development of feminist approaches to MEL, which intersects heavily with the evolution of gender and development approaches, as well as the principles and content that may form the basis of a feminist MEL.

While most literature on feminist MEL jumps right into its contents, a number of texts also trace its origins. Brisolara et al. (2014) explain how feminist theories have fed into feminist research and evaluation, which are key building blocks of feminist MEL. Bowman & Sweetman (2014, p. 202) provide context to the historical relationship between gender and MEL by first explaining that MEL is a foundational component of gender and development, and that "GAD's story began

with feminist researchers mapping – that is, informally evaluating - the impact on women, and development, of mistaken understandings of women's role in economic development in the global South." They also explain that MEL was developed in parallel to gender mainstreaming practices and the development of GAD "as a field of activism and enquiry" (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014, p. 202). MEL tools followed a similar trajectory to that of GAD. Bamberger and Podems (2002, p. 85) explain how the 1980's first saw the introduction of gender-analysis frameworks, such as the Harvard Analytical Framework, which in reality often "tended to focus more on the needs and constraints of women than on an analysis of gender relations." They then explore how successive frameworks have responded to, and iterated upon, critiques.

In addition to discussing how feminist approaches to MEL emerged, much of the literature is concerned with what a feminist MEL actually is. Many theorists and practitioners who write about the topic tend to converge on the point that feminist MEL is a lens rather than one specific and rigid tool. Miller and Haylock (2014, p. 295) encapsulate this sentiment when they write that "there appeared to be no specific feminist evaluation 'methods' distinct from other evaluation approaches. Instead, it is useful to see feminist evaluation as an overall approach or 'lens' that builds on developments within feminist research and theory." The word "lens" is often used within the literature to classify and encapsulate the essence of what a feminist approach to MEL entails, being used for example by Brisolara et al. (2014, p. 33), and Hay (2012, p. 323).

Another convergence within the literature regarding the contents of feminist MEL is the acknowledgement that feminist empiricism and epistemology have been highly influential in shaping feminist approaches. Bowman and Sweetman (2014) build upon Brisolara (2014) in their discussion of how feminist ideas about knowledge are diverse and plural, and that this translates to the world of MEL in the form of a scepticism about its positivist claim that there is some sort of 'truth' that should be uncovered. They identify that feminist empiricism has significantly influenced feminist approaches to MEL, due to its contributions regarding ways of knowing. For example, feminist empiricism rejects the idea that neutrality or objectivity truly exists. Instead, we should acknowledge and seriously consider (rather than dismiss) people's

subjective experiences. Additionally, Bowman and Sweetman (2014, p. 204) argue that feminist MEL should strive to "enable previously unvoiced perspectives to come to the fore and challenge the dominance of professional or expert 'researchers' mining the experience of grassroots women and girls whose own identity and location means their views are seldom, if ever, sought."

Given that much of the literature interprets feminist MEL to be a lens rather than one prescriptive tool, it follows that there is not one set definition that is common throughout all texts. Instead, authors often propose (or refer to) various principles that can be used to guide a feminist approach to MEL. For example, Bamberger & Podems (2002, p. 86-88) present four key components of a feminist MEL: the use of participatory and qualitative methods, the integration of multiple research methods, the application of feminist research methods in cross-cultural contexts, and the respect of subject and recognition of the discomforts of the research process. An issue of the journal *New Directions for Evaluation* later expands upon this to develop six tenets of feminist evaluation:

"(1) Feminist evaluation has as a central focus the gender inequities that lead to social injustice.

(2) Discrimination or inequality based on gender is systemic and structural.

(3) Evaluation is a political activity; the contexts in which evaluation operates are politicized; and the personal experiences, perspectives, and characteristics evaluators bring to evaluations (and with which we interact) lead to a particular political stance.

(4) Knowledge is a powerful resource that serves an explicit or implicit purpose. Knowledge should be a resource of and for the people who create, hold, and share it. Consequently, the evaluation or research process can lead to significant negative or positive effects on the people involved in the evaluation/ research.

(5) Knowledge and values are culturally, socially, and temporally contingent. Knowledge is also filtered through the knower.

(6) There are multiple ways of knowing; some ways are privileged over others" (Bowen et al., 2002, p. 4-7).

These tenets are often referenced within other, more recent texts, and frequently serve as a starting point from which other authors may build upon when conceptualising a feminist

approach to MEL. For example, Brisolara et al. (2014) present very similar tenets but add that it should be ethically appropriate for an actively feminist evaluator to engage in action and advocacy. They also assert that, in addition to knowledge and values, research methods, institutions, and practices are types of social constructs. The AWID report by Batliwala and Pittman (2010) also includes principles that align with the six tenets, while additionally including a considerable amount of principles that relate to more specific and granular practices. For example, their explanation of what a feminist MEL entails also posits that "Changes in gender power do not go unchallenged – our tools will enable the tracking and appropriate interpretation of backlashes and resistance to change (i.e., not as failures of the strategy, but as evidence of its impact and possibly, effectiveness)" and that they will undertake MEL processes for the purpose of their own learning rather than because of donor requirements (Batliwala & Pittman, 2010, p. 20). Oxfam even explicitly quotes Seigart (2005) and refers to the six tenets, but then also contributes, similarly to Batliwala and Pittman (2010), that "More recent understanding of feminist evaluation pays attention to capturing incremental changes, holding the line, or even reversals in women's status as part of the complexity of challenging and changing gender power relations" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 296).

2.3 Benefits of Feminist MEL

The current literature on feminist MEL also extends beyond outlining and conceptualising the contents of such lenses, to predicting and reporting on its benefits. The consequences and positive effects of feminist MEL are often implicit within conceptualisations, as evident from the previous section. Benefits are also touched upon in case studies and evaluations of programs which have applied a feminist MEL. These benefits of feminist MEL, according to the literature, range from encouraging greater participation, its potential to challenge and transform power inequalities, and its ability to reveal gender imbalances and embrace complexity.

Miller and Haylock (2014) discuss Oxfam Canada's application of feminist evaluation principles to their MEL practices, and one of the benefits of feminist MEL that they identify from this practical application is that of encouraging greater participation. They reflect upon how the

feminist principles guided them to "honour the knowledge, context, and experience of our partners" and that this logically led them to adopt participatory tools and methods within their approach (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 305). By co-designing parts of the project evaluation process with their stakeholders, they found that there was stronger local ownership and greater participation.

Another benefit of feminist MEL that is discussed on multiple occasions in the literature is the greater shift in power relations and structures that such approaches may spark. Different authors articulate this shift in different ways, but one common sentiment is that feminist MEL ensures that MEL is not done 'to' people, but 'with' people. For example, Bowman & Sweetman (2014) discuss how different approaches to MEL are necessary to reject the reductive view that MEL belongs exclusively to the technical realm (rather than the political). Along this vein, they claim that feminist approaches are necessary to ensure that MEL will not "continue to be done to women, rather than with and for them" (Bowman & Sweetman, 2014, p. 210). Miller and Haylock (2014) also use similar terminology upon their reflection of their experience with feminist ME. They explicitly state that the processes they noticed "reflect a shift in power relations from partners having monitoring and evaluation conducted 'on' them to evaluations being 'with and for' partners" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 305). Azevedo et al. (2019, p. 498) also reflect upon how they have seen benefits from feminist MEL being applied in practice, and they explicitly reveal that the integration of feminist values into MEL "lead us to challenge power structures, and enable understanding of why and how these structures change (in both planned and unplanned, and positive and negative, ways)."

Multiple authors highlight the particular potential for feminist MEL to reveal phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed or misunderstood, such as by revealing gender imbalances or recognising and embracing complexity. Ahmad (2021, p. 191) states this explicitly: "MEL systems - when designed with feminist principles - can reveal the existence of gender imbalances…ultimately allowing projects to achieve greater gender equity," while Hay (2012) argues that feminist approaches are suitable for identifying gaps within the underlying theory of

a certain program that might ultimately hinder it from addressing gender inequities. Miller & Haylock (2014, p. 306) also note that traditional MEL, being situated within the current aid environment, also encourages the depiction of a "positive, simple story" rather than acknowledging that the nature of change in women's lives is far more complex. These authors found that they were able to tell more complex stories of change after embracing a feminist approach to MEL, and that this allowed them to avoid generalisations and reductive simplifications. Instead, they reflect that it "created space to capture non-linear change experienced by programme stakeholders, including backsliding on previous gains as well as encountering resistance to change" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 306).

2.4 Applications of Feminist MEL

While the academic literature on feminist MEL is scarce, there are texts and reports published by practitioners. Many of these reports consist of practitioners discussing their experiences and reflections about applying feminist MEL, often to one specific program or initiative. For example, such reflections have been published by various country offices of Oxfam (Canada, Intermón, and Novib) as well as feminist academics who consulted Skateistan Afghanistan (a sport, gender, and development organisation) on their MEL work.

Oxfam Canada's application of feminist MEL involved developing "a mixed-methods approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning rooted in feminist evaluation principles" for a women's rights programme titled 'Engendering Change' (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 291). The programme consisted of a portfolio of 44 partners across the world who shared the purpose of "working to support women to further gender equality and secure their rights" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 293). Oxfam Canada developed a feminist learning system with five major components; "a theory of change; a primarily quantitative performance measurement framework; evaluative moments that included a mid-term learning review, case studies, and a final evaluation; reflective spaces and sense-making exercises; and social accountability surveys" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 297). They made use of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, in which partners prioritise and decide which stories of change to report on. The

practitioners reflect that this allowed for greater participation, and the emergence of more "relevant and culturally appropriate indicators of success" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 303). They also found that this new feminist approach encouraged them to report on unexpected and non-linear consequences. However, this project faced some challenges in the form of the time and resource demands of the new approach, and the demands of donors regarding "upward reporting…which speaks to the fundamental power relationships at play" (Miller & Haylock, 2014, p. 307).

Oxfam Intermón also used "feminist MEAL principles" to guide the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning processes for their AMAL program in Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, and Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), which "promotes active participation and leadership of women with a focus on the poorest and most marginalized women in local, national and regional governance structures and decision making processes" (Wakefield & Koerppen, 2017, p. 10). The practitioners involved created a collection of lessons learned from this initiative, which provides insight into the practical application of MEL. For example, one lesson that is not discussed often within the literature (perhaps because it is assumed or implicit) is that those developing the MEAL system "need to share the values and principles of feminist leadership to be able to reflect those principles in practice" (Wakefield & Koerppen, 2017, p. 12). The importance of explaining and justifying a feminist approach is emphasised, as is the point that "we should not take for granted that everyone will use a feminist lens" (Wakefield & Koerppen, 2017, p. 13). They also reflected upon the importance of sufficient time and resources for M&E, especially in terms of providing preparatory training.

Oxfam Novib, based in the Netherlands, launched a Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory in 2008, which was "a three-year action learning trajectory aimed at creating evidence-based changes towards greater gender justice sensitivity and practice in Oxfam Novib's partner organizations, in their programs and communities where they work" (Wakefield & Koerppen, 2017, p. 15). They found that they had lacked MEAL tools to capture qualitative change, and therefore also adopted the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology. They

initiated their MSC approach in 2010 as a way to put feminist principles into MEAL practice. They also reported on lessons learned and found that it allowed them to more clearly understand how change happened, and which changes were connected to their intervention. However, they noted the "administrative heaviness" and resource demand that was necessary to execute this approach (Wakefield & Koerppen, 2017, p. 16). They also reflected upon the importance of building trust between the story collectors and the storytellers.

Ahmad (2021) discusses another, non-Oxfam, application of a feminist approach to MEL. Skateistan-South Africa sought to design and apply a MEL system and recruited feminist academics, including Ahmad, to do so. This allowed for "a unique opportunity to explore and re-imagine the way that MEL is understood, taught, and represented," employing feminist decolonial theory (Ahmad, 2021, p. 192). Ultimately, they encouraged a workshop approach, in which they worked together with Skateistan-South Africa staff to develop new MEL practices, and in doing so they attempted to avoid knowledge hierarchies and instead co-construct knowledge about MEL. They conclude by reflecting that "The insights intend to encourage a rethinking of how one can "do" MEL and of what feminist principles can bring to the practice of MEL" (Ahmad, 2021, p. 209).

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the academic literature discussing feminist approaches to MEL is scarce. Most of the development, reflections, and tracing of feminist MEL has been contributed by practitioners and consequently is often found within reports, blog posts, and briefs. This reveals that a lack of attention is being paid to the topic by academics, and also indicates the existence of a disconnect between theory and practice. The literature tells us how practitioners envision and apply feminist MEL, but it is not often explicit how practitioners are drawing from academia or theory to make these conceptual decisions. More specifically, there are currently no systematic explanations within the literature concerning how various theories (could) feed into and shape the conceptualisation and application of feminist MEL - and this is the gap that I intend to fill within this thesis.

3. Theoretical Grounding

Answering the research question "How are feminist, postcolonial, and development theories interpreted and presented within the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's feminist approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning?" requires an understanding of the theories in question. As such, this chapter will review the key tenets and contributions from feminist theories, postcolonial theories, and development theories as they relate to MEL. These three bodies of theoretical work were selected on the basis that they are integral and significant to the practice of MEL within the field of development practice. Development theories are pivotal within development studies and its practice, a feminist approach to MEL is dependent on the existence of feminist theories, and postcolonial theories are urgent and relevant given that much of development work is being applied within (or to) the Global South.

This represents a fairly non-traditional approach to theoretical grounding, as these three theoretical families are simultaneously analytical tools *and* the subjects of study. In other words, this research is using theories to analyse the presence of theories within the collected data. As an element of analysis, the theories were used as such: throughout the data collection process, including the interviews, participants were not asked to comment directly on their use or interpretation of theory. Instead, the collected data was analysed using these three key theories as theoretical grounding, to uncover and discuss the influences of feminist, postcolonial, and development theories. Which key contributions from these theories were reflected within the discourse of the documents and participants? Which ideas did the data emulate, and which did they reject or ignore? Which parts of these theoretical bodies of work had made their way into the practice of feminist MEL, and which remained within the academic realm? An understanding of these three bodies of theoretical work is necessary to answer these questions, to facilitate the analysis of the collected data, and to ultimately answer the research questions at hand.

3.1 Feminist Theories

Feminist theories are heterogenous and plentiful, but some that are especially relevant to MEL are black and intersectional feminisms, care ethics, and liberal feminism. Black feminist thought is rooted in the "history of black women's struggles against the multiple oppressions of race, sex, and class" which is now often encapsulated in Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (Parpart et al., 2000, p. 130). This refers to the acknowledgement of how the intersection of multiple oppressions operates in complex, non-additive ways. Furthermore, Black feminism has emphasised "the importance of developing an ethic of caring and personal accountability in one's research" and contributed to feminist epistemology by stressing the importance of lived experiences (Parpart et al., 2000, p. 132).

Care ethics is a feminist philosophical theory founded on the premise that humans are inherently relational, interdependent, and embedded within social networks, rather than the "isolated and abstract entities described in traditional liberal theory" (Koggel & Orme, 2010, p. 110). It then follows from this premise that we have a moral duty to care for each other, and that we have a moral claim, as dependents, for the care that we need to live and progress as humans. Another central claim of care ethics is that emotions (including empathy, sympathy, and responsiveness) are useful and should be cultivated rather than rejected when trying to navigate moral decisions (Held, 2006).

Liberal feminism draws from liberalism, a "family of doctrines" that places great value on equality and liberty (especially for individuals) and asserts that the way to secure such freedom is through a just and fair state (Baehr, 2021). Liberal feminists are predominantly concerned with ensuring that women and men have equal opportunities, by for example ensuring that there are no discriminatory laws or policies. This often manifests itself in a concern as to whether women are holding positions of power, especially in government and business.

3.2 Postcolonial Theories

Postcolonial theories are also many and varied, with many postcolonial thinkers applying their insights to the field of development as well as its practice. Some common themes amongst postcolonial thinking which are relevant to MEL include the acknowledgement of structural and historical inequalities, the challenging of Western knowledge, and insights and debates regarding participation.

Uma Kothari (2019, p. 48) explains that "through problematizing, deconstructing and decentring the supposed universality of Western knowledge, post-colonial perspectives critically engage with and resist the variety of ways in which the West produces knowledge." Postcolonial contributions to development studies range from criticising the field and practise itself as a "'neo-colonial' project that reproduces global inequalities and maintains the dominance of the South, through global capitalist expansion, by the North" to tracing and exploring the history and origins of development studies to better understand "how development mediates, extends, entrenches or counters colonial legacies" (Kothari, 2019, p. 48-49). This indicates how postcolonial theories often emphasise the importance of acknowledging and remembering colonial histories, as well as identifying and addressing structural and historical inequalities and oppression that currently persist (although perhaps in differing manifestations). McEwan (2018, p. 26) explains this when she writes that "neo-colonialism is viewed as a continuation of the domination and exploitation of formerly colonized countries but through different means, primarily inequitable international trade and geopolitical relations."

Another salient point of interest within postcolonial theories is that of interrogating modes of knowing and knowledge production. Theorists like Edward Said (1978), Gayatri Spivak (1988), Aníbal Quijano (2007), and Walter Mignolo (2009) have contributed significant insights to this topic. For example, Quijano (2007, p. 169) explains how global colonial domination relied on the systematic repression of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and symbols as well as the extraction and expropriation of knowledge, often related to fields like mining, engineering, and agriculture: "The repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of

producing perspectives" (Quijano, 2007, p. 169). This follows Edward Said's (1978) argument that knowledge constitutes a type of power, and by granting authority to those who produce and hold knowledge, it is also a form of violence. Postcolonial theorists also emphasise the significance of modernity and rationality as inventions that were necessary in upholding coloniality and establishing colonial (non-rational) subjects who could not 'know' or theorise: "As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science" (Mignolo, 2009, p. 159). Johnston-Goodstar (2012) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012, p. 1) both explore how research and evaluation have been central to colonisation, and in doing so acknowledge how "the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples." According to McEwan (2018, p. 261), Spivak (1988) contends that academic institutions and researchers now contribute to cultural imperialism by extracting knowledge from the South to "serve the purposes of researchers in the North," throughout which raw data from the South is transformed into theory and knowledge: "The field is thus the repository of data and the academy is centred as the site for value-added theory – subalterns tell stories and researchers theorize for them." Sardar (1999) also asserts that the main power of the West comes from its capacity to define and theorise, rather than its technological or economic developments.

The debate within development theory regarding the concept of participation is also pressing amongst, and often contributed to by, postcolonial theorists. Some theorists interpret greater participation, and methods like participatory action research, as tools and methodologies that "facilitate the expression of marginalized voices, and that attempt to represent the experience of marginalization in genuine and authentic ways" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 261). In discussing the question "Can the subaltern speak?," Spivak (1988) opposes this favouring of the participatory, on the basis that participatory approaches ignore the heterogeneity of the Global South, as well as the power dynamics that exist and impede genuine participation. Kapoor (2004, p. 636) draws upon this reasoning to argue that Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) fails to consider how power relationships influence the dynamics within participatory spaces: "even if subalterns

speak, they (like anyone) may perform the roles they think are expected of them (by their own communities, the facilitator, the funding agency). They may modify their speech when under pressure, or exaggerate their praise to please the funder."

Postcolonial feminism brings the previously mentioned postcolonial considerations, for example heterogeneity, discursive representations, and colonial history, to feminist theory. One particularly significant insight from postcolonial feminism was brought about by Chandra Mohanty (1984, p. 335), and is called the "Third World difference." This concept refers to the phenomenon of Western feminists representing their own experiences and problems as universal, while simultaneously interpreting and reproducing images of women in the South "as tradition-bound victims of timeless, patriarchal cultures, and reproducing the colonial discourses of mainstream, 'male-stream' scholarship" (Cheryl McEwan, 2018, p. 188). Ultimately, Mohanty (1984) asserts that this establishes a stereotype of the "Third World woman" which centres Western values, power, and knowledge and consequently 'others' women in the South.

3.3 Development Theories

The field of development studies has provided many theoretical concepts and approaches that have influenced the practice of international development. The concepts of empowerment and participation have been of particular interest, and they have their roots in critical development studies and "local, grassroots community-based movements and initiatives, and their growing disenchantment with mainstream, top-down approaches to development" (Parpart et al., 2002, p. 3).

The notion of empowerment has a particularly rich and contentious history which is often traced back to Paulo Freire and his pedagogy for the oppressed, and was elaborated upon by a variety of actors from second-wave feminist scholars to social activists who "saw empowerment as a local, grassroots endeavour, designed to inspire the poor to challenge the status quo" (Parpart et al., 2002, p. 3). However, this discourse was also adopted and mainstreamed by mainstream development agencies and governments where it was used to increase productivity, thus "losing

its emancipatory roots and taking on a more individualist and neopopulist meaning" (Pettit, 2012, p. 6).

Pettit (2012, p. 2) defines empowerment as "a multidimensional and interdependent process involving social, political, economic and legal changes that will enable people living in poverty and marginalisation to participate meaningfully in shaping their own futures," and explains that this is crucial for genuine participation that avoids tokenization and the maintenance of pre-existing power relations. Meaningful empowerment and participation consequently requires a consideration and transformation of power relations, both as it relates to "the ability of individuals and groups to think and act in their own interests, and structure as the formal and informal institutions, rules, norms and beliefs that enable and constrain thinking and action" (Pettit, 2012, p. 2). In other words, it requires changes in both agency and structure. Pettit (2012, p. 4) explains that "Empowerment is a multidimensional process requiring changes in the economic, political and social conditions that reproduce poverty and exclusion." This approach encompasses what Sardenberg (2008) refers to as the 'liberating' perspective on empowerment.

However, one perspective that is more commonly translated into development practice is the 'liberal' view of empowerment: "Some approaches to empowerment focus on enabling individuals to gain access to assets, information, choices and opportunities so that they are able to improve their own situations. This is often coupled with a liberal emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities" (Pettit, 2012, p, 7). Critics of this approach explain that it does not address the conditions that create "a fundamentally unfair situation," but rather focus on helping individuals adapt to the situation at hand (Pettit, 2012, p, 7). In doing so, it contributes to the 'rendering technical' and depoliticisation of the concept of empowerment by focusing on technical solutions rather than meaningfully considering power.

The diverse semantic interpretations of empowerment and participation are frequently debated amongst theorists, and critiques of development practice's tokenization and co-optation of these terms are common as well. Ultimately, they reflect how "competing ideologies coexist within the

same discourse" (Cornwall & Brock, 2005, p. 3). However, scholars such as Cornwall and Brock (2005, p. 18) argue that "Recognizing the strategic reversibility of discourse is important, as it helps us to recognize that alternative ways of worldmaking can take shape even out of the most apparently closed discursive spaces."

Participatory development, another "development orthodoxy," has a similarly contentious history (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1325). Ultimately it revolves around making "'people' central to development by encouraging beneficiary involvement in interventions that affect them and over which they previously had limited control or influence" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 5). However, critics have identified that participatory development has "been naive about the complexities of power and power relations" and have traced its origins back even further than Robert Chambers and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) to colonial and post-colonial governance in which "the architects of colonial governance and post-colonial development have reiterated a relatively consistent set of arguments for the merits of participation, and pursued its realisation through institutions and policies with strong family resemblances" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001, p. 14; Cornwall, 2006, p. 78). They have also connected participation discourse to "the exigencies arising out of neoliberal reforms and the realities of the rolled-back state" (Cornwall and Brock, 2006, p. 7). However, modern proponents of participatory development argue that current conceptions can iterate upon the critiques that have been leveraged against participatory development, and that they can also be re-established "as a legitimate and genuinely transformative approach to development" (Hickey & Mohan, 2013, p. 3).

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach of this research, by outlining the research design, sampling and analysis methods, and limitations. Additionally, this section addresses the ethical considerations that influenced both the design and implementation of this methodology.

4.1 Research Design

This research aims to identify and analyse the theoretical underpinnings of feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning practices. This has required a research design that "emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data" and which constitutes "interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" in order to explain and understand the nuances and complexities of the research topic (Bryman, 2012, p. 36; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

As a result, I conducted a qualitative case study composed of multiple sources of evidence including interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Bryman (2012, p. 66) describes a case study as a "detailed and intensive analysis of a single case", which Robert K Yin (2018) explains is particularly well suited for extensively exploring contemporary phenomena (such as, in this case, the development and implementation of feminist MEL practices). To analyse the theoretical foundations of feminist MEL practices, I decided to focus my research on one specific organisation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), and their conceptualization and implementation of such practices. WILPF is a "membership-based feminist peacebuilding organisation" with member Sections and Groups in more than 40 countries, whose collective vision is "A world of permanent peace built on feminist foundations of freedom, justice, nonviolence, human rights and equality for all, where people, the planet and all its other inhabitants coexist and flourish in harmony" (WILPF, 2024). WILPF is in the early stages of developing and implementing an explicitly feminist approach to MEL, which entails that it constitutes an exemplifying case for my research focus. As Bryman (2012, p. 70) explains, "The notion of exemplification implies that cases are often chosen not because they are extreme or unusual in some way but because either they epitomize a broader category of cases or they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered."

Robert K Yin (2018, p. 197) explains that using multiple sources of evidence is particularly suitable for a case study research design, which is inherently in-depth and contextual, given that case studies entail "collecting a variety of relevant data and hence relying on multiple sources."

Multiple sources of evidence allow for data triangulation by "developing convergent evidence" and thus "helps to strengthen the construct validity of your case study" (Yin, 2018, p. 197). This research design is interested in the perspective of participants, and thus acknowledges the possibility of multiple realities rather than trying to uncover one singular reality. However, triangulation is still valuable in such a case "to ensure that the case study had rendered the participant's perspective accurately" (Yin, 2018, p. 198).

One source of evidence for this research was semi-structured interviews. Interviews are particularly valuable for yielding insights about the relative perspectives of participants, which was relevant and suitable for this research focus (Weiss, 1994). This research adopted a semi-structured approach to the interviews, in which the researcher has an 'interview guide' consisting of potential topics and questions to be covered while still allowing for deviations, follow-up questions, and flexibility depending on the interviewee's judgement of what is important or relevant to discuss (Bryman, 2012). A total of ten interviews were conducted in English, with nine being conducted via Zoom call and one in person, all of which lasted approximately sixty minutes. Out of these ten interviews, nine were carried out with staff members from WILPF while the remaining interview was conducted with a feminist MEL specialist from another Swedish civil society organisation founded by WILPF Sweden, Kvinna till Kvinna. The interview guide broadly covered questions related to the participants' understanding and conceptualisation of feminist MEL, their experiences with implementing feminist MEL at WILPF, as well as their perceptions and experiences with traditional approaches to MEL. The interview guide was consistently tailored according to the role and experiences of the interviewee in question, for example by focusing more on the practical implementation of feminist MEL with project management staff who had been directly involved with such processes.

This research also used participant observation as another source of evidence, which refers to a non-passive mode of observation in which the researcher may participate in the phenomenon that is being studied (Yin, 2018). This allows for "the ability to perceive reality from the viewpoint of

someone "inside" a case rather than external to it" and also "has the potential to come closer to a naturalistic emphasis, because the qualitative researcher confronts members of a social setting in their natural environments" (Bryman, 2012, p. 494; Yin, 2018, p. 191). In my role as an intern at WILPF Sweden, I participated in two MEL training sessions hosted and facilitated by the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Coordinator from the WILPF International Secretariat. Staff members from different WILPF sections attended these training sessions, including Zimbabwe, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon. Each training was two hours long and consisted of a slideshow presentation, group activities and exercises, and opportunities to discuss questions and confusions. The first training session consisted of an introduction to traditional MEL practices and principles, covering topics such as logframes and theory of change. The second training session focused specifically on WILPF's approach to feminist MEL, including its principles and potential tools. While participating in this session, I took notes on the conversations that extended beyond the slideshow text, including the facilitators' explanations, participants' questions, and discussions which arose.

The final source of evidence for this research was documentation, which can be useful to both verify and corroborate information from other sources, and to make inferences about WILPF's 'official' perspective on feminist MEL (Yin, 2018). Bryman (2012, p. 551) also explains that "documents deriving from private sources like companies are likely to be authentic and meaningful," while Atkinson & Coffey (2011) remark that documents should not be interpreted as reflecting reality, but rather be analysed in terms of the context of their production and their intended audience. This research therefore selected two types of documentation for analysis. The first type of documentation included texts created by the WILPF International Secretariat to internally present and explain the concept and content of WILPF's feminist approach to MEL. This included the *International Secretariat's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework for the 2022-2025 WILPF International Programme (IP)*, as well as a guiding document titled *WILPF Feminist MEL Principles* (hereon referred to as the WILPF Principles document). Both of these documents were intended for circulation amongst all WILPF sections, as a learning tool and point of reference when learning about and implementing feminist MEL.

The other type of documentation analysed within this research was presentation materials that were used within the MEL training, including scripts, slides, and preparatory exercises.

4.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this research. This is a non-probability form of sampling in which participants are not selected randomly, but rather strategically to ensure that "those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). To gather the necessary data to answer the research question, the sampling was based on the criteria that participants were affiliated with WILPF, and that they had encountered some aspect of WILPF's feminist MEL practices. The selected participants had worked with WILPF's feminist MEL practices in a variety of ways, ranging from program officers who worked on project-specific MEL, to a MEL consultant who informed and developed WILPF's feminist MEL approach, to communications coordinators who worked on reporting. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to broaden the initial contacts that I had made through my connections at WILPF Sweden. Snowball sampling refers to a "technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research." (Bryman, 2012, p. 424). Throughout the process of scheduling interviews with my initial participants, I also asked them if there were any other staff members that they would recommend me to reach out to.

4.3 Method of Analysis

This research employs thematic analysis, "a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning (themes) in qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 2). Typically, this analytical method entails constructing codes and themes to identify broader patterns and insights (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 3). Thematic analysis allows for researchers to take an active role within the generation of these codes and themes. Rather than uncovering themes that are 'hidden' within the data, researchers make "active, interpretative, choices" in constructing them (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 3).

My data analysis process began by taking extensive (and often verbatim) notes during the interviews. This was followed by data familiarisation, in which I 'played' with the data and began to identify interesting or promising patterns and insights. I then combined an inductive and deductive thematic analysis approach. First, using the research question as a guide, I generated themes that I predicted would be relevant based on my data familiarisation. With these themes in mind, I systematically coded the data by capturing relevant information that fit within them. This process also yielded new insights, which led to the construction of new themes. After reviewing and reflecting upon these themes, I revised my research question. This led to a second iteration of data familiarisation, coding, and reflection according to a new set of themes that were appropriate for the new research focus. Finally, I reflected upon these new themes, the codes within them, and their relationships with one another.

4.4 Limitations

The limitations encountered throughout this research are associated with challenges during data collection, as well as positionality and researcher-related bias. Although the sample of interviewees encompassed various roles and regions, its size and scope remained limited, thus diminishing the data's generalisability. For example, no participants represented the WILPF sections in Asia or Asia Pacific. However, the relevant expertise (particularly from interviewees who had shaped WILPF's MEL) enhanced the data's reliability by increasing its accuracy and depth. One challenge surrounding data collection was that all interviews but one were held remotely using Zoom calls, due to the geographical range of the participants. This led to a few encounters with faulty internet connection that either interrupted or prevented the interview. Finally, some participants may potentially have avoided voicing more critical insights or comments about WILPF's feminist MEL due to their situatedness within the organisation.

Another limitation exists regarding my positionality as a researcher, which refers to the acknowledgement that "researchers are part of the social world they are researching and that this world has already been interpreted by existing social actors" (Holmes, 2020, p. 3). My identity as

a white woman from the Global North, currently studying at a Swedish university, influenced my interactions with my participants, the way I interpreted the data that I collected, and my approach to and understanding of the research focus and theoretical framework of this thesis. Additionally, I was at one point situated within the organisation that I was using as my case study (having been an intern there) and also participated in feminist MEL development activities as a part of my internship responsibilities. All of these factors related to my positionality may have introduced bias to my research, which I attempted to mitigate through transparency and reflexivity. Throughout the research process, I consistently aspired to acknowledge and have a sensitivity to my own situatedness within the research. This also entailed locating myself within the "grids of power relations" and seeing how my positionality "influence[d] methods, interpretations, and knowledge production" (Bilgen et al., 2021, p. 523).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Postcolonial considerations surrounding the ethical dimensions of development research and fieldwork highly influenced the selection of this research topic. Cheryl McEwan (2018, p. 31) explains that postcolonial approaches highlight and "examine relationships of power that determine who creates 'knowledge' about other places and peoples and the consequences of this knowledge, be that in the form of colonialism in the past or development and geopolitical interventions in the present" and in doing so, it "highlights the significance of ethics in development." I was influenced by arguments from Ilan Kapoor (2004) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) in which they discuss the politics of knowledge production. They problematize the process of researchers from Western universities collecting data from the South, by identifying it as a type of imperialism in which "the Third World [is] once again providing 'resources' for the First World; but unlike classical imperialism, it is 'extraction of surplus-value without extra-economic coercion'" (Kapoor, 2004, p. 632). These ethical considerations, and inspiration from Bilgen et al. (2021), led me to avoid such fieldwork and instead turn my critical gaze towards the development apparatus, by investigating the methods and tools that development organisations are using and advancing.

Additionally, this research is aligned with the LUMID Ethical Guidelines for Fieldwork which consists of 4 general requirements for ethical research: information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement, and the use requirement. I fulfilled these requirements by ensuring that I was not 'undercover' throughout my fieldwork, and that I informed my participants of their tasks and the conditions of their participation both within the consent form that they signed as well as at the beginning of the interview. They were clearly informed of the purpose of the research, the nature of the interview process, and that the research would be publicly accessible online. All participants provided their consent, and all except one participant chose not to remain anonymous, although they all remain anonymous in this text. On two occasions, participants decided to redact certain information during the interview, after which I made sure to remove any notes or documentation of this information to ensure complete compliance with their wishes.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section will identify and analyse how the representations of feminist MEL provided by the participating WILPF staff members invoked or showed traces of 1) feminist theories, 2) postcolonial theories, and 3) development theories, and discuss the extent to which these representations are compatible with one another. Additionally, this chapter will identify contributions from these bodies of theory that the data does not invoke or discuss, to identify new potential areas for growth, where the practice of feminist MEL can continue to develop by being put into conversation with academic theory

5.1 Feminist Theories

The influence of black and intersectional feminism, as well as the feminist philosophy of care ethics, was prominent throughout the participant interviews, while the participants' representations of feminist MEL deviated clearly away from liberal feminist theories.

5.1.1 Black and Intersectional Feminism

Black and intersectional feminist theoretical contributions were present in the interviews, particularly in the recurrent themes of structural transformation, collaboration and relationships, and standpoint theory. In describing their conception of a feminist MEL, participants frequently discussed how it allows one to better see and follow long-term, structural changes. Some phrases which were used repeatedly to describe the potential of feminist MEL included "social transformation," "transformative change," "long-term consequences," and seeing "the broader picture." One participant explained that a feminist MEL specifically encourages reflection around the questions "What were the systems? How can those systems be improved?" Another participant explicitly stated that a key benefit of feminist MEL is its capacity to question destructive norms, naming racism and capitalism as examples. This was often discussed in contrast to the more traditional approach of solely focusing on immediate results from activities. Additionally, a number of participants discussed the importance of feminist MEL for movement building. As one participant put it: "Our work is feminist, so then the MEL that we do around the work is also reflecting that feminism and helping us learn how to grow the feminist movement and strengthen it." This emphasis on transformation and structural change is particularly explicit in the WILPF Principles document, when it states:

> "Feminist MEL has the power to transform power relationships. It recognizes that MEL activities themselves can either maintain or challenge power structures and systems of oppression like patriarchy, colonialism, militarism, racism, classism and ableism as well as language injustice and inequality in access to technology or literacy…MEL activities can be a strategic tool for furthering gender equality, social justice and feminist peace."

These representations of feminist MEL all indicate a commitment and aspiration for systems change, which reflects the same focus on transforming oppressive power structures that black feminist theories have historically emphasised.

Although most participants discussed the importance of a power analysis, the data did not reflect any significant emphasis on the "close relationship between data and power" (D'Ignazio & Klein,

2020, p. 14). Much useful theorising about this relationship can be found within the realm of data feminism, "a way of thinking about data, their analysis, and their display, that is informed by this tradition of feminist activism as well as the legacy of feminist critical thought" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 3). Data feminism has contributed many insightful ideas about data and power which are transferable and relevant for the development of feminist MEL. For example, it has raised awareness about the over-surveillance of minoritized groups, and warned about how the tools of data (science) "in the hands of dominant groups" can allow them "to obscure their politics and their goals behind their technologies" (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020, p. 59). Data feminism's commitment to reflexivity and transparency can also be insightful for developing new tools and practices within a feminist MEL.

Participants also drew upon black feminists' contributions to emphasising "the importance of developing an ethic of caring and personal accountability in one's research" by indicating that one key value of feminist MEL is its potential to improve personal relationships and centre care in MEL work (Parpart et al., 2000, p. 132). For example, one participant explained that feminist MEL "should help you build your community and bring you closer together" and that it can do so by helping people become more connected and coordinated. Additionally, this participant discussed how a feminist MEL could encourage an acknowledgement and appreciation for the collective efforts that go into the successes they experience, and also emphasise the importance of "celebrating our wins." Multiple participants invoked the idea of relational accountability, by explaining that MEL should not solely be used as a mechanism to hold practitioners accountable to donors, but rather to hold all stakeholders accountable to one another.

Finally, many participants' interpretations also reflected black feminist contributions to epistemology which stress the importance of lived experiences. Black feminists have contributed to standpoint theory by emphasising the importance of acknowledging multiple ways of knowing, and contextualising knowledge to avoid homogenisation. In their evaluations of traditional MEL practices, one common criticism from participants was the assumption that there is one 'objective' truth that can be discovered using MEL. This was often discussed in the

context of having to navigate donors who demand "tangible," "real," and "true," results, and simultaneously feeling like such measures do not appreciate or sufficiently capture their impact. Several participants explained that they often had to have conversations with donors to plead their case about shifting away from indicators that centre on uncovering one objective truth. This reveals their affinity towards acknowledging multiple ways of knowing, and valuing contextual knowledge, which is expanded upon in the WILPF Principles document:

> "Feminist MEL takes into account the different lived experiences of all Sections, partners and women activists and views all perspectives equally valuable. Feminist MEL is intersectional and captures diverse views, understanding that there are multiple ways people experience the same things. Feminist MEL takes into account the different experiences of all those involved, understanding that there is not only "one way of knowing" and that the perspectives of all are equally valuable."

Another insightful academic theory related to epistemology that feminist MEL could adopt and adapt is that of epistemic resistance, which is "is heavily influenced and informed by theories of oppression—especially those developed within feminism and race theory" and tries to both "elucidate the epistemic aspects of oppression" and "offer a way out of the epistemic injustices that accompany oppression" (Medina, 2013, p. 4). Key concepts from this theory, like testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, epistemic friction, and epistemic heroes, could potentially be adapted to further develop the ideas and practices of a feminist MEL.

5.1.2 Care Ethics

Important benefits of feminist MEL, according to participants, included not only collaboration and relationship building, but also care. When asked to define and explain what a feminist approach to MEL is, one participant began by acknowledging that there are many different feminisms and consequently different values that a feminist MEL could be grounded in. With this in mind, they explained that at the core of any feminist MEL, there should be a focus on collective care, do-no-harm principles, and reflections about the wider movement. Another participant explained that the care aspect is one long term implication of adopting a feminist MEL: "MEL that is more grounded in feminist values is caring and is trying to make the

collective stronger and not reinforce competition, individualism." Throughout one brainstorming activity in a feminist MEL training session, participants also raised the idea that MEL should not be a burden, but rather allow for both self-care and collective care. They listed practical examples, such as avoiding long meetings and events, and taking steps to prevent staff burnout. Participants also raised the importance of caring for each other's well-being and strengthening relationships, by appreciating and validating work that otherwise might not get much attention: "Not every project has the same impact as others, but people worked really hard on it. And it's important to validate the work that people have done and the very challenging circumstances that many are working under."

There was also a recurrent theme of valuing emotions and feelings, and viewing them as sources of knowledge. For example, one participant explained that traditional approaches to MEL did not make sense to them because of its rigidity and narrow focus, especially because it did not leave space for considering people's feelings. In addition to valuing emotions within data collection and reporting, another participant also raised the importance of valuing emotions throughout the entirety of the MEL process:

> "We're all working really hard with a lot of emotionally charged, stressful and upsetting topics. Many people in our movement have a very personal relationship with the issues we're working on. Part of MEL is seeing the human side. When did we have to stop, or pause to prioritise something else or the human needs of someone?"

These considerations of emotions and human needs draw upon the emphasis that care ethics places on valuing and considering emotions, while also reflecting an underlying commitment to caring about one another.

5.1.3 Liberal Feminism

To form a more thorough understanding of the theoretical roots of WILPF's feminist MEL, it is also useful to analyse which feminist theories their interpretations deviate from. In this case, I argue that they are not significantly shaped by liberal feminist theories, given that most

participants' conceptions of feminist MEL explicitly contradict liberal feminist principles and contributions.

A gender approach to MEL contains many traces of liberal feminism, primarily as a result of their shared focus on making incremental changes within pre-existing power structures. For example, a gender approach to MEL often emphasises the collection of gender-disaggregated data, the integration of gender perspectives into certain evaluation processes, and the overall tendency towards promoting gender mainstreaming. This reflects the legacy of liberal feminist theories in which gender equality is pursued through legal and social reforms, rather than the transformation of legal and social structures. WILPF explicitly refers to their MEL as having a feminist approach, rather than a gender approach, which is the first indication that they are already straying from liberal feminist theories in their conceptualisation of MEL. Furthermore, as detailed in the analysis of the influences of black and intersectional feminism on WILPF's feminist MEL, their descriptions consistently emphasise their goal of challenging current power structures and systems, as well as pursuing structural transformation. This refusal to accept and act solely within the constraints of current systems therefore indicates a clear deviation from liberal feminist influence.

5.2 Postcolonial Theories

The participants also frequently voiced considerations and ideas that drew upon postcolonial theory, including the explicit embrace of decolonial approaches, the consideration of power imbalances (particularly within donor relationships and reporting procedures), and the commitment to recognising heterogeneity.

5.2.1 Decolonial Approaches

On several occasions throughout the interviews, participants explicitly recognised the importance of acknowledging and dismantling colonial legacies, expressing that a feminist MEL should be decolonial. One participant began their description of a feminist MEL by positing that "it's all

about decolonising MEL." This is also clearly, and on multiple occasions, stated within the WILPF Principles document:

> "Traditional MEL approaches have historically been top-down and extractive, reinforcing the status quo and showcasing success in terms of outputs and activities being carried out. There is a power dynamic at play, with those in power determining what "counts" as evidence and what information is valuable…These traditional approaches can also be "colonial" and can reproduce power relations between the "Global North" and the "Global South", in terms of who funds, who defines the agenda and projects, and who reports to whom and how."

One participant explained that feminist MEL is decolonial in terms of the language that it uses "that is much closer to the spirit of the people that you're working with." They explained that it is more accessible and approachable, to ensure that everyone can work with it. Additionally, this participant explained that traditional MEL has been used punitively, and that this also contributes to a power imbalance. This sentiment was echoed by a MEL specialist from Kvinna till Kvinna, who argued that aid in itself is a colonial construction, and that MEL derives from a colonial process of control. Given that feminist MEL, and feminism in itself, is built on trust, this relationship of control is incompatible and will lead to power imbalances between partners. Another participant from WILPF who explicitly discussed the importance of feminist MEL having a decolonial perspective elaborated to say that this entails giving a voice to people who historically, or in certain contexts, do not have one.

5.2.2 Power Imbalances

Postcolonial theories share a recognition of historical and global power dynamics that have resulted from imperialism and colonialism, and in the field of international development and aid these legacies continue on in the contemporary distribution of resources and decision-making power.

Throughout the interviews, participants frequently expressed an awareness of these power imbalances and a desire to dismantle them. For example, in discussing the donor relationships

that they have to navigate, one participant expressed that it is a top-down process that establishes a power imbalance, because donors are asking for information that they want to hear, rather than asking the sections and implementers what they deem to be important to document or show as results. The interviews continued: "The classic development aid problem is that the people with the money decide the agenda and control the answers already before they ask the questions." Indeed, it became evident that participants often deemed the current donor questions and templates to not be attuned to the realities and lived experiences of project implementers, which led to the feeling that "we didn't really get to say how awesome our work is" and that "they were asking the wrong questions."

Additionally, another participant argued that a feminist approach to MEL is necessary because it entails questioning who is in the room to plan and make decisions, and therefore requires both an awareness and active challenging of current power structures. The most commonly described barrier to successfully implementing a feminist MEL was indeed donors and their constraints, which led most participants to raise the issue of current funding structures and the ways in which they systematically disadvantage sections and partners in the global South. Some participants described how they navigate this system, by for example trying to translate the needs and wants of sections into so-called "donor language." As one interview explained: "we try to be the translators so that the partners can still do what they want to do, and the donors still hear what they want to hear."

5.2.3 Recognising Heterogeneity

Another influence from postcolonial theory that was evident in the interviews was a refusal to contribute to the 'othering' of people in the Global South. This predominantly expressed itself as a collective commitment to recognizing context specificity, and refusing to generalise or represent partners, colleagues, or even the organisation itself as homogeneous groups. For example, one participant explained that even though the international offices share a core set of values and goals that they want their movement to accomplish, there is also a lot of variation across local contexts in terms of what people prioritise. As a result, they expressed that it is

"critical" to take a context-specific approach when planning various MEL activities across countries. Another participant echoed this sentiment, as they raised the point that it is important to recognize that there are many different modes of evaluation in a movement that is so diverse. This commitment to context-specificity is also expressed in the WILPF Principles document: "We are going to have a clear set of common ground understanding of what feminist MEL means for us, and even though it might mean different things according to different contexts."

Another way in which postcolonial influences regarding 'othering' appeared in participants' contributions was through the commitment to allow implementers to represent themselves and make their own decisions. Rather than extracting information from partners, formulating it into a report and sending it to donors, and thus having full control over the representation of these partners and their work, many participants indicated that they wanted participants to represent themselves. One explained that "at WILPF we are very conscious of our role and where we stand…We act more as a critical friend." WILPF's role was described as a facilitator who asks questions and supports the process of making reports clearer and simpler, while partners are responsible for the writing, and have the final say in what goes into their reports.

However, there are further contributions and ideas within postcolonial theory that were not represented within the data. One potential area of interest could be the theorising of refusal, especially as it relates to this realm of participation, collaboration, and representation within feminist MEL practices (Simpson, 2007). McGranahan (2016, p. 319, 320, 323) explains that refusal is an "ethnographic concept and practice," and that "To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another," but it can also mark "the point of a limit having been reached: we refuse to continue on this way." Feminist MEL could grapple with this theory, by considering for example the value of participants refusing to engage in evaluation, or practitioners refusing to accept funding or adhere to current donor norms and procedures.

5.3 Development Theories

Development theorists have long engaged in discussions about the ambiguous and contentious concepts of empowerment and participation, two terms which participants used exceedingly throughout their interviews. In this section, I will analyse their use of these concepts to understand where they are situated within the realm of development theory.

5.3.1 Empowerment

WILPF's feminist MEL consultant, and author of the WILPF Principles document, discussed the challenges of including the concept of empowerment within the document due to the ambiguity of the term, and due to many people's objection that it implies a problematic power dynamic. They explained that they wanted to avoid connotations of the power dynamic in which "I am empowering you to do something" and instead intended for the concept to refer to the transformation of power relations, in which a MEL process that might be imposing and extractive instead becomes self-owned and useful: "You can use MEL to maintain power structures and impose and extract data, or you can try to challenge that by doing it in a more bottom-up manner and by valuing everyone's opinions and thoughts." One pattern within the interviews was the tendency to use the concept of empowerment as a counter to extractive practices. This is seen in the WILPF Principles document, "we aim for MEL to be an empowering process and not an extractive one," as well as in interviews. For example, one participant explained that a feminist MEL should make use of non-extractive approaches in its methodology: "How is this something that is bringing us closer together? Not just taking, but empowering all of us."

This power-sensitive interpretation of empowerment also became apparent in other interviews when participants indicated *who* a feminist MEL could empower. Several participants discussed empowerment in terms of project implementers, in the sense that a feminist MEL could allow them greater access to useful and valuable information and thus empower them to change their projects for the better, and in the sense that it is a collective process that they are, as an organisation, learning together. Another participant discussion of empowerment revealed a

different perspective, however, in which they focused on not solely empowering the partners or communities they are working with, but also redistributing and shifting power away from the few decision makers. This indicates an awareness of the current global funding structures that shape current MEL practices, and the need for these to be transformed to meaningfully empower MEL practitioners and project implementers.

These uses of the concept of "empowerment" therefore lean more towards the liberating, rather than the liberal, view of empowerment. The participants predominantly discussed the term within the context of challenging power relations, both in relation to improving "the ability of individuals and groups to think and act in their own interests" by increasing their access to valuable information and the transformation of formal and informal funding structures and institutions (Pettit, 2012, p. 2). This focus on power dynamics therefore does not align with the liberal view of empowerment, which instead "[takes] power out of the equation" (Sardenberg, 2008, p. 19).

5.3.2 Participation

To better understand the participants' interpretation of the concept of participation, it is insightful to consider which processes they indicated should become more participatory, as well as their descriptions of the nature of this participation.

Much emphasis was placed on the inclusion of project implementers and the participants of their projects throughout MEL procedures. Some specific practices that were raised as needing to be participatory include the tools, questions, and processes within projects, as well as the agreement on evaluation conclusions and the use of evidence. Participatory tools and methods in data collection were also mentioned, as well as ensuring that partnering organisations can make their own budgets to ensure that they speak to the work that they are doing. In addition to these tools and processes, multiple participants also emphasised the importance of having stakeholders involved from the absolute beginning of project creation: "when you first have an idea, you start the feminist MEL." This would entail that stakeholders are actively participating within the

development and design of projects. Additionally, several participants mentioned participation in terms of ownership and decision-making power. This encompassed the idea that people with knowledge of the local context, and those who implement the projects, should be the primary participants with decision-making power. In that sense, the concept of participation was used to refer to the taking and sharing of power, so that the project implementers and stakeholders "take the lead in owning the process."

What about the nature of participation? Development theorists have complicated the notion of participation by arguing that simply including stakeholders does not ensure meaningful participation, given that power dynamics can constrain and limit the nature of this inclusion (Cooke & Kothari, 2003; Hickey & Mohan, 2013; Pettit, 2012). Often, this constraint refers to in-group power dynamics and norms, but one participant brought up another consideration that they regularly had to navigate in their attempts to encourage participation. They discussed the security aspect of their local context, in which they had to limit the sensitive information that they could share with stakeholders to ensure their safety. This revealed an awareness of the complications and nuance that is inherent within participation. In addition to the security aspect, participants also shared remarks that drew upon this consideration of in-group power dynamics. For example, another participant explained that it is important to acknowledge that one group of people does not entail solely one perspective, and that it is therefore important to create safe spaces where everyone feels accommodated and like their contributions are useful, important, and considered. In other words, their work as a project manager entailed not only inviting stakeholders to participate, but also creating an environment that would allow for meaningful participation as well.

However, with the exception of these two comments, much of the data surrounding participation did not acknowledge the debate within development theory regarding participation and participatory development. For example, those theorists who attempt to complicate and problematise the concept of participation often focus on its "tendency for certain agents of participatory development to treat participation as a technical method of project work rather than

as a political methodology of empowerment" and "obsession with the 'local' as opposed to wider structures of injustice and oppression" (Hickey & Mohan, 2013, p. 11). Given the contentious nature of this concept within development theory, and consequently the plethora of academic writing about which pitfalls to avoid and how to proceed as best as possible, there is much within the academic realm for feminist MEL to draw from and invoke.

5.4 Do the Theories Conflict?

This analysis makes it evident that the translation of theory into practice is not necessarily direct and straightforward. Instead, this instance of an innovative and progressive development practice has drawn upon and blended a variety of theories, drawing influences from select areas of their contributions to development studies. This raises the question of whether these theories can be applied together coherently, or whether they conflict with one another.

With the preceding findings in mind, I contend that the representations of feminist MEL that the participants provided were largely influenced by theories that are generally compatible with one another, and that the specific ideas that were borrowed from these theories also aligned or reinforced one another. Additionally, there were no significant points of tension or contradictions which emerged throughout the interviews. This makes sense, given that the theories in question have influenced each other and built upon each other's contributions within the academic world, so their combined influences on development practice are a logical consequence of their theoretical interplays. This became especially evident at certain points of this thesis writing process, particularly when coding interview data and organising coded data for writing. For example, participants' remarks about the value of care and collaboration could be interpreted as drawing from both care ethics and black feminism, since they share a consideration of relationship building and collective care. Additionally, both postcolonial and black feminist theorists have contributed astute power analyses and considerations to the field of development studies and therefore share a significant amount of overlap.

The previous discussion in this chapter regarding liberal feminism also demonstrates that participants did not collectively draw influence from certain theories and perspectives that are broadly present within development practice (like liberal feminism). This absence of potentially conflict theories therefore further emphasises the theoretical coherence within WILPF's representations of feminist MEL. Ultimately, the selection of theories, and the ways in which their influences showed up in the participants' discussions of feminist MEL, were coherent with one another and did not conflict.

5.5 Areas for Growth and Learning

One of the most recurring phrases throughout the participant interviews was that feminist MEL is about learning. In this spirit, this chapter has focused not only on the ways in which WILPF staff's representations of feminist MEL draw from feminist, postcolonial, and development theories, but also the ways in which they do not. In identifying and explaining how various contributions from these theories did not show up within the data, this chapter aimed to indicate future areas where feminist MEL could learn and grow with help from the academic realm. In doing so, this chapter discussed the relevance and applicability of data feminism, epistemic resistance, the politics of refusal, and the nuances of participation. It is important to note that I am not claiming that the participants involved were not aware of these contributions already, but rather that since they did not show up in my data, they serve as a productive starting point for a discussion about how feminist MEL can continue to grow by virtue of engaging with current hot topics and debates from the theoretical world.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to connect the realms of theory and practice in the context of feminist approaches to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning, by mapping the presence of various theoretical contributions and ideas within practitioners' representations of feminist MEL and identifying untapped and emerging contributions from academia that could contribute to the continual development of feminist MEL. By highlighting the theoretical roots of the current discourse regarding the practice of feminist MEL, this study aimed to contribute an academic

perspective to a conversation that is otherwise predominantly carried by practitioners. Additionally, in a context where progressive ideas and tools are consistently co-opted and enveloped by the systems they wish to change, this research emphasises that it is urgent as ever to refer back to critical and visionary theoretical roots to ensure that their translation into practice does not entail that they are 'rendered technical' and depoliticised.

The findings of this research indicate that key concepts and contributions from feminist, postcolonial, and development theories were present and influential within the WILPF staff's representations of feminist MEL. This ranged from discourse about structural change and explicit decolonial commitments, to emphasising the value of lived experiences, and the recognition of multiple, subjective truths. Many reoccurring themes within the data, such as the commitment to care or the awareness of historical and structural inequalities, also drew upon multiple theories at once and consequently demonstrated their compatibility. The feminist, postcolonial, and development theories that have been present and influential within WILPF staff's conceptualisation of feminist MEL all share a critical and power-sensitive lens, as well as a commitment to structural change and justice. Additionally, this research highlighted various theoretical areas that were not present within the data, such as data feminism, epistemic resistance, the politics of refusal, and the nuances of participation. These bodies of theory represent, more broadly, the academic realms that have not yet decisively made their way into feminist MEL practice and consequently constitute potential new areas for growth and learning. Academia is constantly producing new insights and ideas about development studies and its practice, which we can look to for insights into how to continually improve and push development practice to be more just and ethical.

A broader reflection of this research points to the intimate and symbiotic relationship between theory and practice that extends beyond the boundaries of feminist MEL, and even beyond the field of development itself. Development finds itself in the company of disciplines like medicine and law which constitute both a practice and a study. In other words, they are fields in which we are often studying ourselves and the meaning of what we do. This unique, and sometimes

confusing, quality therefore leads to a very meaningful and intimate connection between practice, policy, and theory. Donors, practitioners, and academics all belong to the field of development, and their work cannot be untied or isolated from one another. In fact, it is not unusual for some actors to have inhabited two or more of these roles throughout their careers. Many development practitioners hold a degree in development studies or international development and have therefore also likely found themselves immersed in the world of development studies. This research has aimed to show that this interconnectedness is a valuable tool for improving the work of development practitioners, and this case study's identification of theoretical influences within one specific organisation's interpretation of feminist MEL should be viewed as a microcosm of the larger dynamics between abstract, theoretical concepts within development and their real-world applications. The feedback loop between theory and practice, when nurtured and maintained, can allow us to embark on a continuous process of learning and adaptation where we allow practical experiences to inform and guide us as we build theory, and to then let these theoretical insights refine and interrogate our practice.

WILPF's vision of a feminist MEL constitutes a frontier within development practice which is situated within the legacy of critical and progressive theories that have historically pushed the field of development towards justice. However, just like feminist MEL itself, WILPF's implementation is still in its early stages. To continue to understand the patterns of co-optation and depoliticisation within the field of development practice, as a result of 'rendering technical,' future research could track organisations, like WILPF, as they implement and develop feminist MEL practices, to better understand how progressive ideas and tools can sustain their progressive edge. Which challenges and limitations do organisations face in resisting the urge, or the pressure, to 'render technical'? What practices or structures can be implemented to facilitate dialogue between theory and practice, and to what extent can this prevent the depoliticisation of critical theoretical contributions when implemented in the field? It is my hope that future research will continue to embrace the commitment to developing these new and exciting frontiers within development practice, and to ensure that the tools we use reflect and facilitate our pursuit towards justice.

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Appendix A: Example Interview Guide

Theme	Example Questions
General Introduction	1. Could you please describe your role and work at WILPF? 2. What type of projects are you working on right now? 3. How have you encountered MEL in your work?
Perception of Traditional MEL	1. Could you describe your experience working with traditional MEL practices? 2. How would you evaluate traditional MEL practices? Do you have any specific praise or criticism about them?
Perception of Feminist MEL	1. From your perspective, what is feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)? a. How does it differ from traditional MEL approaches in the context of international development? 2. Which types of tools and practices do you think a feminist MEL should make use of? What does it look like in practice?
Experience with Feminist MEL	1. Have you encountered feminist MEL during your time at WILPF? a. In which ways? 2. What kind of experience do you have with applying feminist MEL in practice?

	3. Could you describe a specific project or initiative where you've applied a feminist MEL?
	    a. How did you do so?
	    b. Which specific tools and techniques did you use?

Looking Forward	1. What do you see as the long-term implications of integrating feminist MEL within WILPF's work? 2. How do you envision the continued integration of feminist MEL within your section's work, and what potential challenges or opportunities do you foresee?