# 7

# Evaluation and Vulnerable Groups
## Forgotten Spaces
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**R**esearch on violently divided societies (VDS) has largely focused on the extent to which initiatives have promoted *peace* or have addressed the divisions that caused, or resulted from, violent conflicts (see Bush and Duggan, Chapter 1). Such research, however, has focused on *militarised* forms of violence. Much less attention has been paid to other forms of violence that are rampant in *normal* (i.e., non-militarised) societies, such as social violence. This affects a wide range of populations: sex workers, child labourers, migrant workers, pavement dwellers, children of sex workers, street children, people suffering from HIV, leprosy, etc., and backward castes and tribes. The types of violence inflicted on these groups are more insidious than what is found in overt war zones: economic violence, social violence, discrimination, injustice in policing and legal systems, and so on (Schepper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004).

However, while these forms of violence may be less visible to the mainstream, they are both conspicuous and pervasive forces for large parts of society. In this sense, the affected groups may be categorised as being *violently divided*—not by militarised violence, but by social and structural violence. These groups face violence in their day-to-day lives and are victims of explicit and implicit abuse. By and large, however, these groups have not been recognised as a critical subset of research in either evaluation research or in the study of VDS. By expanding the scope of our understanding of what constitutes a VDS, we are challenging evaluation research to enter into an important, but ignored, area of inquiry. The point of analytical access employed in the current chapter is the concept of vulnerability, as it applies to *vulnerable populations*.

Populations who experience systemic violence within *nonmilitarised* societies are *vulnerable*—in the sense that they lack the resources (broadly defined) to avoid or alleviate the direct or indirect effects of predatory behaviour. The response of local, governmental and inter-governmental actors is typically a broad range of programmes and initiatives designed and implemented to reduce or manage such vulnerabilities. The key challenge for evaluation research

in these settings is the same as that in militarised conflict zones: to develop and apply the appropriate methods and tools to identify and assess the relationship between intervention and outcomes.

If an initiative decreases vulnerability, then one would expect to see a reduction in the nature and magnitude of violence experienced by these people.

Although the interventions (in health, education, livelihood, habitat, food security, life skills and human rights) clearly focus on inequities, the evaluation of such programmes tends to be narrowly limited to the determination of whether project objectives were achieved, whether the intervention was cost effective, and whether outputs were delivered and outcomes achieved. Although a context-sensitive evaluation may describe how interventions reshape to adapt to prevailing conditions, it tends not to *assess the conditions in which the intervention is itself implemented*. For example, programmes for children in Sonagachi (a large brothel area in Kolkata, east India) provide early childhood education and some mobilization activities, but have difficulty addressing the actual sources of vulnerability.[1] That is, they may observe the impact of the prevailing conditions of the project, but not the impact of the project on prevailing conditions causing the vulnerability. This chapter explores this problem by drawing on a range of cases in South Asia. It concludes that the next step for evaluation research is to develop the means to systematically explore both the origins and logistics of programmes as the starting point to understand not only the efficiency and effectiveness of the project, but how it intends to reduce vulnerability.

I should make it clear that the orientation of this chapter may differ somewhat from that of the others in this book. Rather than focusing on the evaluation of research, this chapter draws on my experience as an evaluator *for* vulnerable populations in VDS as a means of pointing to essential issues for researchers of evaluation. In effect, the evaluations which constitute the central points of reference in the chapter represent a form of research that might be called evaluative research, that is, an approach to applied research which employs evaluation methodologies to explore social problems.

## Understanding Vulnerability and Empowerment

Vulnerabilities are the consequence of deep-rooted inequities that divide societies. They may be caused or exacerbated by both extrinsic and intrinsic forces. Numerous development interventions attempt to alleviate these vulnerabilities. This chapter will argue that that mainstream development approaches focus on the experience of, rather than sources of, vulnerability. Or, put another way, they focus on the symptoms (vulnerability) rather than the causes (inequity).[2] Thus, for example, interventions may entail: the provision of goods or services to vulnerable groups (e.g., drugs, health care); increasing opportunities to access and utilise them (mobile clinics, mobile libraries, improved transportation and communication links); and increasing the capabilities of the marginalised to benefit from them (e.g., education and training).

Typically, the evaluation of such programmes would focus (respectively) on: whether or not goods and services were provided; whether or not opportunities were increased or expanded; and whether or not capabilities were developed. But the deeper societal and *ethical* question remains unasked: How did the initiative affect the deep-rooted inequities, and was there an impact on a group's experience of violence? If this tends not to be a feature in evaluation practice, then it needs to be placed centrally on the agenda of evaluation research, otherwise initiatives will only ever be focusing on the symptoms of vulnerability, never the causes.

Programmes working with vulnerable populations are overwhelmingly associated with *rights-based approaches*. This has become the dominant paradigm shaping the rationale, mechanics and assessment of initiatives (Appleyard, 2002). *Vulnerability* is defined in many ways depending on the context in which it is used. Underlying this particular notion of vulnerability is that people have rights, but that certain conditions (whether internal or external to themselves) prevent them from enjoying these rights. Rights-based programmes seek to create the capacities and conditions which enable individuals and groups to exercise their rights to education, economic security, health, housing, sustainable development, personal security and so on. *Rights*, in this sense, are not merely about legal entitlement. The rights discourse is infused with a moral, normative undertone: Each and every person has the right to freedom, choice and the fulfilment of their potential. Further, it becomes the moral responsibility of those who enjoy these rights to support efforts to allow them to be exercised by those who do not enjoy them.

Usually funders and donors support discrete projects, focusing on project-specific activities, outputs and indicators of success (OECD DAC, 2006). However, the effects of these projects can extend beyond targeted groups. They also exercise an impact more broadly on the environment within which they are set—including other projects or programmes that are going on simultaneously. It is difficult to unravel the respective and distinct impacts of each project despite considerable attention paid to this problem (Thomas, 2010). This is made more difficult by the fluidity, complexity and (often) volatility of the violently divided environments within which such initiatives are located.

This chapter argues that unless we expand our analysis to explore these bigger societal questions, we are left fumbling in a gray zone because we are unable to critically and systematically examine (a) the broader impact of an intervention on the structures of inequality, and more problematically, (b) the possibility that such interventions may *reinforce or exacerbate* the inequalities and injustice that underpin vulnerability. In VDS, evaluation must pay particular attention not only to *vulnerabilities* deriving from contextual conditions of injustice and inequity, but also to vulnerabilities that may be generated by the *process and outcomes* of an intervention—including the evaluation of that intervention. To be blunt, we need to be attentive to the possibility that initiatives to alleviate vulnerability may *increase* or *exacerbate* vulnerability. Evaluation research will then be able to provide further insight on how evaluation emphasis (or not) on vulnerabilities and inequities influences power differentials and violence.

Such *valuing* of realities should force evaluators to ask uncomfortable questions. What if the credit line given to sex workers is used by the brothel owner to perpetuate indebtedness? What if the support to women migrant workers results in their husbands idling, with less motivation for being employed? What if the special subsidies for HIV positive self-help groups necessitating women's disclosure leads to social ostracism? What if the income-generation project for children of sex workers provides a meagre return for a temporary period and only delays their entry into sex work? It is possible that a targeted intervention empowering one group may unwittingly reinforce discriminatory practices—sponsorship of one child in a family may lead to discrimination of others. If a boy child is sponsored, it may lead to discrimination towards girls. These are hard ethical and analytical questions derived from projects in South Asia. They were in fact, not asked and in many cases this had negative effects on the projects. When they are not asked, evaluation risks becoming a technocratic exercise unable to identify the inevitable influences (positive or negative) of interventions on the socio-political power systems within which initiatives are located—within the home, within the neighbourhood, within and between communities and classes, and so on. Evaluation research, by focusing on these complex interplay of inequities and vulnerabilities, would contribute to a more nuanced and equitable understanding of impact in VDS.

This was the point of departure in the research undertaken by CARE[3] (2001) on a benefit–harm analysis. It followed a rights-based approach and explored whether the initiative produced unintended harm while trying to do good. Fundamentally, it asked two questions: How can we take responsibility for the human rights impact of our work and what can we do to ensure that others do too? The second question seeks to/attempts to ensure that all actors involved directly or indirectly in the initiative respect and protect the rights of those affected by the initiative. In the case of VDS, we must pay particular attention to the power differentials between stakeholders. Most development workers know that projects and the introduction of resources, especially where there is conflict, can have divergent results. There may be a further marginalisation of vulnerable people and intensified conflict or an opportunity for equity and social justice and peace promotion (CARE, 2001, p. 5). Though we believe that all people share the same rights and are responsible for their own development, the self-aggrandising behaviour of some power groups in VDS may subordinate and exploit the vulnerabilities of others.

Rights-based approaches to programming recognise that vulnerabilities are multiple—social, cultural and economic—and that they must be addressed simultaneously. We know from experience that improving well-being in one sector is not enough to effect full-scale societal change. In some cases, programmes have been designed in segments, with funding only available for one sector or activity. Evaluations of such projects are confined to assessing results in a rather narrow fashion. Integrated programmes are necessarily complex not only in implementation

but also in networking and governance since there are multiple actors and hierarchical layers for management and coordination. At micro, meso and macro levels, it is typically difficult to attribute particular results to particular interventions (Stame, 2004). In either of these approaches, single project or integrated, when working with highly vulnerable populations, the role of evaluation must be to ascertain the extent to which vulnerabilities have been redressed, and *more importantly*, how they have affected the sources of inequity that underlie and sustain them. This requires greater sensitivity from the evaluator, and a deeper understanding of the context in which the programme is taking place. This goes *beyond* the terms of reference (ToR) of the evaluation and suggests the need for systematic ethical questioning, at the least, by the evaluator. In such contexts, the qualities of the evaluator must include a detailed, politically informed, anthropological understanding of the social, cultural, economic and political structures and processes within the project environment—in addition to the usual set of technical evaluation skills expected of a professional evaluator.
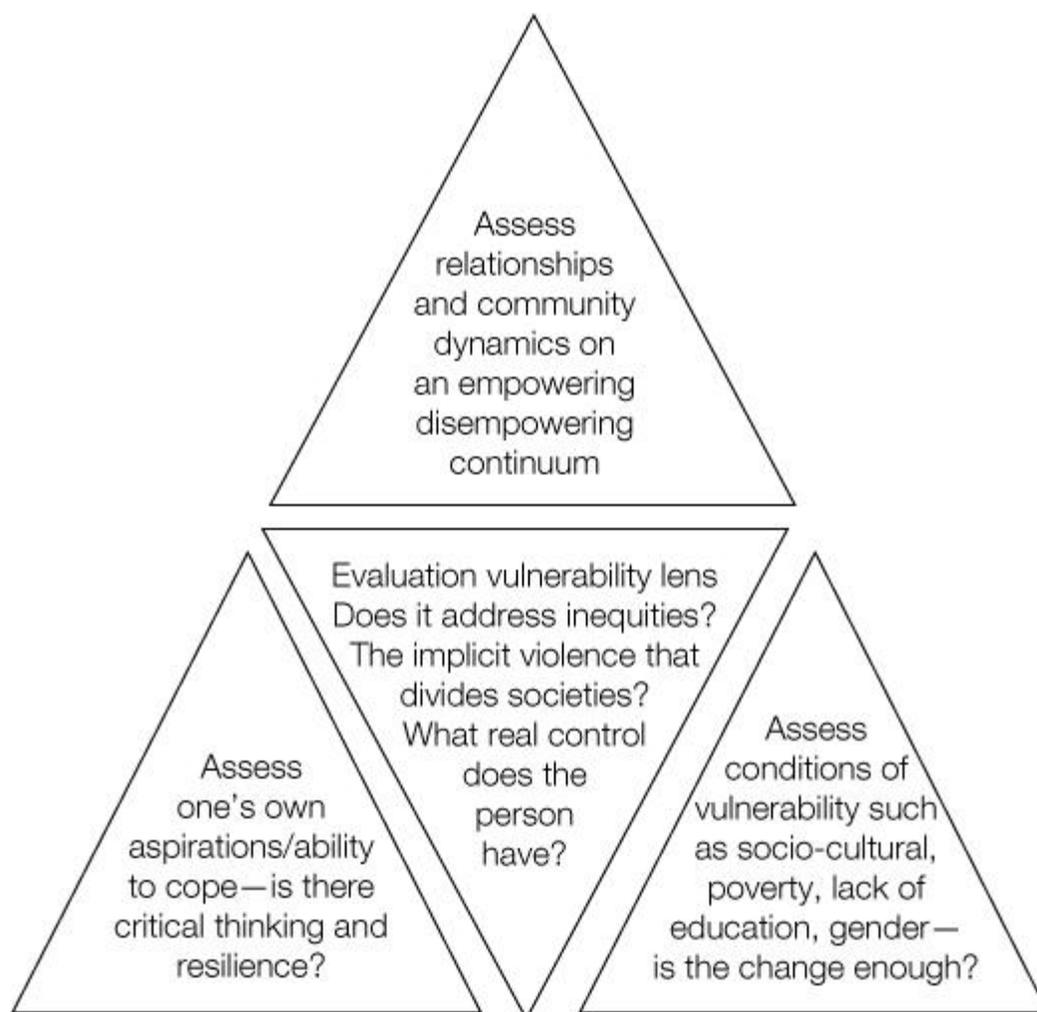
Using a vulnerability lens in evaluation is important for analysing a single or integrated project's impact because it focuses attention on the question of whether or not an initiative concretely helped people live with dignity. This also raises an uncomfortable possibility: that a project might achieve its immediate objectives (such as rights training, education targets), but increase (perhaps in very subtle ways) vulnerabilities. For example, a project may increase migrant workers' awareness of their rights, but if this leads to the assertion of those rights by the workers, which, in turn, leads to a violent and repressive crack down by those authorities who benefit from the maintenance of a fundamentally unjust status quo (through cheap labour, non-regulation of the workplace and so on), then the outcome of the project must be considered ambivalent at best, if not unambiguously negative. This possibility (indeed likelihood) must drive both programming and the evaluation research agenda when working with vulnerable populations.

Rights-based programming is also about *self-empowerment*, or the increased capacity to cope with vulnerability, and to exercise greater control over one's own life. Yet, as illustrated by the migrant worker rights example above, programmes do not take place in a vacuum. Efforts to address the conditions of vulnerability enter into the contentious and contested arena where the empowerment of the vulnerable turns the tables on the powerful. In effect, empowerment challenges existing power relations and begins to confront the vulnerability of the powerful and increases the vulnerability of the powerful's capacity to control—who often have vested interests to resist, subvert or violently repress such efforts. Evaluating such programmes becomes quite complex. For example, an escalation of violence against migrant workers may be evaluated as an indication of the *need for* the programme, as opposed to the direct *consequence of* the programme itself. If the violence leads to the murder of the leaders of the migrant worker movement, the cessation of support for the project may be couched in terms of *inhospitable conditions*, rather than as a direct result of the project. This does not imply that such projects should not be supported—on the contrary. But it does mean that the ways in which such vulnerabilities are addressed

need to be rooted in a clear-headed understanding of sociopolitical and economic power relationships.

Another dimension to rights-based programming refers to the *relational* (see Figure 7.1) empowering–disempowering continuum along which relationships interact and influence each other. This refers to the interactions between different stakeholders that affect the empowered relationships between individuals. For example, within the same community, one group of children may be more vulnerable, exploited, stigmatised and ignored than another group of children. It is also possible that the different sections in the community may *pull and push* in different directions according to group-specific interests. In an examination of a sheltered home community in the Daulatia brothel in Bangladesh, which sought to create an empowering and protective environment for daughters of sex workers, access to the girls was restricted to the mothers to protect them from the larger sex worker community. But, at the same time, there was an exploitative *family* in the brothel pushing her into sex work. The girls were being coerced to join the sex trade through *emotional blackmail* mentioning that the mother was too old and not *pretty* enough to earn money through paid sex or that, being a *good* daughter, she was expected to follow the mother's (or sometimes the grandmother's!) footsteps. Underpinning this story was the grinding poverty, devaluation of girls and women and socio-political deprivation within which sex work has always been located (Zaveri, 2008).

**Figure 7.1**
**Questions That Examine the Issues of Vulnerability and Power**

Assess
relationships
and community
dynamics on
an empowering
disempowering
continuum

Evaluation vulnerability lens
Does it address inequities?
The implicit violence that
divides societies?
What real control
does the
person
have?

Assess
one's own
aspirations/ability
to cope—is there
critical thinking and
resilience?

Assess
conditions of
vulnerability such
as socio-cultural,
poverty, lack of
education, gender—
is the change enough?

*Source:* Author.

The relational or social contexts in which the vulnerable live are a window to understand changes in power differentials. The poverty of South Asia coexists with the context of a stronger social fabric than might be expected. A girl's or woman's own empowerment affects social relationships with others around her differentially, according to gender, age, caste and other factors. It is important for evaluators to note that even programmes having goals for empowerment do not always translate into greater control and decision-making power. Batliwala (2010, p. 3) mentions how interventions that advance women's rights disturb the status quo and can lead to backlashes, mild to severe, which can include violence against or exploitation of women who have acquired new economic independence. If evaluation overlooks these differential relational impacts (which presumably constitute the vector/medium for [dis]empowerment), then analysis will not just be incomplete, it risks being skewed.

Evaluation research must focus on some probing questions that bear directly on issues of vulnerability and power (see Figure 7.1): Are we asking the right evaluation questions? How does the evaluation itself influence those who are being evaluated? And most important, when and how does evaluation increase the vulnerability of

already marginalised groups? Drawing on examples from South Asia, the remainder of this chapter explores these questions.

## Using the Vulnerability Lens in Evaluations

One of the most vulnerable groups in a diverse range of societies is the children of sex workers (Poudel and Carryer, 2000). As children, they are dependent. As the children of sex workers, they live in poverty, face gender violence (especially if she is a girl child), exploitation and instability. A case study of children in the Daulatia brothel in Bangladesh examined how education and a safe home might help children, especially girls, in such circumstances (Zaveri, 2008). The structure of the project was straightforward: A child-centred international NGO (INGO) worked with a local NGO and a sex worker to collectively provide rights-based programming for children of sex workers. Outside the brothel area, a primary school was set up to enable children to move from the world of brothels into the world of education, and the subsequent opportunities that may arise.

The school was established because the children of sex workers were stigmatised and ostracised, and therefore unable to gain entry into *normal* schools. The obstacles to educating children in Bangladesh are similar to those in other parts of South Asia. Although children usually drop out of school for a combination of reasons, one in particular is the poor quality of education available to this group. In this case, the INGO invested resources in curriculum development, teacher training and the creation of a child-friendly active learning atmosphere. The school was located in a community outside the brothel area. Although there was initial resistance by members of the community to sending their own children to a school that also accepted the children of sex workers, the high quality of education served as an incentive for them to register their children, and gradually the student population became more mixed. Through contact over time, the parents of community children and sex worker children learned to accept each other and even jointly attended parent–teacher meetings.

In addition to schooling, female children of sex workers were offered a sheltered home near to the school. This was to ensure that the female child not only received an education, but was protected from possible predation in the brothel environment. The rights-based approach promoted recreation rights. Children learned to dance, sing and draw, all of which provided a creative outlet to their artistic talents. As a means of ensuring that the child and mother were able to enjoy their right to belong to a family, mothers visited on occasion and the girls sometimes visited the brothel.

The INGO in this case had a history of programming in child rights and empowerment. Their national programme on life skills sought to empower children through their clubs and forums. For example, the INGO offered 'LIFE' or the Life Skills Intervention for Empowerment programme to children which includes peer leadership training and life skills sessions with peers within their own communities as well. The Shishu Parishads (child councils) received training on child rights and life skills. Together, these initiatives were meant to respond to problems of child trafficking and early marriage by establishing and supporting a network to support friends who did not want to return to the brothel.

An evaluation of the programme indicated that there were many positive changes in the lives of participants, including: an improved ability to save money; greater determination to continue with education and vocational training; increased rejection of trafficking; and an overall increase in self-esteem. Evaluation of the school programme indicated a high quality of education (a proxy indicator being community children attending school); good school performance and completion of primary education by the children of sex workers. The programme had been started in consultation with the sex workers collective and so there was a sense of ownership for a sustainable project. By these indicators, the project was cast as a success. But a broadening of the evaluative optic suggests a more mixed result.

The assessment becomes less clear-cut when our questions move from the technical to the political. Research on evaluation in this sector needs to focus more explicitly on the need for evaluations to probe whether or not vulnerabilities and inequities have been addressed. In the example above, where sex workers were marginalised and their children born and raised in a culture of deprivation and exploitation, we need to ask the right questions. Did the children's vulnerability actually decrease? Was there an increased ability to cope? Were inequities addressed and, if so, was the violence that pushed women towards sex work and exploitation diminished?

The children were mainstreamed into secondary school. However, after completion of Std. V, access to secondary school, though available, was less attractive for a variety of reasons: school fees were required, teachers were not especially child-friendly and additional coaching was not available. Consequently, although 100 per cent of the students enrolled into Std VI, almost all the children from the brothel dropped out (90 per cent) within the first year.[4] This particular experience suggests that the completion of primary education was not enough to ensure continuation along this path or to permanently address the long-term vulnerability of these particular children.

There were further ambivalent pressures on the children. For example, on the one hand, contact between the child and the mother and family is important for the nurturing of emotional and biological ties. In this case, however, this sometimes created opportunities for the family to pressure the child into the sex trade. Many mothers and grandmothers attempted to lure the children into sex work with petty gifts and emotional blackmail—'I am old and cannot work and eat, whereas you are able to do so in the shelter.' Or, 'You need to support me, I am too old/tired/sick to work.' Sometimes, the child was simply taken away by family, resulting in absence from, and failure in, school. Particularly disturbing, the value of the girls as an exploitable sexual commodity had actually increased significantly as a result of their reaching puberty (unrelated to the programme), and the range of skills they learned in the shelter (related to the programme), such as singing and dancing. This fact was not lost on the predatory nexus of ageing mothers, brothel keepers, pimps and paramours. Girls were coerced and emotionally blackmailed; some were given growth hormones; and most experienced the push and pull factors towards sex work as early as age 12. The inequities and vulnerabilities of the children that had always existed were in fact exacerbated through the programme.

Such experiences are antithetical to the intentions behind their participation in the child rights movement: to heighten their risk perception; to increase capacity for further studies; and to kindle their aspirations for a better life. Yet, when the children were interviewed, their sense of helplessness was acute. Nonetheless, evaluations of the various components of the project—

education, shelter, child empowerment and community mobilisation (involving mothers and sex worker collectives)—all indicated the *success* of the initiative. The questions for evaluation research in VDS should address issues not usually framed in project evaluations such as: How can this be? What would a fully successful outcome look like? What inequities *must* be addressed—and how? How do we operationalise a broader understanding of violence and vulnerability in our thinking and programming? How can results be made sustainable?

The projects and experiences noted above underscore the need for evaluation research to look beyond the achievement of discrete outcomes. They need to be placed in the *context* in which they are implemented. While this may increase the complexity of evaluation, a more one-dimensional approach risks increasing the inequities and violence underpinning vulnerability. It is very uncomfortable to ask whether developmental interventions have *increased* vulnerability of marginalised groups. The organisation runs children's clubs that encourage children to acquire life skills in communication, risk perception, decision-making and the like. The indicators used to demonstrate that boys and girls have been empowered include their ability to discuss child marriage, poor education quality and child abuse at local, regional and national forums. The children are well aware of their risk of being exploited. But there are many factors exacerbating these risks such as lack of protected education facilities for adolescents, conflict between the rights of children towards a family (their mother and her *husband*) and possible protection risks, difficulties in obtaining jobs, and the stigma that follows these children as they grow up, to name a few. Paradoxically, the increased education, increased awareness among children (success indicators) and the evaluative process of participatory dialogue (desired evaluative practice) resulted in the heightened vulnerability of these children.

There are other examples where apparent *success stories* have, upon closer inspection, generated new vulnerabilities and placed precarious groups in even more tenuous situations. For example, in India, PWDS/Blossoms works in South India in an area that is infamous for its child labour market. Children are employed in Sivakasi (in the state of Tamil Nadu, India) factories making firecrackers and matches. However, media exposure and community outrage ostensibly resulted in a ban on child labour in this industry. However, a more detailed situational assessment revealed that child labour had not been eradicated at all. Rather, contractors simply changed their model of exploitation by decentralising their operations. They delivered the raw material for matches and firecrackers directly to the children's homes. Children were, thus, still engaged in this activity, except that they were working from home thereby losing what little time they might previously have had to play and learn (Zaveri, 2008). This increased the difficulty of controlling child labour in this industry. The net impact of the eradication of child labour campaign was to: place the children outside the reach of the project; increase their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS; tighten control over the children by unscrupulous businessmen; and reduce, even further, the amount of time that kids had to be kids.[5]

In other cases, vulnerabilities seem to have been only superficially addressed because deep-rooted inequities have not been affected or dismantled at all. The evaluation of a migration project to combat HIV in India was designed to assess increased awareness among migrants (mostly male) regarding HIV prevention, risk perception and high-risk sexual behaviour.[6] Yet, the way this evaluation was framed, an obvious question was left unasked: 'what about the vulnerabilities of the women left behind and *their* increasing risk to HIV *because of deep rooted social expectations of faithfulness and deference to their husbands?'* (Zaveri, 2006). In fact, getting married young to a migrant male labourer was and is a major contributing factor to the wife becoming HIV positive because, generally speaking, the husband is more likely to have visited sex workers in the place to which he has migrated (Zaveri, 2006).

Increased incomes of women have led to well-documented increases in expenditure on food and education in the household. However, my own research (with sex workers, migrant workers, women living with HIV) has found that their scope for negotiation remained weak regarding household income, employment options and issues related to property. In these decisions, and others of great importance, it was still the lover, husband or father who made the decisions. Sex workers were able to negotiate condom use with clients, which is an important indicator of success in HIV/AIDS programmes. But on closer scrutiny, women had no power to do so with their own *lover* or *husband* (Ghose et al., 2008; Hoque, 2009). The evaluation of life skills programme for children affected by HIV unearthed similar contradictions. My evaluations indicated heightened awareness of rights, gender equity and risk perception, but the programme could not influence the early marriage age of girls since parents living with HIV were concerned about their own mortality and the safety of their girls. Project evaluations usually focus on outputs and outcomes as stated in project objectives which, though important, are likely to miss the opportunity to examine what inequities and vulnerabilities the project has or has not been able to affect. In such cases, the unjust status quo and inequities that sustain vulnerability are not only maintained, but perpetuated. Evaluations do not raise the issues and, therefore, they are not addressed. Evaluation research, however, can emphasize the urgency and need to address issues of vulnerability and inequities, and suggest why they are not being addressed and why they should be.

Patterns of sex work have always been influenced by economic push and pull factors, both locally and globally. Consequently, the nature—and experience—of *vulnerability* in this sector have evolved over time. This underscores the need for approaches to programming and evaluation to similarly evolve in order to take into account shifting structures and dynamics of exploitation. For example, sex workers in the Kamatipura area (a brothel area) of Mumbai were made aware of HIV risk, multi-partner sex and protection—all standard, essential, staples of HIV prevention programmes.

However, sex work itself was changing. The women involved, were not always the typical model of those lured into sex work. Increasingly, migrant women were being coerced into sex work by their husbands who essentially served as pimps. Thus, the efficacy of traditional empowerment and life skills education was limited because of the social power dynamics sustaining the practice and was tied as much to the deference and obligation of wife to husband, as anything else. The husbands themselves pushed wives into part-time sex work for a range of reasons, for example, to repay debts (due to illness, gambling or extortionate moneylenders), to pay for land and other family-related obligations. Interviews with women indicated that they felt it was their *duty* to help the family. Sex work was viewed as a means to do so, since they lacked education, skills and opportunities for work in other sectors. The HIV programme provided condoms, STI treatment, testing for HIV, crèches for the children. Thus, in a perverse way, the provision of these services made sex work even more convenient. The underlying exploitation, however, was not addressed—and may indeed have been subsidised.

If evaluations are to be useful, they need to ask how the interventions influenced lives, relationships and aspirations well beyond the narrow outputs of a project. Evaluation of an exclusive People Living with HIV (PLHIV) self-help group in a high prevalence state of Andhra Pradesh in India indicated that they were able to garner additional benefits from the government leading to greater economic security. However, unasked were such questions as: 'Did identification as a PLHIV group lead to more societal discrimination? Did this increase *self*-discrimination'? In the absence of answers for such questions, the scaling up of the programme ultimately increases negative societal impacts (Zaveri, 2004).

As the context changes, inequities and power differentials assume new forms. Paradigms of feminist rights, empowerment and inclusion, vulnerability and protection, all need to be understood in particular contexts and settings affected by these global changes. Trafficking, child labour and HIV vulnerability from migration have influenced, and have been influenced by, the growth in economies in Asia, as well as poverty and war.

## Evaluation Research: Addressing the What and How in Evaluation

It has been argued that evaluations of interventions can realistically only assess direct and immediate outputs or effects, and that assessing impacts on structural inequities is beyond the scope of the evaluation (CARE, 2001). In fact, many programmes feel that an evaluative focus on an initiative's impact on deep power structures is unlikely to see success—leading instead to a focus on more immediate and tangible impacts and small differences in people's lives (CARE, 2001). But, it is erroneous to assume that in contexts like Asia—with its historical inequities—interventions do not, or cannot, have larger scale impacts. From an evaluative perspective, you cannot see what you do not look for. The current chapter argues that such impacts may be teased out using a *vulnerability lens*.

One of the areas for evaluation research that has been particularly challenging is the identification and assessment of changes in vulnerability. When someone is labelled as being *vulnerable*, we are assuming that a benchmark or threshold has been breached. However, this particular threshold is unstated. Instead, evaluations tend to substitute an output benchmark (e.g., educational achievement) for impact on vulnerability, and by extension, change in inequity, power and violence. But, in the absence of a clearly articulated *vulnerability benchmark*, we risk undertaking programmes and evaluations without clear or comparable standards or points of reference which would provide a baseline for determining project impacts—whether positive or

negative. In this context, a societal-defined level of vulnerability would serve as a progress marker in each instance—in much the same way as the *poverty line* was formulated and applied in development programming.

Another problem in assessing vulnerability is that it is an evolving phenomenon, not static. Vulnerabilities are usually multiple, making it difficult to distil them down to a single measure of value. This is compounded by the likelihood that stakeholders will differ in their understandings of vulnerability. For example, the degree to which the completion of primary school is viewed as reducing the vulnerability of a child may be understood very differently by her mother compared to a development worker—not least because of the tension between the longer term perspective of the development worker, and the very short-term perspective of the mother who is likely to place greater priority on more immediate services that the child may provide such as child care, income generation (however marginal) and domestic help. Evaluators are challenged by how to obtain objective measures of such subjective concepts as powerlessness, vulnerability or the value of personal relationships. Further, as evaluators, we need to assess not just existing, but *emerging*, vulnerabilities and *potential* risks that may deepen inequities. This means that we may also need to project our assessments into the future, so that we might *anticipate and proactively address* contextual and evolving factors.

Formative evaluations lead to findings that feed into discussions of whether the intervention should be continued, and, if so, whether modifications may be required in the next stage. In these circumstances, qualitative tools are particularly useful in developing a nuanced understanding of deep rooted, and often camouflaged, inequities affecting the initiative—*and vice versa*. To understand how vulnerabilities may persist or mutate, qualitative evidence (derived, e.g., through case studies, PRA and so on) may help to shape and influence evaluation questions, approaches and use (Chambers, 1997; Catley, 2008). A number of probing, open-ended questions may help in this regard. This might include questions such as: 'What would you have done differently, and why?'; 'What did the project not address that it should have?'; and 'What are the biggest sources of vulnerability, and how has the project addressed them, or not? And if not, why not?'

By changing our evaluative *framework* of *relevance* in evaluation (OECD, 2002), evaluators can look beyond the indicators of immediate impact, towards more contextual-located and nuanced outcomes associated with the initiative. Such analysis may provide critical and relevant input into recommendations for the programme—or others like it—so as to increase the chances or scale of positive impacts, while decreasing the chances or scale of negative ones on levels of vulnerability. Such an evaluation approach would require more flexibility. This vulnerability-focused approach would also highlight the centrality of the importance of *relevant* results and the multiple accountabilities of stakeholders in programming and evaluation (see Whitty, Chapter 3).

# Conflicting Rights and Their Implications for Evaluation: Views from the Field

Using a rights-based approach to evaluation may pose difficulties, since different sets of rights may come into conflict as a result of an initiative. For example, in the case of self-help groups, economic success is typically (and reasonably) used as an indicator of women's empowerment. However, a case in India illustrates how a particular women's self-help group not only succeeded in increasing incomes, but also created economic incentives for parents to pull children into family businesses and micro enterprises. Boys were pulled out of school and sent to nearby towns to sell goods. On top of the usual household chores with which girls were saddled, they were further burdened with economic chores, making them doubly *exploited*. Consequently, children, especially girls, were deprived of their rights to play, to go to school and to simply *be children*. Clearly, children's rights were compromised to achieve economic rights—and empowerment objectives—for women (Zaveri, 2008).

Case studies in Cambodia found that after-school vocational programmes for children affected by HIV were successful in nurturing new skills. But parents, looking for opportunities to capitalise on these newly acquired skills, *pushed* their children to migrate in search of work, thereby increasing their vulnerability to predation in transit, to trafficking and to HIV. The right to education fed into the *larger context of vulnerability* which incentivised the violation of their right to protection—leading to exploitation. Obviously, the answer *is not* to stop education programmes for vulnerable children. However, it is essential that such programmes—and our evaluation of such programmes—systematically examine the vulnerabilities of the children and the impacts of these programmes so as to optimise the benefits and avoid or minimise the risks of increasing vulnerabilities and exploitation.

Evaluation of an educational programme in the brothel area in Mumbai, India found that children had long absences from school. An economic downturn had pushed their mothers into sex work with the full support and encouragement of their husbands, who were motivated by the need to pay off debts, release mortgaged land and so on. Mothers would migrate back and forth in search for work, thus, uprooting their children's lives and education. The best educational support had no impact because of the migration and vulnerability faced by the mothers. Yet, in that particular case, it was not possible to recommend that children be placed in alternative care, because it was felt that family should be the first place of refuge for the child.

An evaluation of projects in Sonagachi, India and in Dhaka, Bangladesh (HIV prevention, care and support for sex workers) found that sex workers had been *empowered* regarding HIV risk perception and client negotiation over condom use, following the public health model for combating HIV.[7] But neither the project nor its evaluation examined empowerment *spillover* in the sex worker's emerging understandings of their *multiple identities and roles* as mothers, nurturers, sex workers and business women. So, while the programme was successful in its mobilisation and collectivisation objectives (including the creation of support groups and campaigns to professionalise sex *work* as legitimate work), it was found lacking by many of the women from a broader perspective. Some women in the project chose to address other concerns that they felt should have been more central, in particular, the protection of girl children through the establishment of day and night crèches, boarding schools and education support. Such initiatives were implicitly and explicitly responding to a

broader set of questions: 'What impact did the project have on your life?' and 'What would you have done differently?' The project had not addressed the sex workers'/mothers' educational aspirations for their children. Thus, in their minds, the project was perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability, through the lack of viable alternative employment opportunities that would push the next generation—*their daughters*—into sex work (Zaveri, 2005).

A combination of these factors can in fact underscore, and deepen, the gender-specific inequities that were meant to be addressed by the intervention. In Bangladesh, the example of female children of sex workers completing primary education is a case in point. Sheltered, educated, trained in the arts (through various creative development courses by NGOs), and in life skills—girls were empowered and fulfilled their right to education, participation and development. On the other hand, they became prized objects for sexual exploitation by mothers and their lovers. But the girls were also acutely aware of their situation, risks and vulnerabilities and had a sense of helplessness. Boys too were part of the children's rights club but, with few marketable skills, were being pushed to become pimps or other professions related to the brothel, now acutely aware that they too will participate in the exploitation of their peers. This heightened vulnerability and feeling of *lack of empowerment* is rarely evaluated and the conventional evaluations miss evaluating the far reaching impact on inequities, which continue to persist albeit in a new garb.

## The Iatrogenic Effects of Evaluation

All of these examples illustrate the ways in which the evaluation process itself may cause significant risks that need to be considered explicitly and systematically when evaluating programmes located in, or designed to address, conditions of deep inequity and power imbalance. Evaluation research can contribute to the discourse regarding safeguarding the evaluation process without compromising on addressing vulnerabilities and inequities.

While many of these examples illustrate the ways in which development programming may have iatrogenic effects, the very process of evaluation may itself be destabilising. Asking evaluative questions may challenge or threaten an unjust status quo and the power of those who benefit from it. In the course of their evaluations, evaluators may become aware of broader socio-political problems of marginalised and vulnerable groups. For the persons participating in the evaluative process, even recalling past inequities or exploitation may be traumatic. Participatory approaches to evaluation research offer scope for capacity building and empowerment (Chambers, 1994). However, such approaches require that the researcher has a well-grounded and nuanced understanding of both evaluation ethics and the local context.

More attention needs to be paid to the iatrogenic effects of evaluations, whereby participation itself may lead to unintended, unanticipated, harmful consequences. My own interviews with sex workers in Bangladesh and India sought to understand whether the creation of collectives had led to genuine *choice* and sustainable beneficial impact. One of the techniques used to specifically empower them as sex workers was a participatory-narrative tool, which forced them to retrace

the trajectory of their lives. The intention of the tool was to identify milestones where the empowerment process began since the NGO had invested resources and capacity building in enabling sex workers to form collectives, to build pressure groups and to address stigma. However, in many cases, the result of this process was emotional distress as it entailed recalling (and hence, re-living) their entry into sex work (Zaveri, 2005).

Sex workers *did* mention the process of collectivisation but chose to highlight *the milestone of entering sex work*. Empowerment according to the HIV prevention programme was addressing stigma and discrimination through sex worker collectives and the intense emotional distress caused by the tool was clearly not going to be addressed by the programme. The evaluation findings were contrary to what was expected. But the more vexing problem was that the findings questioned the architecture of this and similar HIV prevention programmes for sex workers, and a fundamental shift in programming was less likely. The findings were like a *hot potato*—expressed but difficult to hold and address. From the point of view of the sex workers, how ethical is such a scenario? The question for evaluation research in VDS is how to address contrary (and not just unexpected) findings in a volatile and complex environment.

A similar experience is evident in other settings where I have evaluated programmes for children of sex workers. In assessing how children are faring in early childhood development classes or day care centres, the sex workers are interviewed using focus group discussions which stir up a sense of helplessness about the future of their children, especially girls, their ostracism from their own families and homes, and their own entry into sex work. The end result often seems puerile and distressing (Zaveri, 2003, 2004). Once again, while interviewing the children at the Daulatia Shelter home, the children were able to tell me which of their friends were forced to enter sex work, their fears of the shelter home shutting down, how someone would surely come to help them be secure in their quest for higher education with even boys mentioning that they would (without permission) enter the office premises at night to escape the brothel's pull towards being a pimp.

It is quite possible that tokenism and manipulation can inadvertently filter into the evaluation process and *use* the person being interviewed, sabotaging the intended empowerment outcomes such as the cultivation of critical thinking and independence of action (Hart, 1992; Save the Children, 2000). The evaluator, either by the way qualitative information is collected, or by the implicit viewpoint underpinning evaluative questions, may create conditions within which evaluators look for what they wish to see, and report accordingly.

Most qualitative tools engage subjects of evaluation in a process that leads to further questioning, reflection, analysis and *evaluative thinking*. However, evaluators can inadvertently create or aggravate *personal and social conflicts* (including gendered conflicts), when there are power imbalances among those involved (England, 1994). As explored in Goodhand's work (2000) and Jayawickrama's chapter in this book, evaluators and researchers working in conflict situations routinely face ethical challenges by virtue of the unique character of the environment within which they are working—although such challenges may not be recognized, or may not be recognized as being ethical in nature. This is an underdeveloped field of work. There is an urgent need to review and employ ethical frameworks of evaluation in VDS in order to ensure that interventions not only do *no harm* but may actually *do some good* (Bush and Duggan, 2013; Duggan and Bush, 2014).

Vulnerable populations deserve to be treated within the strictest ethical guidelines. In fact, a renegotiation of the ToRs for evaluation research can give voice to the less powerful, even within complex situations, and can contribute to more informed and appropriate choices by evaluation stakeholders. Unfortunately, ToRs are seldom renegotiated on these lines. The *globalisation* of research networks presents a unique opportunity for a more collaborative and equitable evaluative process rather than the too-frequent donor-driven exercise (ESRC, 2004).

Shorter funding cycles mean shorter periods of intervention.[8] The shorter cycles encourage simple quantification of effects in our evaluations. Understanding and evaluating changes in levels of inequities require attention to detail and to context. But it takes *time* for effects to become evident. In-depth evaluations require a long-term timeline if they are to be credible. For example, nascent changes in context and impact on gender inequities may go *un-noticed* if changes are too small or too subtle, or if they fall outside the epistemological scope of the ToRs of an evaluation.

A recognition that there are *multiple realities* and an acceptance that there may be *competing indicators* provide a more realistic approach to appreciating the socio-political complexities and impacts that coexist and clash within VDS (Bush, 2003). The many examples above amply illustrate the ethical, political and methodological challenges faced by ethical researchers.

In the dynamic world of VDS, ignoring context, especially in the presence of deep seated inequities, may erroneously promote strategies, policies and programmes that in the long run reinforce such inequities. The role of the evaluator becomes critical in such situations—using approaches and formulating questions that tease out these contextual changes can clearly contribute to more equitable, sensitive research in evaluation.

# Notes

1. http://southasia.oneworld.net/fromthegrassroots/children-of-sex-workers-denied-a-fair-chance/. This is a report on a study of over a thousand children who continue to face stigma, lack of education and other difficulties while residing in the brothel area.
2. This particular focus is driving the development of what is being called *equity-based* evaluation. See Bamberger and Segone (2011).
3. The benefit–harm approach emerged from a review by CARE International in September 1998 of their Sudan programmes. The review recommended that there should be an assessment using this approach to better understand the humanitarian, social and political impacts of CARE's work in Sudan. From this starting point, the approach was pilot tested over three years in Africa, the experience culminated in the development of a handbook that could be used anywhere in the world.
4. http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/start/countries/bangladesh (accessed on 21 July 2015). Secondary school enrolment was 45 per cent for boys and 49 per cent for girls, indicating high levels of dropout for 2007–2010.
5. When children are employed in factories or under one roof, it is easier (relatively) to access children for various development activities. Child labourers are known to be exploited by middlemen, contractors and employers, and are vulnerable to HIV risk because of child abuse. Often, these child

labourers are not aware of HIV and risk factors. In Sivakasi, shutting the factories did not eradicate child labour. Instead, it went *underground*, scattered in homes and communities. They became difficult to locate and access for HIV sensitisation programmes as well as for understanding of risk and self-efficacy programmes. Being *hidden*, the chances of exploitation are also higher—it is difficult to find out who is exploiting the children and how the exploitation takes place. This phenomenon is similar to the one where brothel areas are *cleaned up*, creating sex worker diasporas that are difficult to access for various HIV risk perception programmes and placing sex workers at greater risk since they have to live and work in unfamiliar places.

6. Targeted interventions are the approaches used in combating HIV. One of the *target populations* that spreads HIV is sex workers and their clients, and most HIV prevention programmes are focused on these groups. This is a public health approach to control the vectors that spread HIV. In such an approach, less attention is paid to other populations affected by HIV. It is well documented that the AIDS infection trajectory was very different in India than that of Africa. It was only during the third five-year National Aids Control Plan in India that there was an understanding that women, who were not sexually promiscuous, were contracting HIV through their husbands (and infecting their children)—this was then described as the feminisation of the HIV epidemic.

7. HIV prevention has usually followed a public health model—identifying and targeting populations that spread HIV and building their capacities on the use of condoms, treatment of STIs and behaviour change communication. An enabling environment to ensure that the above was possible was also part of most programmes. The understanding that HIV is also a development problem gained attention in the 90s. Although there was increasing feminisation of the epidemic, the programmatic approach preference was a public health one. Empowerment of sex workers included agitating for their right to work and legalisation of the profession. The discourse was, therefore, skewed towards demanding these rights but there was a lack of attention to identifying the needs of sex workers when *they were not doing sex work*.

8. Family Health International's India Final Report (November 2007), produced at the end of the HIV/AIDS IMPACT project, mentions in its Lessons Learned, p. 53, '[t]he uncertainty of year-to-year funding obligations through global field support limited FHI's ability to develop multi-year project agreement cycles with partners. Longer programme planning cycles allow local community organisations to strategically develop long-term plans and can improve staff retention rates.' http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pdack584.pdf (accessed on 23 July 2017).

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