Policy Briefing

Strengthening Women's Inclusion in Social Accountability Initiatives

In the last 20 years, social accountability initiatives have facilitated the inclusion and participation of marginalised groups in governance processes. This Policy Briefing focuses on **how** and **what** factors prove effective in strengthening women's voice in processes holding public service providers accountable. We argue that initiatives must: (a) build technical and other forms of capacity amongst women; (b) change formal rules on women's inclusion; (c) apply political economy analysis to unpack power dynamics, identify actors in favour of gender equality, and build a network in support of women; and (d) make long-term funding commitments for sustainable change in gender-biased norms.

Key messages

– Four critical factors for effectiveness in social accountability initiatives: building technical and other forms of capacity amongst women; changing formal rules and mandate for women's inclusion; applying political economy analysis to unpack power dynamics at the local level and creating a network of actors in favour of gender-equal change; and making a long-term funding commitment.

– Initiatives have proven impact on raising women's awareness, voice, and access to services but they do not automatically lead to increased accountability.

– International organisations and NGOs must continue to address how participatory processes are designed to remove barriers that exist for women.

– Careful design may ensure social accountability initiatives have sustainable impact on discriminatory gender and social norms.

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Sohela Nazneen and Maria Fernanda Silva Olivares

Participation in local governance processes: background

Socially and economically marginalised groups, including women, have limited opportunities and capacities to exercise voice and participate in formal accountability processes because these processes contain systemic biases against such groups. This is addressed by social accountability initiatives that help marginalised groups participate in local governance processes, scrutinise public service providers on their performance, and influence decisions made about expenditure and programme initiatives.

It is assumed that these collective efforts to hold public officials to account for the provision of public goods can enhance the performance of public institutions. They typically include measures such as participatory budgeting (PB), public hearings, community scorecards (CSC), citizen report cards (CRC), public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS), monitoring of public service delivery, and citizen advisory boards.

At local level, the effective participation of women in social accountability initiatives is critical as these initiatives serve as pathways for strengthening women's voice and empowerment while enabling women to hold public service deliverers to account, thus improving the quality of governance. Public services matter to women because they support women's right to health, education, and a decent life. When public service provision fails, women's wellbeing is at risk because their dependence on public services is higher compared to men. As more women are poor compared to men, women tend to have fewer economic resources to switch to private provisioning of health, education, and other forms of services.

This Policy Briefing was commissioned by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to better understand and develop insights into factors that must be considered to ensure social accountability initiatives are designed and implemented in a gender-sensitive manner and lead to women's empowerment. We reviewed evidence over the last 20 years of social accountability initiatives published in academic and non-academic literature, including United Nations and peer-reviewed materials, that assessed how the support for women's voice and participation in social accountability processes in the global South led to change. Our findings highlight the steps that contributed to positive outcomes for women in social accountability and the issues that require further consideration in programming.

Women's inclusion in social accountability initiatives: positive outcomes in service delivery

Our review of evidence shows that the inclusion and participation of women in social accountability processes has generally yielded some positive results for women in service delivery. For example, in Malawi CSC were set up to monitor reproductive health outcomes for women, explicitly focusing on women's perceptions of their needs, access to services, and whether the quality of maternal care services improved. In this case, women's involvement in discussion groups and community meetings without the presence of men led to improvements in women's access to maternal health care and also reduced wait time at the community clinics or government health centres. Many of the studies reviewed reported that women's involvement in social accountability initiatives increased levels of awareness among women about how local

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governments function, citizens' rights and entitlements, types and range of services available, area of coverage, and the role of public service providers. Women were also more willing to voice their concerns and question public officials during public or community meetings and identified these changes with feeling empowered.

Most of the programmes covered in our evidence review focused on strengthening women's presence at the community level or in citizen meetings, including on how women could effectively engage with local service providers and elected officials. These studies found that the impact of women's participation on improvement of service quality was inconclusive because it was influenced by different factors. Many of the studies did report that women found participation in these processes empowering on a personal level, but this did not automatically lead to service providers being more accountable to women. While service providers responded to the issues raised and provided explanations to women, they did not necessarily think that women at the local level had the authority to call into question their performance or sanction them for failure to improve quality.

Improving relations between women and service providers

Evidence shows that the long-term impact of women's inclusion in social accountability processes is varied and uneven. In many cases, social accountability initiatives that had a clear mandate for women's participation led to the development of the capacity of women to ask questions and analyse information on service delivery and, in the short term, strengthened women's ability to demand answers from public service providers. However, evidence on the long-term impact on relations between women and public service providers was inconclusive. While many studies reported that women were empowered to demand answers it is not clear whether the perception

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held by service providers shifted with respect to their role in promoting inclusion and gender equality. Evidence was also inconclusive on whether women were able to sanction public officials for failing to meet their needs and interests with respect to gender-specific services. In some cases, women's lack of ability to use enforcement mechanisms to sanction officials for failure to perform created perverse incentives for public service officials to misuse public resources or demand sexual services in return for the provision of public services.

The role of contextual factors and local gender norms

Social accountability initiatives that were successful paid attention not only to the terms on which women were included but also to contextual factors. In particular, they addressed gender norms around participation and developed an effective coalition of actors at the local level to support women's voice and agency.

One of the most significant areas where context and local gender norms matter is in the design of participatory processes upon which the social accountability initiatives, such as public meetings, citizen management committees, community scorecards, rely on. At local level, these may be vulnerable to elite capture which can reinforce patriarchal gender norms that limit women's participation and voice. In India, for example, upper caste dominance in local water management committees limited participation of poor women who belonged to lower caste groups.

Gender norms that constrain women's mobility, access to public spaces, interaction between women and non-related males, and women's responsibility to perform domestic chores and child and elderly care, may all limit women's participation in oversight processes and participatory forums. At local level, social accountability programmes must therefore pay attention to power relations that exist between elites and women belonging to marginalised groups, and the social and gender norms that constrain women's participation.

Tackling gender barriers to participation

Women, especially those from marginalised groups, face a series of gender-specific barriers limiting access to services and their ability to hold public service providers to account. Many service providers hold stereotypical views of women's claims on public services; for example, the widely held view of 'the male breadwinner model' may exclude certain categories of women from being eligible for public services. Similarly, the view that women's confinement within the domestic sphere means that they lack knowledge about the needs of their community with respect to public services may led to women not being consulted.

In many countries, the service providers and women belong to different social classes, creating a social barrier that makes it difficult for women to be able to make demands. Marginalised and poor women lack resources

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to travel long distances to meet officials and often can lack knowledge about their entitlements to hold service providers to account. These factors make women more vulnerable to public service failures.

Achieving lasting change in women's participation in social accountability

For social accountability initiatives to effectively engage women and strengthen their voice in local governance they must establish a clear gender mandate at the outset. A clear mandate ensures a specific focus on women's needs and gender equality concerns.

Evidence from successful programmes also shows that positive outcomes for women require a focus on a range of issues to remove barriers to participation. First, at the outset, developing an understanding of the local context and conditions under which women can exercise a collective voice and express their needs is key. This requires an understanding of local power dynamics. Second, in setting up participatory processes, paying attention to the multiple barriers that may limit women's participation is crucial for success. These barriers could include: women's lack of knowledge about their entitlement to services; their lack of time to attend meetings and demand answers on service provision given the need to balance paid work, domestic chores, and child care; and local gender norms that may exclude women from public spaces to question and hold local officials to account.

The third key area is to change the formal rules to facilitate women's participation. These must be changed to include stipulations that require a mandatory quota for women's participation in community forums, and a requirement that for a quorum to be met in a formal meeting, one-third of the participants should be women. The aim is to establish equal terms for women's participation in formal processes.

Beyond changing the formal rules for women's engagement in local governance, the next area to consider is the nature of the participatory space created by social accountability initiatives. Building the capacity of women and creating a network of actors who support women to function in these participatory spaces, including local women's rights, human rights and community organisations, are critical. Building women's confidence and capacity to demand answers may require establishing separate meeting and safe spaces for women. For example, studies on gender-responsive budgeting at local levels show that creating separate groups that allowed women to meet before public hearings or participatory budgeting were effective in strengthening their voice and creating a collective identity. Evidence also shows that connecting women to civil society actors at the local level allowed women to access information, and women used these relationships to draw attention to their needs and created pressure on public officials.

Beyond effective participation: holding public officials to account

Alongside addressing the barriers to women's effective participation, specific attention must also be paid to the factors that could positively influence local gender norms and women's ability to sanction public officials for failure to perform. Key to this is ensuring that the social accountability initiatives are not implemented as one-off efforts but instead are a long-term commitment, so they have a sustained impact on changing gender norms and power relations. This includes providing women and other marginalised groups with the technical support needed to use grievance processes and other enforcement mechanisms designed to sanction service providers for failure to deliver.

Designing social accountability programmes: defining factors

– Address gender norms that limit women's access and voice by formulating specific rules and measures for women's inclusion.

– Establish processes that create equal terms for women's inclusion and participation in social accountability forums and oversight processes.

– Ensure that decision-making processes with respect to the distribution of resources have mandatory consultation with local women.

– Link women to other local civil society actors and networks so they are able to secure support to counter pressure from the local elite.

– Make it mandatory for public service officials to respond to gendered accountability failure.

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Social accountability initiatives should be long-term commitments in order to have a sustained impact on changing gender norms and power relations.

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Policy recommendations

Social accountability initiatives **do** have a positive impact on raising women's awareness, voice, and access to services but the inclusion of women does not automatically lead to increased accountability from service providers. International organisations and NGOs must therefore continue to support social accountability initiatives while paying attention to the following aspects in programming:

– Integrate a gender lens through rigorous design and pay attention to the formal rules and mandates so women can participate in these initiatives on equal terms.

– Design participatory processes that address the barriers to women's participation. These include women's time poverty because of domestic work, biased gender norms limiting access to public spaces, etc. This requires that NGOs and implementing organisations pay attention to details, including setting meeting times and locations that accommodate women so they can balance their paid and care responsibilities at home and travel to these spaces.

– Provide technical support so women can use enforcement mechanisms, grievance procedures and other mechanisms to hold public officials to account.

– Conduct political economy analysis at the start of any initiative to identify key actors at the local level who may be in favour of women's inclusion and open to challenging gender power dynamics.

– Engage with supportive stakeholders during the inception phase, then connect women beneficiaries to these civil society organisations at the local level. This will create a strong network that may be able to pressure service providers to be responsive to women's demands.

– Develop a benchmark on women's status and condition at the outset, then have a clear theory of change around women's inclusion in these initiatives. These are important to track what has shifted in the long term.

– Provide long-term funding and technical support for institutionalising gender-sensitive processes so the initiatives can have an impact on discriminatory gender and social norms that hinder the capacity to engage women in accountability processes. ∎

Further reading

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Joshi, A. and Houtzager, P.P. (2012) '**Widgets or Watchdogs?: Conceptual Explorations in Social Accountability**', *Public Management Review* 14.2: 145–62

MacArthur Foundation

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