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**Social Accountability of Women in
Pakistan:
A case study of Sialkot**

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Introduction

Social Accountability as a mean of holding the state accountable to its citizens is not usually practiced in Pakistan. One of the prerequisites of Social Accountability is the right to information. Though laws exist in this regard such as Article 19A of the Constitution, according to which every citizen has right to information, the promulgation of laws is the real issue. The second major hindrance in the way of Social Accountability is the capacity and capability of citizens as how much they have empowered themselves to fight for their rights. They cannot be able to influence political decisions unless they have the complete knowledge of government policies and their possible impact on the society.

Among the different approaches of SA, one is the bottom-up approach, which Ackerman (2005) describes as “citizens holding state authorities accountable by demanding the uprightness to be done”. This approach lifts up the confidence level as well as the sense of belongingness of the community to a country. Moreover, by adopting the bottom-up approach, the increased demand for the effective utilization of resources on one hand, and result-based implementation of policies on the other, lead to improved performance of state officials.

Though the bottom-up approach is a developing phenomenon in Pakistan, the segregation of male and female participation seeking answerability is another paramount factor. Thus, the Social Accountability, not only in itself, is in the initial phase but also accompanied with low women participation into it. The lack of gender balance in accountability practices can be envisioned as one of the major factors deterring this practice to fully flourish in Pakistan. A number of studies refer the importance of gender balance to make the social accountability processes fully functional.

Additionally, the paper explores the status of female participation in Social Accountability practices in Pakistan. In addition, the paper highlights the problems women have to face in SA initiatives. However, the female participation in rural and urban areas has different impacts. That’s why, the paper also undertakes an assessment of urban-rural differences, as viewed by women toward social accountability.

In order to explain the objectives of the paper, Sialkot, a city of the Punjab province, has been selected as a case study. The rationale behind selecting this city was the availability of rich data collected under “Aawaz: voice and accountability program” of Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI).

Literature Review

Despite several attempts, literature on women and social accountability in case of Pakistan was hard to find and thus case studies of other developing countries on this subject have been used as reference. Hence, this paper may contribute towards the limited literature on SA and women in Pakistan.

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of gender lens in SA process through its engagement in participatory practices. These studies include:

- i “Women, bureaucracy and the governance of poverty in southeast Asia...” by Angeles (2010)
- ii “Participatory Governance?” Gender and Participation in Peru’s Local Institutions...” by Stephanie (2012)
- iii “Gender Responsive Service Delivery and Accountability in Bangladesh” by Ferdous Jahan

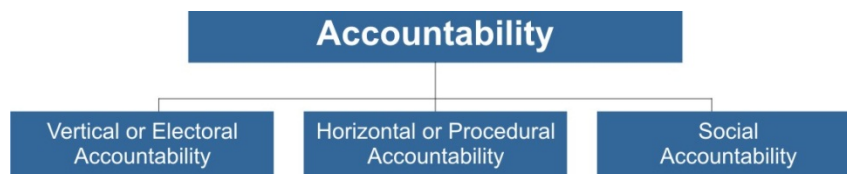
Most of these studies link women’s active participation with social development, which ultimately leads to poverty reduction. Moreover, these studies also highlight an important factor of low participation of women in demanding Social Accountability as compared to men.

Participatory Development

Participatory Development (PD) is a new approach in development theories, which considers the involvement of local community in development activity as the main agent of change. The concept behind is that local people know better about their problems, and can present effective ideas to solve these problems. Thus, their participation is necessary to achieve sustainable development in the society. It is a human centered approach, which brings change at grass roots level.

What is Accountability?

The concept of accountability revolves around three approaches, i.e. i) vertical or electoral accountability, ii) horizontal or procedural accountability, and iii) social accountability.



In the societies like Pakistan, accountability is considered a relative phenomenon that varies from class to class. But in broader terms, as we have discussed earlier, it is a pressure of citizens

towards the state obligations in terms of maintaining a balance between the state machinery and the citizens. Thus accountability is second to answerability towards beneficiaries by the power holders.

Social Accountability (SA)

The approach of social accountability is an emerging phenomenon in which citizens and communities hold the government officials accountable by ensuring the acts of government in the best interest of the public. Thus, in turn, government representatives have to become part of this form of accountability as well, for they have to respond to the societal aspirations. This form of accountability is also known as “demand side accountability” (Holland and Thirkell 2009). This approach not only helps the communities fully recognize their rights but also enables them to move ahead and demand for their rights from the appropriate power holders.

Being a comparatively new approach, social accountability has two dimensions. The first relates to citizens demanding rights and entitlements from the state. The second relates to the element of enforcement in meeting those demands. These two factors that work jointly to solve problems form the base for chain of encouragement, struggle, approachability and solvability of issues by citizens (Khoday 2012).

However, there are certain compulsions for the efficacious promotion of the SA. Accordingly, in promoting SA, there are four requirements to consider. These are: enabling environment, systematized and proficient group of citizens, cultural suitability, and access to information. All these four pre-required environments are known as four pillars of social accountability, which are considered as essential for the wider promotion and acceptance of SA (Bismonte 2010).

According to the World Bank (Sourcebook p.5),

“Social Accountability refers to the broad range of actions and mechanisms beyond voting that citizens can use to hold the state to account, as well as actions on the part of government, civil society, media and other societal actors that promote or facilitate these efforts”.

Social Accountability and Women

In Pakistan, Social Accountability is the 21st Century phenomenon. However, splitting into two, the top-down accountability approach has failed to produce desired results whereas the bottom-up approach is gaining fame and is being considered a powerful and effective tool to hold public officials accountable.

The idea of bottom up approach has rapidly been adopted by a number of sectors in the country, including education and health. Nevertheless, it has not yet been completely adopted by all the sectors. Even the sectors, which are practicing it, have faced low pace of its functioning.

Numbers of factors have been highlighted behind such low level of working of this approach. Lack of proper orientation to the idea, lack of coordination amongst the citizens/participants, lack of knowledge about the mechanisms, lack of courage to initiate, lack of proper platform to complaint, etc. are amongst the factors, which are behind the low level of working of this approach (Shah 2008).

Apart from these issues, another important factor is gender balance in voicing accountability. Most of the women do not demand any type of accountability. The poor, women and marginalized can hardly hold authorities accountable (Cheema 2007). There are a number of endogenous and exogenous factors. Exogenous factors include poverty, socio-economic inequality, historical resources and endowment whereas land rights, tenancy favouritism, access to labour market, difference in education and access to credit are amongst endogenous factors. Both these types work together in hindering women and other marginalized groups to participate in accountability process.

State of Public and Social Participation of Pakistani Women

Despite half of Pakistani population comprise women, their representation in politics remained low over different periods of time. Likewise, women in the country do not have easy access to political activities. However, those who are in power are less empowered than men in making decisions on economy. A report (National Commission on Status of Women [NCSW] 2010) highlights that most of the women politicians are from the influential families of the country and thus do not represent the talented or deserving women.

According to the same report, political parties consider policies related to women issues in their manifestos, but do not include women in the committees that draft manifestos. Also, women members have less say or ignored at the time of taking any decision within the party. Though women voters are large in number, their voting ratio is a matter of concern. Patriarchal and customary practices in the society hamper women to get themselves registered as voters and then to cast vote.

Methodology and Data Set

The data was collected by using the qualitative technique of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). In total, two female FGDs were held; one in the rural area of Adamke Cheema and another in urban area of Haji Pura of Sialkot city. A total 32 participants (16 from each area) from different backgrounds age groups and educational levels participated in the FGDs and shared their views on three topics, i.e. Women's Participation in Politics & Public Life, Women and Dispute Resolution, and Demand by Women about Service Delivery. Moreover, they were representing various classes and sectors of the society, i.e. schoolteachers, social workers, youth, activists, housewives, and lady health workers. A checklist was developed on the programme objectives to

collect responses. The responses were initially audio recorded and then transcribed. Later, the answers were coded under three themes, and have been used for the analysis in the study.

Analysis

Theme One: Women Participation in Politics and Public Life

Under this section, the respondents were asked as to “*How and to what extent do women in your area participate in politics or political activities?*” In reply, diverse responses were documented. These responses varied not only from rural to urban respondents but also were different within a group. Most of the participants of rural and urban FGDs said that they do not participate actively in the political activities. During the probing session, various reasons were highlighted by the respondents of both the areas. One of the reasons was the inability of certain voters to cast their votes due to the absence of Computerized National Identification Card (CNIC).¹ One of the respondents from an urban UC said:

“We do not have computerized national identity card (CNIC), which is a major hurdle for not casting the vote.”

When respondents were asked if they have sought their right to get CNIC before casting the vote (an initial step to hold public officials accountable), a number of reasons were given in this regard such as high fee, cultural barriers, i.e. husband or father’s permission, travelling cost to move to the district headquarter, non-availability of time amid domestic chores, etc. One of the women from an urban UC said:

“Expensive transportation cost from one area to another, permission from husbands or other male members in the house are some of the reasons we have to face if we ask for anything, particularly for acquiring CNIC and casting votes.”

Nevertheless, some of the respondents do have CNICs but when they were asked about their participation in political activities via casting vote, an unexpected response was that

“Why should we vote or participate in politics. For this, we have to leave our homes and above all, there is no visible benefit to women of this activity”.

However, when respondents were asked about the second part of the question regarding participation in politics, general responses of “less entry points for women” in politics and “low respect” to the female politicians in comparison with male politicians were recorded. In this perspective, most of the respondents said that they do not have permission from their male family members to cast vote and thus how can they participate in politics. Many of the respondents consider “participation in politics” as a task, which is next to impossible for them.

¹ CNIC is the core product of NADRA (National Database & Registration Authority) issued to a valid/legitimate citizen of Pakistan. Every genuine, 18 Years and above, citizen of Pakistan is eligible for CNIC.

Lack of courage and interest to engage in politics was observed in more than 90 per cent respondents.

When participants were asked about the lack of interest in politics, (as only through this they can be a part of change and can work as agent of change for the betterment because those who are actually victims of issue, only they can handle those issues in a better and effective way), number of reasons were highlighted by them. “Harm to the reputation of women” was highlighted by about 80 per cent of the respondents. One of the respondents said:

“At first, women don’t get support from the male members of their families to come out and participate in a political activity or run the public office. Despite, those who managed to step out of their homes, all what they get in turn is humiliation and a bad name in the community.”

Another respondent added:

“While there are other professions, which demand women to leave home but participation in politics is specifically seen by many men in the society as not a good thing for women as compared to teaching or other professions.”

Moreover, some of the respondents also shared their views about the power of women politicians that actions and voices of female politicians are taken for granted by the society and especially by the male politicians.

To another question, one of the participants, who had been *Nazim* in the local government system in 2002, said that she has worked for the betterment of her area, which includes small tasks of installation of streetlights, maintenance of streets, etc. But she also highlighted the same factors of “low reputation” and “low say of women in politics”.

To a supplementary question that *Do they feel that political decision makers adequately represent and lobby for women’s issues?*, a majority of respondents said that they do not highlight their problems adequately and thus problems remain unresolved.

The responses of female respondents from rural community were almost similar to urban respondents. However, certain differences were observed in both the FGDs. Rural women were scrutinized as more active in casting vote than the urban women. No concrete factor was identified behind this difference. However, a high level of interest in casting vote was observed.

Subsequently, when participants of rural FGD were enquired about the choice of casting vote to a particular party, most of them said that they follow the family trend. One of the rural respondents, for example said:

“We cast vote for those for whom our family members decide.”

Thus, casting of vote is not backed by any specific objective. Nevertheless, women cast vote just for the sake of vote casting.

Theme Two: Dispute Resolution

Participants of both the FGDs were asked the following three questions under this theme.

- (i) *Are there incidents of harassment or violence against women in your community?*
- (ii) *How do female members of your community deal with/seek justice after such events?
and*
- (iii) *What is your view about the available institutions of justice?"*

Participants of the both the FGDs responded somewhat in similar ways. All the participants verified the presence of violence against women in their areas. However, the chances of violence and its intensity of occurrence was different within rural and urban areas and across both the areas. Moreover, almost 80 per cent respondents of both the FGDs termed "domestic violence" as the most common one. "Husbands beating their wives" was highlighted specifically in this perspective. One of the female participants from an urban UC said:

"Thrashing of women by their husbands is common."

There prevails a clear sense of considering domestic violence a normal or routine matter, which does not require a punishment or accountability. A respondent from urban side observed:

"Of course, a husband can beat his wife, but that is restricted to the bedroom."

The urban female participants did not highlight the reasons behind the acts of violence meted out to them, whereas rural participants declared "the factor of women emancipation" a major reason behind domestic violence. One of the rural respondents said:

"The problem starts with the freedom offered to women. The more they get freedom, the higher chances of being exposed to violence occur"

Another respondent highlighted that lack of women education is one of the factors due to which they are unable to seek justice. She said:

"It is unfortunate that women here are not educated enough to counter any biases in this regard."

Respondents of both of the FGDs seconded the incidents of harassment. Although none of them told about harassment cases which are personally related to them, they mentioned about the prevalence of an overall harassment factor in the community. A respondent from an urban UC said:

"The harassment of women in our area is very common."

The respondents linked this factor with the social courage of women and said: Owing to harassment, women cannot come out of their houses alone, which has increased the dependency factor. Moreover, the respondents also highlighted the element of harassment as a hurdle in getting education. One respondent in a rural UC, for instance, said:

“We, the women, muster up a lot of strength to go to colleges or work places, but boys are always at the street corner to harass us. Boys nowadays also tease girls and women on phone.”

When participants of both the FGDs were asked if there exists any dispute resolution mechanism (DRM) in their areas, most of them named the “elders” in their homes, who resolve the matter. Almost all the respondents replied with the perspective of “violence” and to their understanding violence is the only thing which can be given name as dispute. None of the participants talked about other disputes like property dispute, legal dispute, dispute on development in the area, etc. To them, “violence” is the only dispute. This shows their lack of exposure to the world and other matters. During the discussion on dispute resolution mechanism, their focus remained on violence against women.

During the probing session of this sub-theme, the respondents of urban-UC not only denied the presence of DRM but also challenged its functioning. This response shows that there exists some mechanism, however, their credibility among masses is a problem. Some of the participants told about the presence of DRM at Union Council (UC) level, though they were not aware about their proper names and functioning. But the same participants also said that most of the women avoid such mechanisms, and prefer to solve the problems at home.

Out of the total respondents of the urban FGD, almost half of the respondents were not aware about the presence of any such mechanisms. Some of the respondents, under the same sub-theme, highlighted another mechanism of “active women” to solve the disputes related to women. One respondent said:

“There are some women in the community, who are active and have worked with UCs and local nazims to get the women problems resolved.”

However, the same group of respondents admitted that probability to approach these active women is not high and thus problems are resolved at household level.

Almost all the respondents of urban FGD consider the existing DRM an ineffective technique to settle disputes. One of the participant from an urban UC said:

“We don’t take the recourse of police or legal system because it not only delays the matter but also leads to “more shame” for the family.”

More than half of the participants were in favour of the reliability of household mechanism and elders of their family to resolve such matters. The respondents not only highlighted it as a

reliable mechanism but also an effective mechanism. One of the respondents from an urban UC said:

“The problems of women get resolved at the household level, and not through outside mechanisms.”

Another participant responded subsequently:

“It is perceived bad in the family and community, if women take their disputes outside the house.”

The other respondent highlighted that

“Problems remain unresolved when taken outside the house.”

The respondents from rural-UC not only termed the family mechanism as the best mechanism to resolve female related problems, but they strongly suggested the solution of problems within the family. To sum up; “respect of the family”, “dignity at the societal level” and “chances of quick solution of problems” are some of the positive aspects associated with family mechanism.

Theme Three: Service Delivery

Third question posed to the participants of both the FGDs was related to ‘*Service Delivery*’. Sub-theme was followed by some questions such as:

- (i) *What is your opinion on the available education services/facilities in your area?*
- (ii) *What is your opinion on the available health services/facilities in your area?*
- (iii) *What is your opinion on the available water and sanitation services/facilities in your area?*

First Sub-theme: Education

While responding to these questions, female participants from urban area talked mostly about the private schools. Almost all the respondents said that primary, middle and higher middle level schools both in private and public sector are running in their areas.²

Most of the participants supported the private schooling and said they would prefer to send their children to private schools because students are taken care of, schools are located within the locality, and teachers remain present in the classrooms. One of the female participants from an urban UC was of the view that

²The respondents were representing both, public and private school children’s’ parents. However, most of them were the parents of private schools.

“Private schools are preferred due to number of reasons; children are not taken care of properly in government school, private schools are closer to their residences than the government schools and the government schools have high rate of teacher absenteeism”.

However, many respondents highlighted the other side of the picture of private schools, like the teachers working on low salaries and hiring of unqualified teachers. One respondent from an urban UC said:

“Teachers with very low qualification are hired by the private schools.”

Another respondent said:

“Private schools hire less qualified teachers and pay them low salaries.”

Almost all like-minded respondents linked the qualification with the quality of education. Thus, one of the respondents from an urban UC was of the view that:

“Although there are private schools in every street, quality of education is poor.”

Almost 90 per cent respondents highlighted the lack of technical educational institutions in their area. A female participant from an urban UC maintained:

“There are not enough technical and higher education institutions in the area.”

Contrary to the urban participants, respondents of the rural FGD appreciated the presence of higher educational institutions in their city. The difference in both the FGDs surfaced, as the rural participants envisioned the “city” while the urban participants talk about their “own area” only.

One respondent from a rural UC was of the view that

“There are a number of educational institutions for higher education in the area, including a medical college in Sialkot.”

The issue of increased number of teachers and their availability in the schools as compare to the past condition of government schools was highlighted by the participants of rural FGD. One of the participants from a rural UC stated:

“There are enough teachers at the schools and they are rarely absent from the school.”

Nevertheless, none of the participants of both the FGDs demanded the missing facilities in the educational institutions of their area.

Second Sub-Theme: Health

Under this sub-theme, most of the respondents pointed out the presence of a “General Hospital”³ in their area. However, when respondents were asked about the facilities offered by these hospitals, most of them termed it poor. Talking about the trend of private clinics being run by the doctors, they said doctors prefer to work in these clinics for long hours and thus neglect their duties in the government hospitals. Moreover, the respondents linked the private practice with higher consultation fees, which what they said could have been free if a patient is diagnosed in general hospital. One of the respondents from an urban UC stated:

“It is a common practice that the doctors, who work in government hospitals at daytime, also work in their private clinics in the evening. These doctors often ask patients to come to their clinics, so that they could charge high fees.”

When participants were asked about the filing of complaints against the issue, most of them recalled the inspection visits of health officer to make the doctors accountable. But, this accountability practice, the participants said, does not prolong. Once the officer completes the visit, doctors start practicing the same tricks, they said.

However, when female participants were specifically asked if they had ever got their grievances registered with authorities to hold the doctors or hospital administration accountable, almost all of them were unaware about the procedure to file complaints. And thus, no one has ever tried to file a case. Among others, a female participant from an urban UC said:

“We do not know the procedure or to whom we should complain when health services are not up to our satisfaction.”

Contrary to this, the responses of rural participants were entirely different. None of them talked about the presence of any major hospital in their village, however, basic health units (BHUs) were identified as major source of medical treatment.

The functioning of these BHUs was questioned by almost all respondents. A number of issues were highlighted by the participants such as absence of doctors, dispensers working as alternate to doctors, non-availability of medicines, etc. One of the respondents from a rural UC said:

“The health facilities are not adequate in villages and doctors remain absent from their duties at the health center. Dispenser is considered doctor. Moreover, medicines are not available in these BHUs.”

Besides, the respondents also highlighted that present number of BHUs cannot fulfil the community needs. Thus, rural areas have less and poor quality of health facilities.

³ A General Hospital means a government hospital?

Third Subtheme: Water and Sanitation

During the discussion under this theme, came to light a bleak picture of water and sanitation situation in Sialkot city. Water and Sanitation Department supplies water to almost every house, but it is highly contaminated that people cannot use it to take bath. One of the respondents from an urban UC said:

“The water is really dirty and stinky. It is not worth using for drinking or even for bathing.”

The respondents further highlighted that it is the dilapidated sanitation system of the city, which makes the drinking water tainted. Most of the sewerage system is underground, so it has not been repaired since long. Thus, the broken sewerage pipelines are mixed with the water pipelines as a result of which residents receive dirty and contaminated water. Yet, people have no choice but to get water by digging wells.

During an in-depth discussion, another side of the issue was highlighted by the respondents, which is related to industries in the city. Sialkot is an industrial city and has a number of industries mainly the leather industry. The waste or byproducts of these industries are not disposed of through proper channel but thrown into the city’s water sources. Resultantly, the underground water has got polluted and the residents are unable to access safe drinking water.

Some participants also pointed out the other sources of clean drinking water such as “water filtration plants” constructed by the city district government. Nonetheless, there comes a dependency element as most of the participants highlighted the dependency on “someone” who can go and fetch water from filtration plants for their families. One respondent from an urban UC said:

“Many households have to send someone to the two or three water filtration plants installed in some parts of Sialkot to bring clean drinking water for their families.”

When participants were further asked about the effects of water and sanitation conditions on health, they indicate towards a trend in increase of fatal diseases. One of the respondents from an urban UC said:

“Water and sanitation problems have led to the prevalence of many diseases in the area and this is why hepatitis is so common in Sialkot.”

When participants were asked if they had filed any complaint or taken steps to resolve these issues, not a single female participant replied in yes, though they had been facing the problem since years. However, most of the respondents said that they informed their male family members about such issues. One of the respondents from an urban UC said:

“We let the males and elders in the family know about any issue, and they resolve it whenever they get time.”

Conclusion

Most of the women appeared in the discussion stay at home and do not demand any deprived facilities. Moreover, most of them are not aware of accountability mechanisms practiced in their areas. Above all, most of the women think that highlighting of issues and asking for justice is the prerogative of men and not the women. However, the situations vary in intensity from urban areas to rural areas.

A general trend of low participation in political activities, i.e. casting of vote was observed in urban areas while it was comparatively higher in rural areas. However, most of the women in rural areas do not cast vote after analyzing and quantifying the better representative for their area but they just cast vote following the family trend.

In general, a low trend of casting vote came up during FGDs of both the areas. The reasons behind are CNIC non-availability, and social barriers to come out of home.

For the respondents of both FGDs, participation in politics was considered a next to impossible task. Most of the women do not even think of to be a leader. Moreover, a huge number of respondents linked participation in politics with “reputation of women”.

Domestic violence specifically beating of wives is one of the major violence against women in both rural and urban areas. Although participants of urban FGD did not highlight reasons behind such violence but “emancipation of women” was the main reason highlighted by rural participants of the FGD. At the accountability side and demand for justice, “education of women” has been highlighted as a major feature, which is the cause of increase in incidences of violence.

Most of the women are not aware about the presence of dispute resolution mechanism in their respective areas. “Elders of family” are considered the most effective source of dispute resolution. In case of any other mechanism, its effectiveness and credibility is challenged by the participants of both areas. “Active Woman” in the area is also another reliable source to solve disputes.

On the service delivery side, majority of the women do not complaint about any issue related to education, health, and water & sanitation despite facing acute problems. Women are dependent on the male family members and thus do not think about taking any initiative.

Owing to the factor of dependency on male, women are not able to create a sense of self-reliability and consequently sense of highlighting issues. However, there are other reasons as well, which do not allow women to be the part of accountability mechanism. Social and cultural barriers are the strongest factors women are captured with. Moreover, sometimes they do not want to get rid of such norms and customs and want to be part of the system. To generalize, all

these factors, together show that women of Pakistan cannot become the part of accountability mechanism in a substantial quantity. However, certain instances of active and strong women participation are there but it will take time to take women on board for this mechanism.

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