

The under-representation of women voices in Social Accountability narratives: An analysis of women centered approached to citizen participation

Abstract

The paper examines the ways in which new spaces and social formations have been utilised to elevate the participation of marginalized demographic groups like women in governance processes in contemporary Zimbabwe. High levels of inequality, poverty, citizen disenfranchisement and other challenges continue to affect social justice, community cohesion and women's inclusion. Social Accountability as a tool for bottom up development is a relatively new discipline in African governance. While its underpinnings are moored in citizen-led demands for the progressive realization of rights, it has been met with several contextual challenges and, in the case of women's participation, individual, institutional and structural barriers have curtailed its potential to effectively transform the lives of women. In this way, while social accountability processes have been handicapped by such barriers, thus creating difficulties for ordinary women to participate effectively, patriarchy has compounded such challenges even more so for women. Restrictions in the public sphere, which are strongly tied to patriarchy, with regards to women's participation have culminated in the underrepresentation of women voices. In respect of this, service delivery decisions at local and national levels tend to be devoid of women's voices yet poor service delivery adversely affects women given their gender roles within households. Because social accountability places emphasis on citizen-led demands in respect of improved performance of public service delivery, it has seen the emergence of social formations in the form of women-led organizations which provide 'safe spaces' to amplify the marginalized voices of women for improved participation and representation in governance processes.

1. Introduction

Economic inequality continues to shape the pattern of citizen participation, with studies pointing towards continuities in the relationship between economic decline and social informality and a demise in citizen participation in governance and democratic processes. The correlation between failing economies, informalization and declining citizen participation have further alienated

women from taking center stage in shaping governance discourse. While the third wave of democracy in Africa brought forth political emancipation, it did not deliver economic independence where locals own the means of production and this is most certainly true in the case of women. At the same time, women have become increasingly involved in informal trading and other income-generating projects, in the face of an absence of formal employment opportunities. This consists of women traders selling various wares which include clothes, fruits, vegetables, airtime, cellphones and toiletries. An independent source of income on their part may shift gendered power relations at household level and enhance their decision-making responsibilities. This also means that, as informal traders, women have been able to protect and promote their socio-economic rights. This has entailed the formation of loosely coordinated social formations, committees and associations, through which they are able to articulate their interests in the public sphere.

The gradual decline of the Zimbabwean economy has shifted the normative understanding of the gender defined roles of men and women. Due to patriarchy, a continuity from pre and post-colonial Zimbabwe, women's roles in society were understood within the confines of the household as caregivers and mothers. Within this understanding, the predominant roles of women, in their day to day lives, included cooking, washing, ironing, looking after the children and managing the household. Certainly, this held true for post-independence Zimbabwe where usually, a household would have the father being the sole bread winner, through formal employment in most cases, and the mother staying at home as a care giver. The adverse impact of such a set up meant women could not meaningfully participate in governance processes due to their 'dependence' on their male counterparts. As such, women's participation in local governance for example was very marginal. However, this scenario changed when the Zimbabwean economy began to shrink. The shrinking economy saw a rise in informal businesses with women occupying the role of breadwinner given high unemployment rates. The rise of women breadwinners saw the economic emancipation of women and income earners with the ability to expand their influence beyond their caregiving duties. While this enhance the position of women to contribute meaningfully at household level it did not ultimately translate to the same at local governance level due to existing masculinities in governance processes moored in patriarchy. In response to this bottleneck, women began

associating in loosely coordinated social formation which provided them with ‘safe spaces’ to engage on issues of concern to them.

The establishment of these social formations has witnessed the creation of ‘safe’ and ‘exclusive’ spaces for women to coalesce around issues of concern albeit on household and economic issues. Such formations have constituted of savings and lending clubs, sewing and knitting clubs and more commonly, in urban areas, money clubs (mikando/stokvels). Consequently, women centered civil society organizations noted the potential in leveraging on such formations and transformed these into organized community structures for local level engagement advocacy on governance and service delivery issues. These social formations became more coordinated and focused on local governance issues intent on ensuring women’s voices were included in governance discourse. While these safe spaces can be considered a deviation from the norm, they have had mixed success in achieving engendered service delivery as these platforms have not led to local government processes becoming more inclusive of women overall because of their failure to link with formal local governance processes, systems and structures.

Research informing this paper was conducted in Bulawayo, the second capital city of Zimbabwe with a contested population figure of 653, 337. The city has 29 Wards and 12 Constituencies. The study adopted a largely qualitative approach as its research method, as such primary data was collected through Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions and observation, interaction and informal questioning. These methods were underpinned by a multi staged sampling approach for both enumeration areas, wards, and respondents. Within Bulawayo itself, purposive non-random sampling was used to select specific wards for more focused study. These wards are 3, 6, 7, 9, 13, 18 and 26¹. Snowball nonprobability sampling was used for KIIs while purposive sampling was used to collect views during FGDs. Both methods were in line with interpretive sociology. Collected information was analyzed using content analysis where data was thematically arranged for purposes of analysis and presentation.

¹ Ward 3 (suburbs, Hume Park, Killarney, Orange Groove, Queens Park East, Romney Park, Sunnyside), Ward 6 (Bellevue, Newton West, Barham Green, Montrose, West-Somerton, Southwold, Donnington), Ward 7 (Makokoba, Thorngrove Industries, Thorngrove Rented, Thorngrove, Westgate, Steeldale, Westondale), Ward 9 (Mpopoma, Matshobana, Kelvin North 2), Ward 13 (Iminyela, Mabuthweni, Pelandaba, Kelvin North), Ward 18 (Old Magwegwe, New Magwegwe, Portion of Magwegwe West East of Intemba Road) and Ward 26 (Emganwini 1 and 2).

This paper posits that while poor service delivery by local authorities affects their daily lives, women have largely remained on the margins of local authority plans, policies and programs. Hence, local government processes in large part are configured around masculine politics framed in terms of patriarchal norms and networks pushing women to create alternative/informal 'safe spaces' in order to respond to structural and institutional barriers affecting their participation in governance processes. Resultantly, these safe spaces have been viewed as a deviation and counter-hegemonic stance by women and women's group to compel local authorities to include women's voices in decision making. As such, these spaces have achieved limited outcomes in shaping service delivery largely because of their failure to link with formal local governance processes perpetuating marginality and the systematic disenfranchisement of women.

2. Methodology

The research methodology underpinning this paper entails a purely qualitative approach. This involved a case study research design as supported by several qualitative research methods, notably Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), semi-structured interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and the use of primary documentation. The adoption and use of various research methods facilitated the triangulation of empirical evidence and, in the process, enhanced reliability and validity. In this regard, the paper was based on a post-positivist epistemology and ontology consistent more specifically with interpretive sociology. Thus, there was no attempt to identify and establish statistically formulated causal relationships. Rather, the focus was on understanding the social practices of various actors and the ways in which these were informed by subjective meanings as well as conditioned by broader structural conditions. Further, this involved a relational sociology insofar as practices are acted out in and through the socio-political relationships in which actors are embedded.

As noted, the paper used a case study research design (focusing on Bulawayo) in order to understand the relationship between citizen participation, urban governance and SA. As indicated by Creswell (1994), case studies do not allow for statistical generalisation but, importantly, they are generalisable to theoretical propositions (King et al. 1994; Gilgun 2001). They are generalisable to theory in the sense that investigating the case study is facilitated and illuminated

by a theoretical framing and, additionally, the case study findings may be used in refining prevailing theory about the particular social phenomenon under investigation (such as citizen participation, urban governance and social accountability). The case study approach entails studying social phenomena through the understanding and analysis of an individual case, which forms part of a broader class of cases of that particular social phenomenon. The unit of study (or case) then becomes the subject of reasonably in-depth examination and investigation.

Bulawayo itself, as a case study, was not selected on a random sampling basis. Because of this, the case study of Bulawayo is not representative of urban governance in contemporary Zimbabwe in any strong statistical sense, though it may provide insights into the social and political processes embodying urban governance more broadly in the country. Within Bulawayo itself, purposive non-random sampling was used to select specific wards for more focused study. These wards are 3, 6, 7, 9, 13, 18 and 26. Purposive sampling is designed to identify particular sub-cases (so to speak) within the overall case under study (with wards being the sub-cases in this respect). Though it is sometimes used because of the researcher's inability to engage in random sampling (due to, for instance, the unavailability of a well-defined universe), at other times it is used because the research focus and objective could be more ably pursued by way of non-random sampling. It thus involves a particular resolve on the part of the researcher to include certain sub-cases (with a particular set of key characteristics) which are specifically relevant to the focus and objective (Punch 2004). This was the key issue with reference to purposive sampling of wards.

Additionally, the research collected and utilised primary documentation relating to government activities as well as civil society groups involved in governance issues in Bulawayo. These were collected straight from the relevant state or civic body or collected independently from relevant archival sources. As such, the study gathered for instance council minutes, programme and donor reports from CSOs and various government proclamations to analyse the content for a better understanding of the distinctions between policy and practice.

3. Findings and discussions

The type of political leadership and citizen participation in Zimbabwe entails patriarchal arrangements (Jackson 2003) which permeate the social, political and economic formations in Bulawayo. The power

relations within households in Bulawayo's communities is marked by male domination, i.e. ruled by household-based patriarchs. Additionally, as culturally defined, women tend to be confined to this domestic sphere (Hine 2000), with the public sphere (the economy and polity) said to be the space for male participation. This undercuts women's ability to access public platforms. Despite this, if not because of it, most Bulawayo City Council policies and programmes and social accountability processes have been largely gender blind and unresponsive to the direct needs of women. As a result, the high levels of inequality, poverty, disease, citizen disenfranchisement and other challenges that affect the efficacy of local governance processes have not addressed the specific concerns of women. In this way, while local governance processes have been curtailed by fear in the context of a strong state presence and have thus created difficulties for ordinary citizens to participate effectively, patriarchy has compounded these challenges even more so for women in Bulawayo. Certainly, the lack of strong women centered mechanisms and frameworks has a direct relationship with poor service delivery, and poor service delivery negatively affects women due to their gender role within households.

Economic inequality remains a constant feature of post-colonial Zimbabwe. Additionally, this inequality tends to trickle from top to bottom and when it percolates the bottom tiers of society it takes a female form. The inability of women to access and own the means of production, coupled with low employment rates, has seen ordinary women being pushed to the precipice of the economic stratum. Their position of lack has pushed their existence and issues to the periphery promoting marginality and disenfranchisement. However, with the prominence of the informal economy in Zimbabwe, women have seized the opportunity by venturing into informal trading, adding the sale of wares into their day to day activities. This has seen women assume the position of income earners and contributing household earnings. In so doing, women have gradually changed from a position of dependence to contributor. Consequently, this has seen women assume more prominent positions in the household from caregivers, to income earners and decision makers, albeit at household level.

This situation has seen the caregiving role of women change overtime as women have transcended economic, social, and cultural barriers, largely through informal means, to become more assertive at household levels. While the condition of women at household level has gradually shifted, outside the confines of the household structural, individual, and institutional barriers have remained in place with patriarchy shaping public sphere where women exist. Considering this, the economic emancipation of women has seen the formation of loose social and associational groups that provide safe spaces for

women to participate in governance processes. Through such formations, economically empowered women have increased their participation in governance issues especially around issues of service delivery, however such women have been labelled as troublemakers by their male counterparts.

The study established that there is underrepresentation of women in local governance processes in Bulawayo due to their inaccessibility to public spaces for their voices to be heard. Most respondents therefore highlighted the lack of vibrant representation of women within such mechanisms. Women participants during a focus group discussion lamented the fact that, for instance, budget consultation meetings are organised on short notice and the time scheduled for these meetings usually clashed with their daily duties. The gradual decline in the Zimbabwe's economy has led to a corresponding deterioration in service delivery standards. For instance, in 2016, the Bulawayo City Council introduced a 72-hour weekly water rationing schedule due to the dwindling volume of water in the supply dams, poor infrastructure connecting the city's reservoirs and supply dams, and the lack of resources to purchase purification chemicals.

This situation adversely affected women as they would be in queues to fetch water from communal boreholes at the expense of engaging in other activities. At the same time, women have become increasingly involved in informal trading and other income-generating projects, in the face of an absence of formal employment opportunities. This consists of women traders selling various wares which include clothes, fruits, vegetables, air-time, cell-phones and toiletries. An independent source of income on their part may shift gendered power relations at household level and enhance their decision-making responsibilities. It has also meant that, as informal traders, women have been able to protect and promote their socio-economic rights. This has entailed the formation of loosely coordinated social formations, committees and associations, through which they are able to articulate their interests in the public realm. An example of such an organisation is the Bulawayo Vendors and Traders Association which creates platforms for vendor interests to be heard by facilitating social accountability dialogues between vendors and local government decision makers. However, these engagements have not led to SA processes becoming more inclusive of women overall in Bulawayo.

The disenfranchisement of women in local governance processes in Bulawayo has hampered the ability of demand side actors (civil society groups) to effectively coalesce as a collective to ensure that the BCC is accountable to service users. The absence of collective actions that include pronounced women's perspectives undermines the importance of inclusiveness of citizen participation, thus

rendering responses by the supply-side of the chain inadequate due to the absence of the key concerns of women. In this sense, patriarchy systems have in a sense perpetually colluded with state authoritarianism, at local government level, over the years to marginalise women from participating in and benefiting equitably from local governance processes. Most of the work around local governance in Bulawayo is driven by civil society, and civil society activism in Bulawayo emanates from a deeply entrenched culture and practice of masculinities which leads to the instrumentalisation of women. Key civil society actors in social accountability in Bulawayo claim though that, while women's voices are seemingly side-lined, this is not because the issues being addressed were packaged to appeal to males only. Rather, women hardly participated actively in such processes. Of course, the failure of women to participate is a manifestation of the patriarchal practice of women remaining silent in the presence of men. Creating separate spaces for women to meet on their own, apart from men, has provided a stronger platform for women to participate in local governance processes.

Throughout the study, there were consistent innuendos pointing to the fact that women have largely remained on the margins of local authority plans, policies and programmes. Hence, local government processes including around social accountability in large part are configured around a masculine politics framed in terms of patriarchal norms and networks. The depiction of women, from the perspective of central and local government, continues to be reduced to the "motherly figure" as in their household and caregiving activities. In response to this, new social formations have been established to carve space for the participation of women in public processes. Such formations have been transformed into formal organized forms of civil society bent on seeing the proliferation women's organizations which specialize in local governance and accountability issues. Such formations have been established and subscribed to by women to ensure engendered perspectives particularly on resource allocation and public expenditure at local level.

The study also established that in instances where women are consulted and effectively engage in public processes, it is a window-dressing measure to give the impression that women's voices are incorporated. For example, women participants interviewed noted that even in spaces where they were invited, women were relegated to the less important tasks such as saying the opening prayer or giving the vote of thanks. Another participant raised the point that women's participation was treated as cosmetic as it was not rooted in most of the duty bearers' ideology or philosophy. Challenging patriarchal procedures clearly is crucial and in so doing women have begun to convene associational spaces where duty bearers are invited to such spaces to hear women's concerns on service delivery

issues. However, such spaces are not organically convened by individual women but through women's organizations occupied with gender and equality issues. Inadvertently, such formations have created quasi-local government structures which co-exist uneasily with formal structures of local governance creating tensions between duty bearers and women in governance sphere. The formation of these social movements, in this regard, can be understood within the notion of counter-hegemony as protest to the sidelining of women in governance processes at local level. Secondly, the absence of spaces which are amenable, sensitive and responsive to the disparate service delivery needs of women and men has prompted the formation of such spaces.

One can argue that the emergence of these new spaces is in direct response to the existing status quo where women are sidelined in key decision making processes at local level. While such spaces have created space for women's participation they have adversely diluted the collective bargaining potential of service users as a social base for meaningful engagement with decision makers. Additionally, such formations have excluded the key voices of other service users beyond the sex/gender divide creating a situation of reverse discrimination/marginalization as such platforms are exclusive to women and local governance feedback from a largely feminist view-point.

While the establishment of associational formations which provide safe and exclusive spaces for women's participation in local governance issues have helped bring their issues to the fore, these have not helped alleviate challenges associated with patriarchy regarding women's participation in local governance. Women's spaces have been and continue to be treated as quasi-local government structures bent on causing trouble and not providing solutions for local authorities. Considering this, a blockade has continued to exist between these new spaces and formal local government processes, institutions and structures. While women have been established platforms where they can coalesce and engage, even with duty bearers, on their own terms, these spaces fall short in translating the dissenting voices of women into meaningful service delivery changes. This failure is largely due to the inability of these spaces to attract the attention of key decision makers in local governance as they are viewed with mistrust by solution holders. Coupled with that, the lack of social will by women's groups to link these parallel structures of citizen participation to formally recognized systems and processes of local government have undercut the potential of such spaces to tie women's voices to local governance processes. While these formation and spaces can be considered a shift from the normative pattern of citizen participation, in response to patriarchy, it has to some extent reinforced the marginalization of women's voices as local governance continues to be a male dominated sphere.

4. Conclusion

The paper provided an analysis and understanding of the influence of normative socio-cultural dynamics which influence women's participation in governance issues in Bulawayo. The study offered a picture of the prevalent and dominant socio-cultural constructs in Bulawayo and how these pattern the participation of women in governance processes. The contribution, based on a broad survey of Bulawayo's wards, tried to highlight the general characteristics of Bulawayo's attitudes and perceptions regarding the participation of women in economic, social and political spaces. It explains what the socio-cultural norms and values are, where they emanate from, how they impact women's participation in local governance processes of Bulawayo.

It further analyses the emerging social spaces and gender relations. To understand how these concepts operate in practice, we have to know the type of people and community in which they appear. The social and historical experiences of people in Bulawayo have shaped the interaction they have with institutions, policies and processes in general. These experiences have contributed to the outcomes of civic participation in Bulawayo's communities. All these experiences and others have determined the level of inclusion, exclusion and involvement of women in shaping local governance policies. Relationships and social spaces have been created within the local governance arena. The main aim of the paper is to understand how the socio-cultural context drives women's participation through the appreciation socio-cultural values and norms that include institutional, individual and structural barriers from contrasting backgrounds, ages, beliefs and gender.

While barriers to women's participation exist at multiple levels, these have created new opportunities and spaces for women to coalesce on local governance issues. Notwithstanding existing social forms of marginality, which continue to disenfranchise females, women have used the informal economy as a springboard to gradually make decisions at household level. However, this newfound space has only been confined to the home space where women, in their daily activities have increase household income. Due to entrenched masculinities within the public sphere access to public space and processes have remained a challenge largely due to local governance processes simply reproducing patriarchal exclusions. In response to such obstacles, women have resorted to establishing new social formations

and community structures which offer exclusive spaces for women to participate in local governance processed outside traditional forms of citizen participation in local governance processes. This has seen an emergence of new spaces essential to inclusion and accommodating dissenting voices from women. However, while these spaces have afforded women the opportunity to speak out, they have failed to directly impact local governance decision. This has been attributed to their failure to link new spaces with existing formal local governance processes, systems, institutions and actors.

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