

Women, agency and responsive governance

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2015 took place on 23-26 November 2015 and was jointly organised by the Government of Malta (host) and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2015 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of "What Makes Resilient Societies?" It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF2015 series elaborates on the issues covered in the Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience.

Introduction

At CPF 2015, participants convened to explore the Forum's overarching theme of resilience with a dedicated session on the theme of "Women's Agency and Responsive Governance." The goal of the session was to understand how civil society could make institutions accountable to women's voices and women's needs; and to understand how governance systems can deal with the challenge of inclusion.

Key discussion points

The session set out to critique the principle of individual choice when applied to women's demands in policymaking. A reflection on the struggle for sexual health and reproductive rights illustrated how governance issues or failures can cause or exacerbate the vulnerability of women.

Policy responses to women's choices

Both institutions and governance systems determine the choices that that matter. Individual choice and market dominance

constitute fundamental principles of many prevailing governing systems and determine access to resources and service provision. However, the concept of "individual choice" is often challenged when women and other marginalised voices assert control of their own bodies or exercise self-determination of their territories. For example, "women's choices" on

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sexual health and reproductive rights are often not addressed or receive inadequate attention in public policies, which often emphasise social control over female sexuality and reproduction. In many countries, schools do not teach reproductive rights, as the issue may be considered a sexual taboo, even while forming part of the official education curriculum.

The issue of reproductive rights was only endorsed as part of the Sustainable Development Goals after intense lobbying from women's groups in many countries, since at national and international levels there was no consensus on reproductive rights.

This shows there is a contradictory narrative in policy making with regards to women's choices and women's needs. Societies, which ostensibly embrace the principle of individual choice often ignore women's choices based on principles, values and morals which are expressions of male-controlled systems.

Women's vulnerability increases when policies and initiatives that address their needs are not created or implemented. For example, the lack of implementation of policies challenging violence against women condemn them to harm, hardship and destitution.

Institutions committed to gender equality can challenge these biases in governance systems. Strengthening initiatives that support women's rights and gender equality would be a good way to generate an inclusive governance response to women's voices. Holding agencies accountable for a lack of adequate women's focus in policy making can be an effective way to open up spaces for women's choices. These approaches must recognise that action to address gender inequality, discrimination and marginalisation is not confined to policy and constitutional reform alone, but also embraces change in social norms and practices.

Structures to support women's representation and participation

Women's agency cannot be denied. Historically, women have shown the ability to shout, push, and change things. Women have, can and will mobilise for change. The women's movement has diversified the range of tools and approaches used to achieve and express their voice. Resilient societies are successfully built when women's voices are heard and integrated into policies. Open channels for inclusion guarantee women's meaningful representation.

Women's resilience and agency are directly linked to inclusive and responsive societies. Women have always been resilient in the face of adversity and served as a reference point for societies seeking to become resilient.

There have been notable improvements in some aspects of gender representation within the Commonwealth, including in Parliaments but this does not necessarily lead to gender equality. It offers no assurance that improved representation will necessarily be sensitive to women's rights. Strengthened female representation in governance systems, including in national Parliaments, has failed to translate into stronger voice and women's agency, with party political allegiance often setting the agenda on women's agency and voice. This has resulted in a continuing lack of progress in advancing women's sexual, economic and social rights. Women's inclusive, full and equitable participation in governance is also hindered by the absence of sound and supportive policies

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(e.g. social security) and networks. Women find it difficult to divorce, to enter politics and to affect a range of other actions, which are more easily achieved by men, because of a lack of adequate support structures.

Rural women in particular lack the necessary support structures to enable effective participation and face more significant deprivation and marginalisation. There is a substantial gap between the actual circumstances experienced by rural women and the understanding at national level of the challenges they face. Discussion alone is insufficient to solve these challenges.

Educational, religious and traditional systems are all needed, in order empower and advocate on behalf of women. In the long run, a critical mass is needed to achieve fundamental improvements in women's participation in governance. Gender representation can better translate into more effective women's agency and responsive governance systems by training political parties and both women and men in positions of leadership on the importance of governance that is responsive to women's issues.

Addressing invisible power and strengthening accountability

Dominant and hegemonic narratives of governance and resilience foster invisible forms of power, which deny women's agency and precipitate unresponsive and discriminatory governance systems.

Three particular sources of invisible power are frequently manifested. Firstly, the presence of a public and private divide. This provides space for discriminatory practices to be identified and addressed in the public realm, while ignored and tacitly condoned in the private realm. Secondly through the presence of multiple legal codes, with no clear boundaries between formal legislation, customary laws and religious laws. Customs are often treated as laws and then interpreted by male leadership, leading to gender-based outcomes. Thirdly, through control of financial resources, with many civil society organisations demanding better government accountability, yet vulnerable due to their dependence on funding from the very same institution.

Women's vulnerabilities are also amplified when there is a lack of both accountability and implementation of policies. Impunity where there is a failure to implement is a major factor perpetuating vulnerability. While there is evidence of empowerment taking place at both grassroots and policy levels, inequality remains a common occurrence. Consequently, there is a strong need for transparent systems of governance and for improved knowledge among policy makers of the realities faced by communities and people on the ground.

Education is crucial to enhance agency

Education is crucial both as a catalyst for transformation and inclusion and as an enabler of more responsive governance. Its contribution to gender inclusiveness, participation and societal resilience is multifaceted. Education is key to understanding and addressing abuse; and school children need to learn together what constitutes abuse. In some Commonwealth countries, a large majority of the population experience forms of violence, while child marriage is a common occurrence. At the same time, in some countries women hold powerful leadership roles and the enrolment of girls in education and other formal sectors make them more involved and visible. Yet

in many countries girls tend to remain deprived of access to education. While this scenario is changing, education is important to empower and invest in women in all sectors of society. Education needs to take place outside the school; and there should be openness to discussing violence against women, with wider access to empowering, high-quality, life-oriented education promoted. Indeed, education forms an extended part of an overall support structure for women.

Moving forward

The Malta Declaration on Governance for Resilience emphasised several key policy initiatives warranting early action; and highlighted a host of challenges impeding the building of resilience through women's agency, as well as opportunities to do so. A strong role has been identified for Commonwealth civil society.

Governance systems can address the challenge of inclusion only when they effectively tackle exclusion, stigma and discrimination in the designing of public policies, so enhancing women's choices; and through a process of education of both empowered boys and girls where socialisation processes are questioned and challenged.

Women can obtain real benefits from a multi-level governance structure, when the national level agrees to protect, promote and reinforce women's rights through service provision. At the same time a lack of access to basic sexual health and rights represents another governance failure for women.

The Commonwealth Foundation can also support these initiatives, including through analysis, research, the convening of policy and stakeholder dialogues, consensus-building and through supporting national, regional and international civic advocacy.

The Foundation can also initiate comparative policy studies on good practices among Commonwealth civil society organisations in contributing to information dissemination, to policy implementation and to the effective mobilisation of funding for initiatives that strengthen women's support systems.

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