



## GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: THE POSSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL AUDIT AS A SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM

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### Abstract

*Sexual and reproductive health rights encompasses women's right to have control over and decide freely and responsibility on matters related with sexuality, sexual health, marriage, reproduction, fertility control and access to maternal and child health care. In order to understand the existing inequalities, gender has to be problematized as a social and relational process. Mainstreaming gender in reproductive health needs focused integration of gender as a social determinant in ensuring reproductive health policies and programmes across the world. Addressing the existing inequalities in the system requires independent and accountable measures by ensuring community participation from the beginning of conceptualization till the evaluation process. The possibilities of social audit as an accountability mechanism in gender mainstreaming of reproductive health could be explored.*

*Social audit is a comprehensive and transparent community participation method, in which stakeholders could involve in the process at different levels. It emphasises the right based framework by making shift from beneficiaries to citizens. In doing social audit, communities could involve in dialogue and creation of knowledge. It would help to challenge the existing gender discriminations and structural inequalities which restricts the exercise of sexual and reproductive health rights of women in its full potential. A systematic social audit could produce and share the local voices and reliable evidences based on their needs and lived experiences. Thus it could act as a social accountability measure of mainstreaming gender in reproductive health choices and decisions of women.*

**Key Words:** *Gender mainstreaming, Reproductive Health, Social Audit, Social Accountability Mechanism, Community Participation.*



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### Background

Sexual and reproductive health is a key determinant of women's health. International convention on population and development laid the foundation of sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights and made a drastic shift from family planning approach to the right based sexual and reproductive health approach. It encompasses women's right to have control over and decide freely and responsibility on matters related with sexuality, sexual health, marriage, reproduction, fertility control and access to maternal and child health care. Women's and girls' ability to exercise free and informed choices regarding their sexual and reproductive health rights is a central component in ensuring gender equality. Thus the denial of the rights is a cause as well as a consequence of gender inequality.



Women and girls in and across the world and communities face discrimination even though the intensity is varied according to the existing gender norms and cultural practices. Unequal relationships and structural inequalities have powerful influence on the reproductive health choices and decisions of women. It not only perpetuates but also aggravates the existing gender inequality.

### **Gender Mainstreaming in Reproductive Health**

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are the cornerstone of the development of women. It is vital to improve the reproductive health status of women in order to decrease the existing gender inequality. Understanding gender as a social determinant of reproductive health is essential to address the equity gap in reproductive health status of women across the world. Gender mainstreaming provides systematic approaches to redress the gender inequalities and differences from the beginning of conceptualization to till the monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. “It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres, such that inequality between men and women is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality” (ECOSOC,1997)

Gender mainstreaming is a progressive and strategic mechanism to challenge the relational, institutional and contextually specific nature of gender and its impact on reproductive health outcomes of women. It tries to deconstruct the existing hierarchical relation of men, women and transgenders in society and to maximize the opportunities and resources in order to attain higher reproductive health standards.

The reproductive health experiences are shaped by the deprivations and privileges caused by these structural factors in relation with their specific local contexts and identities. Mainstreaming gender in reproductive health requires sensitive and effective measures to explore these equations and emphasises the need of concrete actions at different levels (Magar, 2015). Mainstreaming gender should happen at the levels of preparation, planning, deciding, implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Political will, gender equity policies, disaggregated data, comprehensive knowledge on gender relations, funds and human resources, participation and decision making of women in political and personal life are the necessary prerequisites for the gender mainstreaming process. (Strasbourg, 1998).

Mainstreaming gender in reproductive health needs monitoring of inequalities in policies. Understanding the existence of inequalities and gender vulnerabilities with a reference to local context along with the data disaggregated by multiple factors like sex, class, caste, ethnicity, economic status etc.. is integral to the mainstreaming process (Hosseinpoor et al., 2015). People – centred, gender sensitive and independent accountability measures can mobilize communities to participate in their full potential to reduce the effect of various barriers in accessing the reproductive health services (Hunt, 2015).

### **Role of Social Accountability Mechanisms and Community Participation in Mainstreaming Gender**

Social accountability is a potential mechanism to ensure community participation in accessing reproductive health services. Information, dialogue and negotiation are the key factors of an accountability measure and it help to deconstruct the power hierarchies between different stakeholders (George, 2003). Gender mainstreaming and sustainable development goals emphasises the need for social accountability measures through community participation methods and the 2030 Agenda provides possibilities for national health accountability strategies in order to ensure social accountability through claiming the rights of community (Friedman, 2016). The Global Strategy for



Women's, Children's and Adolescent's Health 2016-2030, proposes nine key elements in order to accelerate better health standards and effective accountability mechanisms is one among them. It also recommends an enhanced Accountability Framework to redress the existing gaps in the system and also to meet the health needs of the vulnerable communities. It aims to "establish a clear structure and system to strengthen accountability at the country, regional and global levels and between different sectors" (WHO, 2015).

Community based actions can improve the reproductive health outcomes by using flexible resources and different platforms to monitor the health services. This can be addressed by three key elements; awareness raising, community monitoring and dialogue with authorities (George et al., 2018). Community mobilization and participation is key actor in ensuring access to reproductive health services to the marginalised sections in the society. Greater stakeholder participation would help to build sustainable social accountability measures grounded on right based framework (Marston et al., 2016). It can influence the governance, policies, health beliefs, social relations and status, reproductive and maternal status of women, availability and accessibility of maternal and child health services, and also would help to empower the women by making collective demands on the basis of their lived experiences (Hamal et al., 2018).

A wide range of social accountability methods by ensuring community participation are used to monitor and evaluate the reproductive health policies and programmes. Social audits, community based monitoring, community linked maternal death reviews, report cards, and score cards are proven social accountability measures. These social accountability mechanisms are capable to mobilize and empower communities in order to claim their rights through collective efforts (Marston et al., 2016). It would help to redress the existing gaps in the attainment of reproductive health needs of marginalised communities such as women, children adolescents, disabled, dalits and tribals.

### **Social Audit as a Social Accountability Mechanism**

Social audit is an ongoing process in which, the stakeholders and the potential beneficiaries of a particular project, programmes, schemes or policies are able to participate from the formulation to the monitoring and evaluation of that particular project or programme. In most of the health policies especially in the reproductive health policies, the concerns of the communities were never reflected in the policy documents. It is a respond to the voices of the communities and it could be used as an effective mechanism in order to improve the efficiency of health service delivery and thereby could meet the health needs of the particular communities (Hausmann-Muela, 2011).

Social audit has been introduced as a social accountability mechanism in which communities are identifying and actively engaging in the health matters and thereby participating in the policy formulation. It is based on the right based framework by ensuring local democratic process and thereby increasing the decision making capacity of the communities by hearing their voices and lived experiences from their intersectional position in specific contexts. Social audit is a community based method to make governments accountable in the reproductive health service delivery by providing communities an access the system. It helps to reconstruct the existing power hierarchies in the governance and planning system. It is based on the idea of critical consciousness by collective community efforts (Puri & Lahariya, 2011).

### **Current status of Social audit in Reproductive Health Services in India**

Over the last few decades, social audits have been happening around the world and especially in the health sector. It developed over these years and the current third generation phase includes detailed, in- depth and high level research methods in order to create evidence based claims to ensure the rights of the communities (Andersson, 2011). In India,



social audit practice got momentum with the formulation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and it explicitly ask for the social audit as an accountability and transparent mechanism in order to strengthening the participatory democracy at grass root level. Social audits are mandated by parliament and governments executive orders across ten welfare programmes which also includes National Food Security Act, Persons with Disabilities Act, Meghalaya Community Participation and Public Services Social Audit Act, 2017, National Social Assistance Programme Guidelines, Swacch Bharat Mission Guidelines, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana Guidelines, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Guidelines, Building and other Construction Workers Act and Juvenile Justice Act. Along with that, various non-government organisations and civil society movements in India are engaged in conducting social audits of various welfare schemes and programmes including integrated child development schemes, mining sectors, forest rights and tribal health cooperatives. The political will is very much essential to mandate this in all facets of development and welfare programmes.

Although very few welfare programmes are included the mandate of doing social audit as accountability, transparent and participatory measure but still last few years shows more acceptance to the social audit process. It includes the areas of food security, disabled rights, basic infrastructure, social assistance and livelihood. Even though social audits have been happening across the world in health sector, India has to still mandate the social audits practices in health sector especially in ensuring sexual and reproductive health rights of women, girls and transwomen.

#### **Possibilities of Social Audit in Mainstreaming Gender in Reproductive Health**

Gender mainstreaming intends to transform the existing gender imbalances and accelerate gender equality. It needs different actors in the process, through which the structural frameworks would be sensitized to the existing inequalities (Strasbourg, 1998). According to Puri and Lahariya (2011), social audit is a participatory and a multi-perspective approach in which it aims to reflect the concerns of the communities or stakeholders involved with it. This would help to bring the voices and experiences of men, women and transgenders in the social audit process and thus social audit could act as a medium through which mainstreaming gender in reproductive health can be achieved.

Mainstreaming gender in reproductive health needs disaggregated data in order to understand the intensity and varied positions of stakeholders involved in it. Collecting disaggregated data is the first step in doing social audit and it would facilitate audit process by giving insights to the prevailing inequalities in the system (Andersson, 2011; Andersson & Roche, 2010). Health policies focus on household as a unit of analysis. Gathering disaggregated data will benefit to understand the specific reproductive health needs of the women and create spaces for dialogues and negotiations with the structural factors as well as with the communities itself. It would lead to the effective engagement of communities in the social audit process by enabling them with adequate data.

Gender mainstreaming instructs to problematize gender in relation with other institutional mechanisms such as socio-economic and political dimensions. It acknowledges the interlinkages between the various structural factors on the realisation of health needs of the vulnerable communities. Social audit is a multidirectional method in which it also focuses on the significance of these multiple structural factors on effective reproductive health service delivery. Regular and transparent social audits can challenge the gender norms and cultural constraints embedded in our legal and policy frameworks. Thus social audit as a social accountability mechanism possess the ability to reconstruct the prevailing gender inequalities in the system like the way mainstreaming gender in reproductive health intends to do.



### Conclusion

Mainstreaming gender in reproductive health requires involvement of different gender in the process. It is not only women specific and it should be understood as an evolving relational concept. Social audit provides a platform in which the entire communities or different stakeholders could effectively engage in the process and it leads to the realization of gender mainstreaming in reproductive health services. It further leads to achieve the full potential of reproductive health standards by ensuring multiple actors participation in the process. Effective engagements with micro and macro dynamics in social audit promises the possibilities of it as a social accountability mechanism in safeguarding gender mainstreaming in reproductive health rights of women.

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