



Towards Inclusive Systems

Understanding Adolescent Girls'
Engagement, Challenges, and Demands
for System-led Accountability

About ICRW

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute, with regional hubs in Washington D.C., United States; New Delhi, India; Kampala, Uganda; and Nairobi, Kenya. Established in 1976, ICRW conducts research to identify practical, actionable solutions to advance the economic and social status of women and girls around the world. ICRW Asia's thematic focal areas include access to education and livelihoods, adolescent empowerment, gender-based violence, masculinities, gender inequitable attitudes, HIV prevention, and violence against women and girls. For more information, please visit - www.icrw.org/asia

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AG – Adolescent Girls

AAC – Area Advisory Council

BLCPC – Block Level Child Protection Committee

CBO – Community-based organization

CCID – Community Centre for Integrated Development

CFAM – Child Friendly Accountability Mechanism

CSA – Centre for the Study of Adolescence

CSO – Civil Society Organisation

CPC – Child Protection Committee

DCPU – District Child Protection Unit

DM – District Magistrate

DSWO – District Social Welfare Officer

GAC – Girls Advisory Committee

GLD – Girl-led Discussions

ICDS – Integrated Child Development Services

IPPF – International Planned Parenthood Foundation

MHM – Menstrual Health Management

PRI – Panchayati Raj Institution

SCPS – Superintendent of Police (SP)

SHG – Self Help Groups

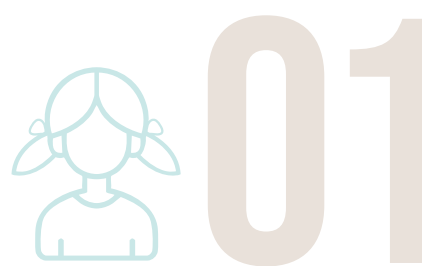
VDC – Village Development Committee

VLCP – Village Level Child Protection Committee

YW – Young Women

WHO – World Health Organisation

INTRODUCTION



Adolescence is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as individuals between the age of 10-19 years. It is a transitional phase where individuals are neither children nor adults, facing unique challenges physically, mentally, and emotionally. This period is critical as it shapes their future well-being and opportunities, making it essential to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of adolescents. While global frameworks like the Convention on the Rights of Child and many national laws define an individual under the age of 18 as a child; whereas adolescence brings specific challenges which require a different approach than that needed for children under the age of 10.

Adolescents in general encounter pubertal changes and accruing from them body image issues, vulnerability to substance abuse, unhealthy relationships, and violence. This is also the stage when adolescents feel the pressure to adhere to gender norms and imitate culturally dominant identities due to peer pressure and lack of guidance (WHO & UNICEF, 2021; Global Youth Advisory Board –Qualitative Research Report; GEAS, 2021). Gender norms play an important role in shaping mental health outcomes for adolescents of all genders. The messages from the media, family and peers inform them subconsciously about the correct gendered

performance and they are often punished if subverted (UNICEF, South Asia, 2024 and Action Aid, 2022).

Adolescent girls (AGs)¹ face even more difficult situations such as child, early and forced marriage, globally 19% of girls get married before the age of 18. The prevalence of child marriage is the highest in West and Central Africa, where nearly 4 in 10 young women were married before attaining the age of 18 (UNICEF, n.d.a). They face increased risk of sexual and physical violence (UNICEF, 2014) and intimate partner violence. Globally, 1 in 3 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have been the victims of any emotional, physical or sexual violence committed by their husbands or partners at some point in their lives (UNICEF, 2014). Around the world, 119 million girls are out of schools (UNICEF, n.d.b) and 30% of the girls are out of secondary education in South Asia. Girls also face aggravated health issues like anemia (30% of AGs and women of reproductive age worldwide (WHO, 2014); almost 40%-50% of AGs in many Indian states (Kumari et al., 2017) were found mildly anemic and almost 5-10% had severe anemia due to menstruation and nutritional deficiency). In addition, there is persistence of period poverty, as at least 1 in 10 women and girls in rural areas across 12 countries did not have a private place to wash and change during their last period (UNICEF, 2023).

¹ In the report, the terms adolescent girls, AGs and girls have been used interchangeably.



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Furthermore, low confidence and low self-image accruing to stereotypical images of beauty also hits the confidence of girls; as Jain et al. (2023) and Romo et al. (2016) points out. However, Archard (2011) argues that educational achievement of girls is often applauded and mistaken for a signifier of high confidence in girls. His study found that many high achievers may have low self-confidence as it is related to gender norms and body image issues. The impact of COVID-19 has made the life conditions even worse for girls as the rate of child marriage went up during the impoverishment of families during the pandemic. Many girls also had to drop out of the schools and remained out of the formal education system². The increase in domestic violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic was termed as Shadow pandemic by UN Women (2021).

This study found that students, unemployed girls and women suffered more violence inside homes or public spaces during the pandemic.

As the above paragraphs highlight the disproportionate impact of gender norms on adolescent girls, it is also important to highlight that girls belonging to socio-economic marginalized backgrounds face heightened challenges and pressures. Girls from rural and lower income households are more susceptible to the disempowerment caused by digital divide, early marriage, domestic violence and household burden of work. For instance, Aggarwal et al. (2023) show that during COVID-19 pandemic, compared to unmarried girls, newly married girls were more likely to be from Bihar, one of the poor states in India (61% vs 42%); from marginalized backgrounds (including

² According to Right to Education Forum policy brief, 10 million girls in India could drop out of secondary school due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes, 88% vs 76%), from households with the lowest income (16% vs 8%). Mitra et al. (2022) in their study on socio-economic and spatial disparities of out of school girls point to the likeliness of out of school girls existing 35% more in rural areas and more probable in the socially marginalized groups based on their religion or caste. Their study found that poor Scheduled Tribes girls are the most vulnerable to school dropouts. The study also found that a shift of AGs from private to government schools might have occurred due to familial income decline during the pandemic in India. In conflict-affected regions of Cameroon, the adolescents, particularly girls face heightened protection risks, including separation from their families, lack of access to education, increased vulnerability to child labour, and exploitation (Plan International, 2022). Such evidence indicates the role other systems of oppression play in exacerbating the challenges faced by adolescent girls.

While the government in different countries have introduced several policies to improve adolescent girls' overall well-being such as education scholarships, health clinics, and others; the access to these entitlements and services remain a challenge due to service delivery challenges and restrictive gender norms. For instance, studies in India have shown that despite government schemes to provide menstrual products such as sanitary napkins to adolescent girls, many girls have not been able to avail this benefit, especially the girls from lower income communities. Further, amplifying their vulnerabilities during this critical period (Shah et al., 2022 and Rana, 2023).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 3, 4 and 5) aim to mitigate some of the issues mentioned above. To achieve these goals, it is important that the system stakeholders are held accountable and

adolescent girls actively participate in governance. This ensures that schemes, national and global mandates recognize and respond to the needs of adolescent girls and are accessible and effectively implemented to benefit them. The World Bank document 'Governance and Development' (1992) mentions accountability as one of the key four dimensions of governance. Various policies, global platforms and conventions have attempted to not just build girls' skills through programs on education and health, but also by training them in leadership skills, strengthening capacities and creating platforms where they can represent peer adolescent girls and participate in local decision-making processes and events (Women Deliver Conference, AGIP-AMREF, 2023). It is time to recognize that adolescent girls are not only passive recipients of schemes built in a top-down approach, but creative individuals and politically active citizens. They must not only have a say in raising their issues and formally registering their grievances through social accountability mechanisms, accessible processes and channels but also actively have a say in the development of policies, schemes and initiatives.

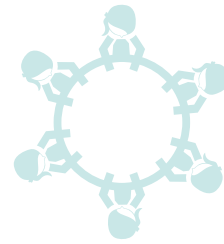
Due to their young age, limited resources, and absence of electoral vote; adolescent girls are often left out of decision-making spaces, and their unique needs remain largely unrecognized and unaddressed in policy and practice (Khurana et al., 2023). It is important to involve adolescents in policy processes because they have a right to participate in decisions that impact their everyday lives. Decisions informed by girls' perspectives are likely to have a greater impact and will enable them to become active citizens. Governments must actively work to strengthen and make accountability platforms more functional and accessible to girls. It must be ensured that it reaches all girls coming from diverse socio-economic-geographical backgrounds.

This project marks a significant step forward in understanding how adolescent girls perceive their challenges, and what are the expectations and recommendations they have for strengthening accountability mechanisms. For this project, accountability refers to the practice of holding system and its stakeholders i.e. government duty-bearers, responsible for the commitments they have made towards development of AGs, both locally and nationally, as well as, holding them answerable for their overall development. Accountability mechanisms include platforms and processes through which adolescent girls can demand and hold the system stakeholders accountable to their commitments and actions, including a platform to raise their grievances, concerns and demands. These mechanisms ensure that the system remains responsive to the needs of adolescent girls.

Since the adolescent girls should be at the center of any policies and decisions that affect their lives, it is critical that they are equipped with skills and capacities to raise their voices in holding governments accountable and have

access to platforms to voice their opinions. Moreover, a sustainable, supportive and safe environment that facilitates their participation in these platforms must be ensured by the system. Earlier, ICRW conducted a study (Khurana et al., 2023) to document best practices for making systems accountable to girls across India, Kenya and Uganda. This study helped to develop an understanding of the varied mechanisms that enable meaningful engagement and participation of AGs and young people in accountability processes across these three countries. It also indicated the need to delve deeper into the enablers and barriers faced by AGs in engaging with system stakeholders and document their expectations and demands from duty-bearers. With this aim, this project was launched to develop a comprehensive framework on adolescent girls' engagement in accountability mechanisms. The framework of this project is grounded in the experiences of the girls and was collaboratively developed alongside by them for effective and responsive accountability mechanisms.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



02

The project had two interlinked objectives- firstly, to develop an accountability framework capturing enablers, barriers, and expectations from adolescent girls for system stakeholders³. Secondly, through the process of engaging with the girls, the project aimed at enhancing their capacities and leadership skills to co-design the accountability framework. Through this global project, ICRW sought to examine:

1. What are the mechanisms through which adolescent girls engage or interact with system stakeholders to hold them accountable?
2. What are the enablers and barriers faced by AGs while engaging with the system?
3. What are the demands and expectations of the AGs from the system?

It is important to highlight that as the project is based on the perspectives and experiences shared by the participating girls themselves, it is not intended as a commentary or assessment of the extent of system-led accountability in each of these countries.

2.1 Methodology

The project methodology was guided by the principles of inclusivity i.e. it tried to include girls' voices from diverse countries. Secondly, a girl-centric approach was undertaken by developing project design in consultation with the girls, ensuring the project activities are rooted in their experiences and some are led by them such as through peer-to-peer discussions. Lastly, collaboration was a key principle which guided the project, both in terms of collaborating with our partner organizations as well as the girls themselves as active stakeholders in the project.

ICRW reached out to AGIP member organizations and other civil society organizations (CSOs) in its network who have been working extensively on issues concerning AGs in their countries. A detailed note about the project was shared with the organizations. Nine organizations from seven different countries expressed their willingness to participate and were given a detailed orientation. The organizations then nominated adolescent girls and

³ For the purpose of this project, system stakeholders refer to government system/representatives or state-based duty bearers. These are actors or institutions within the government set-up who have the responsibility to promote and realize constitutional and human rights. The term system stakeholders, duty bearers and state actors have been used interchangeably in the report.

young women whom they found suitable for different components of the project. Additionally, they also provided their insights and expertise during different stages of the project. The project adopted a participatory, consultative and collaborative methodology anchored in the experiences of the girls and embedded within their voices. The following structures of engagement were adopted-

a) Girls Advisory Committee (GAC):

The GAC was a critical body that was designed to inform the project and ensure that the voices of girls and young women (YW) are built into all project processes. This advisory body gave insights on project design and reflections on information gathered through girl-led consultations and supported the co-creation of the accountability framework. Seven adolescent girls/YW were nominated as GAC members by organizations from Kenya, Cameroon, Mexico, India, Nepal, Cambodia. Two members represented Kenya. GAC was convened three times through virtual meetings during the project cycle.

b) Adolescent Girls Cohort Group:

A Cohort group of 16 adolescent girls was formed with girls nominated from eight organizations. Each partner organization nominated two girls. Four immersive virtual workshops were organized with the cohort group. In these workshops, the girls were introduced to each other and the project. Their inputs on the project design and objectives were collected. It was also an opportunity for the girls to share their own perspectives. In the second workshop, they were oriented to the girl-led discussions (GLDs) and its template and tools. In the third workshop, they presented their findings and experience from the GLDs. In the last workshop, they collaborated with each other to co-develop the platforms on accountability, drawing on the learnings from the earlier workshops and girl-led discussion activities.

c) Girl-led Discussions (GLDs): The cohort group members conducted group discussions with their peer girls within their local communities. 18 GLDs were conducted by cohort team

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members with 112 girls, with six to eight girls in each GLD. The discussions focused on understanding the issues affecting the girls, the mechanisms through which they engage and hold the system stakeholders accountable, their demands and expectations from them, and the enablers and barriers experienced in engaging with the system.

d) Online Consultations: Virtual consultations were conducted with each of the nine organizations. During these consultations, the organization team members, coordinators and all the nominated girls were present. This was conducted towards the end of the project activities to gain deeper insights into each of the country contexts and fill any gaps in evidence generated thus far.

2.2 Project Geography and Partner organizations

Geography: Africa (Tanzania, Kenya, Cameroon) **Asia** (Cambodia, Nepal, India) and **Latin America** (Mexico)

Table No. 1 - List of Partner Organizations

S.No.	Organizations	Country
1	Amplify Girls	Kenya and Tanzania
2	Centre for the Study of Adolescence (CSA)	Kenya
3	Community Centre for Integrated Development (CCID)	Cameroon
4	International Planned Parenthood Foundation (IPPF)-MEXFAM	Mexico
5	This Life	Cambodia
6	Voice of Children	Nepal
7	International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW)	Jharkhand, India
8	Children Believe - partner ROPES	Andhra Pradesh, India
9	The YP Foundation	Delhi, India

2.3 Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological model was used to understand the factors, both enablers and barriers, affecting girls' engagement with the system stakeholders. The project examined factors at the individual, family, CSO and system levels. As gender norms affect each of these levels, they were analysed as a cross-

cutting theme. The socio-ecological model provides a cohesive framework to analyse the interconnectedness of the different factors operating at multiple levels, aptly reflecting the lived experiences of the girls themselves.

At the individual level, it explored how girl's relationships with themselves impact their self-confidence and communication

abilities. At the family level, it examined how the division of labour, gender stereotyping and community culture impact girls' mobility and well-being. At the CSO level, it analysed the role of the CSO itself in shaping the girls' engagement. At the system level, it assessed how the government system, its platforms and actors either enables or hinders the girls' ability to demand accountability. Lastly, the gender norms around household work, care responsibilities and violence were also analyzed.

2.4 Ethics and Principles

The principles of consent, anonymity and privacy of the girls and CSO partner representatives involved were strictly

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adhered to. For GLDs, ethics training and handouts were provided to the girls. Apart from maintaining the ethics of voluntary participation, consent, anonymity, privacy, confidentiality and shared responsibility in our conduct through the study, the girls were trained on these principles for conducting and documenting the GLDs.

2.5 Limitations

Due to resource and time constraints, the activities were conducted virtually. While this gave an opportunity to girls from different country contexts to participate, contribute, listen and learn from each other, on the other hand it placed certain constraints on the nature of interactive activities and time commitment needed from the girls themselves. Secondly, as a global study, participants joined from different time zones via Zoom. Some of them were non-English speakers (for whom interpretation support was provided). However, technical glitches, network issues, and time delays due to interpretation sometimes impacted the workshop's flow and may have affected girls' concentration and engagement. Most girls shared that they would like to participate in in-person workshops like these. Lastly, due to time and resources limitations, the project was only able to engage with a smaller cohort of girls from different countries. More time and resources were necessary to engage with a more diverse cohort of girls' representative of all socio-economic backgrounds across all the countries.

ISSUES AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS



This section presents the project findings pertaining to the key issues identified by the girls as impacting their lives the most. It then explores the accountability mechanisms utilized for raising these issues with system stakeholders or the redressal mechanisms used by the girls in case they are unable to access their rights and entitlements.

3.1 Key external challenges faced by adolescent girls

This section highlights the key challenges faced by adolescent girls. These were issues the girls reported during the workshops, meetings and GLDs. All issues described in this section were shared across by all girl participants unless specified otherwise.

“We felt thankful to the girls for trusting us and telling us about their problems in the GLDs, we realized all of us share similar problems.”
Girl Leader, Nepal

- a) **Family Level:** The girls shared about the multiple challenges they faced within their families. These include domestic violence, disproportionate burden of household chores, mobility restrictions, son-preference and restrictions on communication with boys in their school or community. Most of them shared that from childhood to adolescence, the sons

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are usually preferred and given more resources and time to pursue their goals, whereas girls face negligence and burden of care. These have severe implications on the girls' time, access to recreational activities and even their study time.

- b) Societal level:** There are multiple societal level practices that pose barriers for girls. One of the key challenges is early and forced marriage which continues in most places from where the organisations participated in our study. Many girls shared that they are subjected to community level policing and surveillance, severely restricting their movement. Period poverty was also cited as a major challenge, as most girls reported that the girls in their communities did not have access to safe menstrual products, despite the existence of government schemes promising to provide the same in many countries. In Africa, female genital mutilation was identified as a harmful social practice still occurring in parts of Kenya and Tanzania, affecting girls' mental and physical health. In Kenya, high rate of adolescent pregnancy was another critical challenge impacting girls' physical health and well-being. They even talked of the need for de-stigmatisation of sexual relationships. In Mexico, the abduction of young girls for ransom was also highlighted as a major concern.

Even if we talk to a boy regarding studies, people think that there is something wrong and complain to our parents, they even keep a track of where we go and with whom, which restricts our right to freedom.

Girl Leader, India

- c) School level:** Girls reported significant challenges in accessing quality education, especially relating to infrastructural issues and gender-based harassment. A major issue is the lack of safe functional toilets with adequate sanitation facilities. Lack of safe drinking water is also a major problem faced by girls affecting their health and leading to higher absenteeism. The absence of sufficient number of female teachers was also cited as a significant concern. They reported feeling more comfortable to share their challenges with female teachers and how the absence of them impacts their confidence. Lastly, bullying and harassment by boys in schools and neighbourhood, was particularly reported by girls from Africa and Nepal. They shared that this creates an environment of fear and tension, affecting their ability to concentrate on studies. All this, alongside son preference, has also led to higher school dropout rates seen amongst girls.

All the infrastructural changes in school are only seen in the painting of the walls.

Girl Leader, India

- d) State level:** At an overall level, a key challenge the girls shared was lack of awareness of the government schemes and programs. Many girls in the GLDs found that their peer girls are not only unaware of schemes but also do not have any source to receive that information either. In Nepal, girls shared that in a few instances they faced difficulty in applying for and accessing citizenship documents. However, it is not a major challenge for most of the girls.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

3.2 Accountability Mechanisms

The girls shared that, in many countries, the government has tried to address their challenges by enacting stricter laws and developing schemes to promote girls' education and health. However, their issues often persist, as they are frequently unable to access the benefits of these schemes either due to administrative issues or restrictive gender norms. This section will examine the different platforms the girls have utilized to hold the system accountable to its commitments and to raise their complaints. These mechanisms are described as follows.

It is important to highlight that these listed mechanisms are based on those shared by the girls themselves, as well as some of those identified in ICRW's most recent study, which examined mechanisms in India, Kenya, and Uganda. A quick literature scan was conducted for other countries; as an in-depth literature review was not within the scope of this work. Therefore, this is not an exhaustive list of mechanisms, and there may be additional mechanisms present in the project countries.

3.2.1 Government-led accountability mechanisms

In the two countries of India and Nepal, certain government-led initiatives which work as accountability platforms were reported. It is important to highlight that these mechanisms are legitimized by virtue of being part of government laws or policies. Few of them also received government funding. Some of the key ones are as follows:

a) Child Club- Nepal

The Child Clubs are run in government schools for students in the age group of 10 to 18 years as mandated by the Government of Nepal. They are elected bodies of students between class 5 and 10 where every section of each grade elects one student so that they can discuss the problems of the class. Both boys and girls can participate in the child clubs. Class teachers are the focal persons of the club. Often the issues related to school and safety are discussed in these clubs which are then escalated to head teachers and principals. According to the girls, these clubs have provided critical spaces to discuss the challenges faced by students in schools and raise them with relevant authorities. They help in generating awareness about children's rights and to foster youth leadership.

b) Child Rights Committee- Nepal

The Child Rights Committee periodically inspects and monitors the overall status of children and the quality and effectiveness of the available services within the province, municipality and the local level. Social Service providers and psychologists work with the local Child Rights Committee. In this body, there is a combination of representatives from departments such as education, health, community-based organizations (CBOs), women's group and police, etc. The committee also has children's club representatives (2 children including 1 girl, 1 boy). It is mandated under the Children's Act, (2018), Government of Nepal. The participants had limited exposure to these committees and no additional data was shared on this.

c) Bal Sansad (Children's Parliament)- India

Under the *Bal Sansad* mandate, in government schools, the students of primary, upper primary, secondary, senior secondary are elected as parliamentarians as per the number of enrolled students. For instance, there are 20 elected parliamentarians, in case of 40 enrolled students, and 30 elected parliamentarians in case the number of enrolled students are between 40 to 100, and so on. Each Bal Sansad has a Prime Minister, different Department Ministers and Members of Parliament elected from different classes. There are a total of 11 ministers in this Children's Parliament. 50% of these elected ministers must be girls. This body works collectively to identify issues affecting children in school, suggests solutions and works with teachers to drive change (Education Jhar, 2024). The girls and partner organization representatives were aware of this mechanism, but they shared that it is ineffectively implemented. They also shared that it does not exist in most schools. In some places, teachers randomly assign students as parliamentarians or ministers without their knowledge or consent.

d) Village Level Child Protection Committee (VLCPC)- India

The Village level Child Protection Committee or VLCPC is responsible for monitoring, reporting and responding to the issues of child protection in the community. The VLCPC plans and take up innovative activities to raise awareness in the community about the issue of local child protection concerns. The VLCPC works in close coordination with the District level Child Protection Unit (DCPU) for activities in the community on child protection issues. It also develops annual action plans to address issues of child protection. It engages various stakeholders and duty bearers to raise awareness on children's rights and protection at community level. VLCPC is mandated to have nine members i.e. one representative each from Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), Anganwadi worker (community worker), an active woman from Self Help Group (SHG), SMC (School management committee) and two representatives of Bal Sansad (1 Girl, 1 Boy). In addition, the representatives from Block Level Child Protection Committee (BLCPC), District Child Protection Unit (DCPU), District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO), SCPS (Superintendent of Police (SP), and District Magistrate (DM) can participate during the meeting of VLCPC. The committee's tenure is for three years, and it should be reconstituted thereafter. At least three seats are reserved for female members, including one girl as children representative. The girls shared that the effectivity of VLCPC varies significantly, they are active and functional only in some areas. However, the girls themselves had not utilized this forum to raise any of their concerns. The organization representatives were more aware of the committees' presence indicating the need to create more awareness about this mechanism among the girls and their communities and to strengthen its effectiveness.

e) *Balika Panchayat* – India

The *Balika Panchayat* is a pilot initiative designed to empower adolescent girls and young women by integrating them into local governance and decision-making processes. This program promotes gender equality and fosters active participation from girls in addressing critical issues related to education, health, and overall development. In Gujarat, it aimed to increase girls' participation and awareness of the local governance processes at the village-level. Towards this the Women and Child Development Department of the Gujarat Government, along with the '*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*' (Save the girl, Educate the girl) program organized the process of electing '*Balika Panchayats*' (girl led village council) for girls between the age of 11-21 years in 4 panchayats across the district of Kutch. Similar projects were also organized in 2023-24 under the leadership of a woman Zila Parishad CEO (an urban local governance office) in Nanded district of Maharashtra. The *Balika Panchayats* have played a critical role in addressing social issues such as alcoholism, child marriage and domestic abuse (Kejariwal, M. August 29, 2023, The Hindu). However, two things to note are that, firstly, this initiative is largely dependent on the commitment and discretion of local officials as it does not have any binding legal mandate. Secondly, it is important to note that this mechanism did not come up during the discussions with the girls. This mechanism was identified during the ICRW study conducted on identifying accountability mechanisms in India, Kenya and Uganda in 2023.

3.2.2 Civil Society Organisations (CSO) led mechanisms to hold system accountable

As seen in the previous section, there are very few government led mechanisms that girls can access to demand accountability from the government. In most of the

conversations, girls reported leveraging the presence of local CSOs to voice their concerns. Few of them are described below.

a) *Glow Club* – Cameroon

Glow club is an adolescent girl-led club and a discussion and capacity-building centre where girls share their goals, and their capacities are strengthened to realise their goals. It was adopted from an initiative from the US and there are *Glow clubs* in many countries of the world. There is also a *glow calendar* where events are marked. CCID, one of the project partners, is also a *Glow Club* partner in Cameroon. Girls enrol in an intensive capacity strengthening curriculum and are provided mentorship as part of this initiative. Through this, girls gain the confidence and skills to advocate for themselves and their communities.

“We have sessions every week in the Glow Club, and they address the needs of the girls. Girls are usually very shy and hesitant initially as many are survivors of gender-based violence but after the training, many gain confidence in academics and advocacy, both.”

Organization representative

b) CFAM – Ropes, India

The Child Friendly Accountability Mechanism (CFAM) being implemented since 2017 by Children Believe in partnership with ROPES aims to enable adolescents between the age group of 13 to 17 years to monitor the performance of child protection systems, and to engage in an informed dialogue with decision-makers for realizing positive changes at the community level around issues that affect their lives. The CFAM methodology involves intensive and continuous capacity-

strengthening exercises, which equip children with the necessary knowledge, skills, and perspective to engage in accountability-seeking. It allows adolescents to organize committees and groups to raise various issues like child marriage, access to menstrual hygiene products and provisions under the Integrated Child Development Services schemes⁴ (ICDS).

The CFAM has managed to stop child marriages in 7 villages of Andhra Pradesh. It is a collective which develops the decision-making capacity of children through monthly meetings. There is a President, Treasurer and Secretary in each village and children approach these leaders of the CFAM committee who then approach the local leaders. In this instance, they collaborated with the Village Development Committee (VDC), and in the presence of the VDC members, took an oath that they will not let early/forced marriage to happen. The oath taking ritual was also attended by the judge as they had given petition to the District Judge as well. The CFAM members are very active. In case of prolonged absence of a girl student from school, they investigate whether she is being married and if it turns out to be true then they put pressure on the parents and neighbourhood community to stop it by sensitising them on girl's education and children's right.

Organization representative

c) Young Women Advocacy Network (YWAN) – CSO, Kenya

This network in Kenya empowers young women in Meru County by utilizing

participatory tools such as community scorecards and budget tracking. These tools enable young women to evaluate the quality of services provided, particularly in Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), and to hold local authorities accountable (Rutgers, 2018). By facilitating community dialogues, YWAN encourages active engagement between young women and local government officials, fostering a culture of accountability and transparency in service delivery. This initiative was also identified during the literature scan.

d) She Leads – Plan International & others, Kenya

'She Leads' aims to promote the leadership and participation of girls and young women in decision-making spaces at both national and county levels. This initiative emphasizes social accountability by encouraging ongoing interactions between community members and institutional actors (Restless Development & The Oslo Center, 2023). Through workshops and advocacy campaigns, the project seeks to transform negative cultural norms that restrict girls' leadership opportunities, enabling them to claim their rights and contribute meaningfully to their communities (Khurana, et al, 2023). This mechanism was identified during the ICRW study conducted on identifying accountability mechanisms in India, Kenya and Uganda in 2023.

e) Bal Kachahris (Children's Forum) – Save the Children, Nepal

Bal Kachahris is a social accountability tool by Save the Children in Nepal. Young people aged under 18 years organise intergenerational dialogues in their communities and invite local service providers, elected representatives, other duty-bearers and influential stakeholders to a discussion, to move from commitment

⁴ ICDS is a government program in India aimed at improving the health, nutrition, and development of children as well as pregnant and lactating mothers.

to action and follow up. These courts have been successful in sensitising elected representatives on their role in increasing public investment in children and in curbing harmful social norms like child/

early marriage, food security, livelihood, education, and violence against children. It is important to note that this initiative was identified during the literature scan (Saroj and Bale, 2024, Save The Children).

Box 1: Key reflections

Most of the accountability mechanisms discussed above are open for both boys and girls. However, many of these platforms are not universal models which are present in all parts of a country, and thus have a limited presence. Government-led platforms are present in very few countries and also lack effective implementation. Often times they exist on paper but are not translated with the same intent in practice. Additionally, as some of these platforms are run in schools, these are not accessible by out of school girls, keeping one of the most at-risk AGs at the margins.

The CSO led mechanisms, on the other hand, are relatively more active across different countries. These platforms primarily focus on collectivizing children and adolescents, promoting their engagement, creating a safe space for discussions, capacity building and exposure visits to local government bodies. Their function is mostly monitoring and raising complaints with regard to access to government schemes and rights. However, they have limited sustainability. The engagement with girls and the platforms created by the CSOs, sometimes in partnership with government bodies are often discontinued failing to create a lasting ecosystem for adolescents' empowerment. This usually happens due to limited resources. This leaves the adolescent girls dissonant and disappointed.

3.2.3 Local governance units

Due to the challenges mentioned in Box 1, and in the absence of stronger platforms designed to be accountability platforms, girls utilize other avenues. They often leverage local governance units to seek accountability from the system stakeholders. Few of these mechanisms are mentioned below as reported by the girls. These units are local governance bodies which are decentralized and devolved units of governance established under respective country laws and thus are state sponsored. They are used as *de facto* accountability platforms in the absence of specific platforms for adolescent girls.

a) Gram Panchayat (Village council)- India

The Gram Panchayat is the basic governance unit, operating at the level of village in India. The Gram Sabha works as the general body of the Gram Panchayat. The members of the gram panchayat are elected directly by the people. It also has government appointed official as a secretary, assisting the members in day-to-day functioning. The head of the council plays a critical role as an approving authority for certain programs and schemes. Girls shared that they often raised their complaints with the Panchayat members or the secretary. Most of these complaints are related to accessing their entitlements.

Recalling how she faced challenges in availing government education scholarship benefits, a girl shared-

The forms have been filled for the scheme, but the village council leader has not signed it. The delay usually happens on the system's part and our file gets stuck sometimes from the principal's side, or village council's side or from the side of the office processing the fund. When we submit our request for expedition at the block level, there is no grievance redressal towards it. They tell us that the scholarship will come in 2 months, but it has not come yet.

- Girl Leader, India

b) Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) & village forum meetings- Cambodia

In Cambodia, there are meetings that happen at the level of village on a monthly basis- known as the village forum meeting. The next level of governance is the commune, which consists of 10-20 villages. The Commune committee forum meeting takes place annually. At the commune level, there is a Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) designed to address and advocate for issues related to women and children. All the members are women and it has around 19-20 members. In this Committee, there is one person from the student council. Women are responsible for this committee. They go to community households if there is an issue raised in a family. The village elections take place to select the leaders of these committees. The representatives come to visit the school from time to time and does training and awareness campaigns. The government

allocates a budget for this committee. The CCWC forum meeting takes place monthly. Girls shared that they occasionally do raise their issue during the forum meetings.

We conducted a meeting at the school level with the children council and the leader of the council to discuss the key issues. The issues raised included the discomfort caused by burning of dead bodies in proximity to the school premise, unclean bathrooms, lack of dustbins, gangsters and smoking. We then decided who will be raising the issue during the commune forum meeting. One of the students got a chance to speak at the commune meeting and requested the official to solve these issues. This helped in resolving the issue. Such meetings are conducted once a year at the beginning of the year.

- Girl Leader, Cambodia

c) Local actors and platforms- Kenya

There are multiple platforms and officers as reported by girls whom they can approach if they have any concerns. Firstly, there is a Community Officer who is the government duty bearer at the ward level whom girls reach out. This Community Officer can also be a part of the school board along with the principal. Secondly, there is an Area Advisory Council (AAC) in Kenya led by the Children's Officer. It is a government led structure that is established to coordinate child welfare activities and protect children's rights at the community level. Lastly, there is a county-based platform called the Children's Advisory Committee accruing from the Children's Act, 2022 where the children and adolescents can complain.

Box 2: Key reflections on local governance units

The local governance units are not designed as accountability mechanisms. They are devolved centres of power, often working as gate keepers themselves, as can be seen in the story above of accessing scheme benefits. Additionally, these may not be designed as girl friendly spaces, affecting their participation. Lastly, often times they are not effectively implemented and are marred with corruption.

3.2.4 Individual Girl-led initiatives

The girls also shared certain initiatives they have taken independently to voice their concerns. In the absence of systemic platforms, these ad-hoc individual measures have also demonstrated the power to influence the system.

a) Social media

The leveraging of social media has helped some girls to reach out to officials, amplify their voices and concerns with other girls and CSOs. Many girls shared instances of successfully inviting the attention of state officials and building momentum to repeal conservative rules.

I know of a youth advocate who started a forum (a FB page) on social media where she started sharing challenges faced by adolescent girls, like herself and even connected with local CSOs. She asked her followers to share their ideas to make the page more responsive and to amplify their voices. One example of the forum's impact involved a pregnant teenage girl who wanted to attend school but was denied by the school authorities. Through the page, the girl shared her concern, which caught the attention of local authorities and eventually reached the minister for secondary education, who allowed her to return to school.

- Girl Leader, Cameroon

b) Memorandum and application

Memorandum and applications to the officials like District Magistrate, Judge of lower courts and Councilor are also ways through which the girls have reached out to the system stakeholders on issues like urgent intervention in early and forced marriage and improved transport facility.

Box 3: Key reflections on individual girl-led initiatives

The individual initiatives are girl-led activities, these are not systemic and are dependent on individual capacities, skills, exposure and resources available to girls. All girls do not have the same level of access to social media platforms, or personal mobile and smart phones due to digital gender divide. Additionally, there are internet restrictions in some countries. Due to all these reasons, all girls may not be able to leverage social media. Further, both of these initiatives require girls to have literacy skills, including digital literacy skills, which girls with literacy challenges may find difficult to access, further pushing them to the margins.

FACTORS AFFECTING GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS AND HOLDING SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE



Section 3 presented the key accountability mechanisms and the pathways adopted by girls to voice their concerns with the system stakeholders. This section focuses on the factors that either aided their journey or created barriers for them to hold the system accountable. Following the conceptual framework presented in Section 2, this section analyses the factors operating at the level of individual, family, CSO and the system. Additionally, norms have been analysed as a cross-cutting analysis framework. It is critical to reiterate that these levels influence and are influenced by each other and do not operate in silos. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that as enablers and barriers are often interrelated, they have been analysed and presented together. The analysis is based on the experiences shared by and the discussions held with the adolescent girls themselves. It is important to note that these insights are not an assessment or a reflection of the situation across the entire country including its governance structures.

4.1 Cross-cutting Factor: Gender Norms

Gender norms operate at all the levels and intersect to create a web of vulnerabilities for adolescent girls. These norms restricting girls' engagement were seen in a more pronounced manner at the level of the family and the system. This impact also extends to the individual level, where the lack of self-confidence was reported as a significant barrier by the girls. It is important to note that self-confidence and courage is also shaped by regressive norms around 'acceptable' gender roles like care giving roles as normative behaviour for girls, restricted girls' participation in outdoor activities as they reach adolescence, family dynamics, types of disciplinary methods in school, etc. Further, the most critical challenge was that young girls' opinions were undervalued – both by their families and the system. Families often discourage their participation in accountability mechanisms, questioning what these girls know. Similarly, the system stakeholders



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dismissed them and instead asked them to bring their parents or brother. Additionally, at both these levels, a paternalistic attitude was noticed, where girls were not treated as equal independent citizens having a voice and choice of their own. The girls felt that the family and system seem to believe that they know what is better and appropriate for the girls. Additionally, norms related to son-preference and gender stereotyping at the household level further restrict girls' participation. Girls reported that restricted mobility and an increase in household responsibilities were key challenges preventing them from holding the government accountable. This undermining of their voices and choices is a major barrier to their engagement as active citizens and their ability to raise critical issues that affect their lives. The sections below present a detailed analysis of the findings as reported by the girls across the levels of individual, family, CSO and system.

4.2 Individual Factors

This section focuses on the factors which operate at an individual level of the girls and how do they impact their engagement with accountability platforms and processes.

4.2.1 Self-confidence and courage

During the workshops and meetings, girls constantly reflected on the role self-confidence played in whether and how they were able to raise their concerns with the system stakeholders. They shared that girls who believe in themselves and have confidence in their abilities had the courage to access local governance set-up more. Often the capacity strengthening support provided by local CSOs play a critical role in building their self-confidence. Additionally, courage was a key factor, especially because holding system accountable meant questioning the power holders. However,

the lack of self-confidence and belief in their own skills, was also a critical barrier shared by the girls. They shared that the lack of information and negotiation skills adversely impacted their self-confidence to question the system stakeholders.

4.2.2 Access to social media

As shared in section 3.2.4, girls use social media to create campaigns and build visibility for their issues. Through the reach of social media, they are able to access the higher authorities to resolve their concerns. Their exposure to social media as a means of collectivizing has also played a critical role in AGs working as a pressure group. This presence and access to social media channels has enabled them to hold the government accountable. They shared that often they have learned this through their own initiative and personal experience. It is important to note that this was not shared unanimously across and largely was highlighted by the girls from the African countries.

4.2.3 Apolitical youth

Few girls also felt that today's adolescents and youth themselves are not very keen in matters related to citizenship and governance. This impacts their own zeal to participate in demanding accountability from the system. Their lack of political engagement leads to missed opportunities to advocate for their needs and interests and reduces the pressures on the government to engage with them and include their voices in decision making.

4.3 Family Factors

Adolescent girls' lives are heavily influenced by their families. Given the patriarchal set-up, it is often controlled by the choices of their families. Amid this background, it is critical to understand the role families play

in shaping the ways girls engage with the system and hold them accountable. Many girls shared that parental pressure is a major deterrent to their engagement with the system. These restrictions and pressures also adversely affect their confidence in demanding accountability.

4.3.1 Restricted mobility

In order to voice their concerns, girls often have to visit the local governance set-up or accountability platform (wherever they exist). Girls shared how their mobility is often restricted by their families, their movement is under constant scrutiny, and they are told to take their brothers or fathers with them. These restrictions get heightened as the girls' start experiencing puberty. The parents become more worried due to societal pressures and fear of harassment, the burden of family's honour is also often placed on the girls.

Families and neighbours restrict girls' mobility and interactions with male peers in teenage years.

GLD, India

4.3.2 Fear of gender-based violence in public spaces

A related challenge faced by girls is their families' fear of violence while accessing public spaces such as roads, public buses, parks and others. These spaces are often male dominated, leading families to worry for girls' safety in accessing them. In some contexts, the presence of adolescent girls without adult supervision is looked down upon by the community and the parents are questioned over their parenting styles. Since accountability platforms or processes entail navigating public spaces, sometimes

even alone, parents' fears stemming due to safety concerns, social stigma and gendered norms- negatively impacts the girls' engagement with the system.

“
We are not allowed to step out of the house to participate in the village level discussions.
Girl leader, India
”

4.3.3 Limited access to resources

In order to access accountability platforms or government offices, girls also need financial resources to pay for their commuting costs or access to a vehicle (for older adolescents who have reached driving age). They shared that, often, girls do not have access to such resources either because of their families' poor financial condition or even when savings are available, they are utilized for other household expenses or towards the needs of the boys in the household. In the absence of such resources, girls find it difficult to participate in activities to hold the governments accountable.

4.3.4 Burden of household work

It was widely reported that girls bear a disproportionate burden of household work. They are expected to help with care and domestic work at home, while their brothers are not expected to do the same. This makes them feel that they are not valued and are not treated as equals, and limits the time they have to engage in other activities.

4.3.5 Discouraged to participate

All the above factors create a web of challenges that hinders girls' engagement

with the system, and they are discouraged to participate. Moreover, as demanding accountability involves challenging the government duty-bearers, the girls are also discouraged due to the fear of backlash. There could be fear of family shame, safety concerns and social stigma.

“
Parents don't support girls to raise their voices due to the fear that the society will judge them.
GLD, Nepal
”

4.4 Civil Society Organization (CSO) Factors

At the next level, presence of CSO's play a critical role in the ways girls engage with the system. They are a key component of girls' ecosystem at a local level and heavily influences them. This section focuses on the ways in which CSOs shape girl's participation.

4.4.1 Collectivization

As section 3 highlighted, CSO-run initiatives play a critical role in bridging the gap between adolescent girls and duty-bearers. They enable the girls in multiple ways in demanding accountability. One key approach is by collectivizing them into groups at the local level. These organizations often create clubs or youth groups to provide girls a safe space to voice their opinions, promote cross-learning and encourage collective action including advocacy efforts. As a collective, they are in a better position to influence local policies and actors, due to their ability to work as a pressure group and support each other with lesser fear of backlash. CSOs also play a critical role in providing safeguarding support to the AGs.

4.4.2. Capacity strengthening: Trainings & Visits to Local Governments

CSOs play a crucial role in strengthening girls' capacity to demand accountability. They provide various trainings including on gender, leadership, skills, which help in building girls' confidence. They also provide them with access to information about their rights and entitlements and how to claim them. Since each government policy and scheme may have different processes to avail their benefits, including eligibility criteria, application process and grievance redressal mechanism, the information provided by CSOs help girls access these schemes or raise a complaint. CSOs also raise awareness about accountability platforms available to girls. Additionally, girls shared that CSOs sometimes organize visits to local government offices, which helps them in understanding the physical space of these offices, how to access them, whom to contact for what problems. Such visits also make government offices seem more accessible to girls. These trainings, awareness generation activities and visits create stronger links between girls and local accountability platforms and government structures. Thereby enabling girls to demand accountability from the state actors.

4.4.3 Question of reach and sustainability

While CSOs play a very important role in enabling girls' engagement with system stakeholders, it is also important to highlight that by virtue of the nature of CSO run projects i.e. short term and dependent on external funding- they are unable to reach to a broader section of girls or sustain their efforts over a longer time period. Due to these reasons, all girls are not able to experience the benefits of the presence of local CSOs. Additionally, once the project ends, the clubs are unable to self-sustain and girls' source of information

is also severely curtailed, impacting their ability to engage with state actors. In the absence of government-led initiatives that promote meaningful engagement for girls, CSOs play a pivotal role in filling this gap. Therefore, the question of reach and sustainability pose significant barriers for the girls in holding states accountable to their commitments.

4.5 System Factors

The system i.e. the government is one of the most important factors that influences and shapes the engagement of girls with stakeholders and their ability to hold the system accountable. This level includes all government systems including education, health, law & order, local governance, and others. This section will focus on the factors operating at the system level.

4.5.1 Access to information

The system has a key role to play in providing access to information about platforms and policies. The girls reported that a key medium through which they have been able to access information is through schools, primarily via school teachers and counsellors. This also occurs during school club or school council meetings. Additionally in India, girls reported the critical role played by community health workers in building awareness about government policies and platforms. Sometimes they also support in enrolling girls into eligible schemes. However, this information was often insufficient because often even through these channels the girls were not receiving complete or relevant information. This lack of information posed a significant barrier for girls in accessing government policies or in raising a complaint. They shared that they often used to go to the local officer but if s/he did not resolve their issue, they did not know of escalation measures.

4.5.2 Lack of government platforms to promote accountability

Another key barrier faced by adolescent girls is the lack of government led platforms and mechanisms. In most countries, girls reported the absence of any accountability mechanism promoted by the state. In the absence of this, girls are utilizing local governance structures and CSO models, both of which have certain challenges. Therefore, the lack of girl friendly platforms, designed to promote girls' voices and choices is a major barrier to holding the government accountable. Even if these are present in a few countries, in most places there is a need to strengthen their implementation and effectiveness, so that they can reach all the girls. Thereby providing them with a safe space to raise their concerns and ensure that the duty-bearers are able to address these issues.

“
There is a lack of effort to resolve AG's concern by the government in our community.
Girl Leader, Kenya
”

4.5.3 System Stakeholders: Supportive and Dismissive

When girls raise their concerns with system stakeholders, often they face apathy from them. Issues range from stakeholders being unavailable or unresponsive to outright dismissal of girls' issues. Some girls reported that sometimes duty-bearers are not even available to resolve their concerns. Even when they are present, they do not resolve their issues. Instead, they frequently dismiss adolescent girls, especially when they

come alone, asking them to bring their brothers or parents or questioning their knowledge. These stakeholders do not treat girls as independent citizens with agency. A key overarching challenge here is also corruption. Girls shared that even while accessing any eligible scheme developed for their benefit, sometimes the local officials ask for bribes to register them or to resolve their complaint. This behaviour of the system stakeholders creates a hostile environment for the girls, making it difficult for them to voice their opinion and challenges.

“
We are not heard or taken seriously by officials, even when we raise our concerns and most of the time, they tell us to bring male members of the family. That exemplifies how women and girls are not considered agential citizens.
Girl Leader, India
”

However, it is important to highlight a few positive experiences of engaging with system stakeholders shared by girls. These were largely at the level of the schools, where they found the school teachers were cooperative in resolving their concerns and escalating it to school headmaster, principal or local government official, as needed. Such incidents provide hope, motivation and confidence to the girls to continue voicing their concerns. These incidents were largely reported by girls from Kenya, Tanzania and Cambodia. This also shows that the school ecosystem is very critical for adolescent girls. It is important to create a supportive and encouraging school environment, so that the girls feel heard and confident to raise their concerns ultimately enabling them to

demand accountability not just within the school but outside of it as well. There were also reports of support received from public officials in India, to address the issue of child marriage. However, this was not widely reported from other parts of the country.

**“
In case of dysfunctional school toilets, we go to the headmaster who informs the school board, and the community officer is also a part of this board, and through their intervention, our problem gets resolved.**

Girl Leader, Tanzania
”

4.5.4 Lack of women representatives in government

Another major barrier shared by girls is the male dominated nature of government spaces. They reported that lower representation of women in positions of power affects them in two critical ways. First, they would feel more comfortable approaching a woman officer with their concerns, and the absence of such representation often prevents them from visiting government offices to raise their concerns. Secondly, having more women representatives would serve as a role model, making system structures more accessible and relatable for other girls.

Box 4: Top three most critical barriers

While the girls shared a number of barriers they face, they also ranked their top three most critical barriers which has the most profound impact on their participation in holding the system accountable. These are as follows:

1. Unavailability of the government duty bearers to resolve concerns
2. Fear of violence in public spaces including to access government offices or accountability mechanisms
3. Fear and lack of confidence among AGs to interact with the government officials

GIRLS' RECOMMENDATIONS: TO STRENGTHEN GOVERNMENT LED ACCOUNTABILITY



05

While the girls shared the factors that supported or hindered their engagement with system stakeholders, they also shared demands to strengthen government-led accountability mechanisms. They have also shared an outline of a mechanism that they feel could be useful in raising demand and holding system accountable to resolving their concerns. This section focuses on the recommendations shared by the girls for system stakeholders and the platforms.

5.1 Demands from the system

This section focused on highlighting all the expectations the girls have from the system stakeholders. They emphasized on the need to have a supportive environment in which they feel safe to raise their concerns. They shared the following demands-

5.1.1 Developing platforms and processes

- Create safe, easy and accessible government led platforms for girls to raise their needs and challenges
- Develop processes for girls to participate in policy making so they are a part of it from ideation stage itself
- Create girl and youth groups at local level
- Develop anonymous feedback mechanisms for girls to share their grievances without the fear of any backlash

5.1.2 Promoting discussions and engagement

- Nominate one girl as a coordinator at a local village level
- Monthly meetings should be organized at district level between girls and local government officials
- Government should also conduct monthly meetings together with both parents and girls, so parents are also aware of the policies and programs of the government
- Female government employees should engage with girls on a monthly basis to understand their challenges

5.1.3 Creating supportive ecosystem

- Government should support CSOs and advocacy groups working locally to promote systems accountability
- Increase awareness of schemes through SMS, monthly meetings, and camps for parents and girls
- Government officials should improve their responsiveness
- Ensure quicker complaint resolution processes
- Promote online application for schemes to curb corruption



Photo Credit: Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

Box 5: Top three most important demands

While the girls shared a number of demands and expectations from the system stakeholders, they also prioritized their top three most important and urgent demands. These are as follows:

1. Create safe, easy, and accessible platforms for girls to raise concerns
2. Create awareness about policies and programs among parents and girls
3. Girls must be involved in policy making processes

5.2 Platforms developed by girls

The most critical demand raised by the girls was the creation of safe platforms for them to raise their concerns. To explore this, a group activity was conducted with them to understand how they imagine these platforms to look like. Girls were divided into thematic groups- one group designed a platform to address health related challenges, another focused on education related challenges and the last one aimed at addressing civic infrastructure related challenges. Each group then presented their platform design to the other girl participants, who provided feedback that was incorporated into the final designs. The idea behind the activity was to present a model perceived by girls as something that would be useful for them. Their contextualization would vary across the countries given that the governance structures would look slightly different in each country. The three thematic platforms are provided as Annexures, while a consolidated model based on the common

key features across all the three model is presented in Table no 2 below.

The consolidated model is developed by combining common themes emerging from the three thematic models created by the girls. This is not an attempt to create a best practice model, this is a model as envisaged by the girls as useful for them. However, to strengthen it, it is important to highlight that this kind of local platform needs to be recognized and embedded within the system and financed by it, for it to sustain and have an influence. This legitimacy is very critical. Girls also need to be supported financially and non-financially to strengthen their capacity and create enabling environment to ensure their meaningful engagement in such platforms and processes. Further, if an issue is escalated to higher authorities at block or district level, a clearly identified points-person should be responsible to resolve it in a timely manner. Lastly, the model needs to also have in-built periodic review system at a higher level, so its performance can be monitored and tracked.

Table No. 2- Model accountability platform: Key common features

Level of Presence	Stakeholders involved	Role of stakeholders	Frequency of meeting	Escalation Mechanism
Village level with ties to school and local health facilities	<p>12 members</p> <p>Core stakeholders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two Adolescent Girls representatives from different socio-economic groups • Two Community leaders • Two village council leaders/officers • Two Parents or Guardians • Two female teachers • Two community health workers <p>Need-based stakeholders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School principal • Block level authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AG representatives: Should meet other girls at village level to discuss concerns on monthly basis at the end of each month and bring it to the attention of this group. • Community leaders: Provide safe space for AGs for monthly meetings. Discuss issues with community members. Advocate for girls issues such as community health initiatives, inclusive infrastructure such as separate & functional toilets. • Village council leaders: Convene monthly meetings with block/district level officials to advocate for girls' issues and present the committee findings and plans to seek support from them. • Parents/Guardians: More open with AGs and encourage open discussions at home on various topics. • Teachers: Teachers should provide a safe space for girls to raise their concerns and also report about issues girls have shared with them in this committee. They should also advocate for inclusive curriculum and teaching methods within their school and raise relevant concerns, such as appointment of counsellors, with school principals. • Community Health workers: Offer workshops on health topics & provide resources as guaranteed by government schemes like sanitary pads. Raise girls' health related concerns with health officials. • Committee should also organize camps to generate awareness on issues, government policies & schemes, and provide resources like sanitary napkins. 	<p>Core Meeting: Monthly meeting of all committee members to adjust strategy, monitor progress, and discuss ideas to improve.</p> <p>AG Meeting: Two girl representatives conduct monthly meetings at village level with all the girls and then raise their concerns at the core meeting.</p>	Unresolved issues should be escalated to block level, then district and finally with state level departments/ ministries, if needed.

LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



06

This section focuses on presenting the key learnings and recommendations basis the insights generated during the project. There are some learnings and recommendations specifically addressed to policy makers and the community and family. However, before discussing the specific recommendations, it is critical to mention that an overarching learning has been that it is pivotal to address gender norms in order to promote girl-responsive accountability. Gender norms are created and reinforced at multiple levels. The impact of restrictive gender norms—such as those related to mobility, household chores, and access to resources—significantly hampers girls’ participation in accountability mechanisms. These norms limit their access to such platforms and undermine their confidence in engaging with duty-bearers. Even when girls muster the courage to raise their concerns with relevant system stakeholders, they are often dismissed or not provided with adequate responses. Such behaviour highlights how girls’ voices are unrecognized and undervalued. It is crucial to continue to challenge the status quo, question gendered role expectations and address these norms comprehensively to enable meaningful engagement of the girls with the system stakeholders.

6.1 Recommendations for Policy-Makers:

a) Need for system-led accountability mechanisms:

There are very few accountability platforms which are designed by the system to promote girls’ engagement with system stakeholders. The system-led mechanism of Child-Clubs in Nepal seems to be functioning effectively. There is a need to strengthen the implementation and reach of the other models. An information gap is also present as all the girls were not aware of such mechanisms, signifying the need to create more awareness as well. In the absence of system led mechanisms, these girls utilize multiple platforms to raise their concerns and voices. These include CSO led models focused on collectivization and strengthening capacity. Further, girls leverage local governance units such as village level meetings to share their challenges. Lastly, they partake in individual initiatives such as social media activism to amplify their voices and reach out to the higher authorities. In order to truly demand accountability and meaningfully engage with the duty-bearers, there is a need to build government led platforms

and processes. It is important for the system to recognize that the responsibility for accountability and responsiveness to the needs of adolescent girls rests with them, rather than with the adolescent girls. The commitment and intentionality of senior leadership are pivotal to moving the needle.

b) Investment in public funded and delivered schooling:

As adolescent girls shared that one of their most important sources of information is through school teachers and counsellors. They also have presence of Child Clubs at the level of schools through which they are able to raise their concerns and monitor its resolution. It is critical that the government continues to invest significantly in education system and provide gender equitable environment at schools which promotes adolescent girls' growth, encourages them to be active citizens and enables them to achieve their full potential and aspirations.

c) Policies to integrate accountability mechanisms:

While the girls acknowledged the efforts of the system to resolve their concerns through dedicated schemes such as educational scholarships, health services, and others but accessing them is fraught with challenges. Government should embed accountability mechanisms and processes within policy design itself and earmark funds for the same. In the absence of generic accountability platforms and policy specific platforms, girls' voices often remain unheard.

d) CSO support should be promoted:

The local CSOs play a critical role in bridging the gap between girls and the system stakeholders. In many ways, they act as a first line of response. CSOs build a network of girls by collectivizing them into groups,

strengthening their capacities to advocate for themselves and for social change, and connecting them with duty-bearers. As highlighted by the girls, CSOs and their advocacy efforts should be funded, supported and promoted. Long-term and flexible funding should be provided to girl-rights organizations so they can sustain their work for a longer period of time. Additionally, CSOs should complement and not replace, government's efforts to promote girls' leadership and participation in decision-making platforms to demand accountability. Sustained engagement with CSOs should focus on strengthening existing government structures or platforms where they exist. In their absence, it should aim at building alternative structures in collaboration with partner organizations, including government entities. However, to be sustainable, government stakeholders must ensure that the platforms and processes developed by the CSOs are adopted and integrated within their own systems.

e) Strengthening capacity and sensitivity of the system stakeholders is critical:

The attitude and behaviour of the government officials pose a major barrier to girls' engagement with the system. Often times their approach towards adolescent girls is paternalistic and protectionist rather than progressive. This works as an impediment in girls' ability to interact with them. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen their understanding of the issues faced by adolescent girls especially through a gender justice lens including by developing an understanding of gendered attitudes and behaviours, and the need to adopt values of respect, equity and collaboration. It is also pivotal to equip them with necessary information and skills to address these concerns.

f) Promoting women representation in schools, administration and government:

Girls mentioned that the lack of women officials and teachers affected their confidence in voicing their opinions, as they did not feel comfortable. One of the demands shared by the girls also included monthly engagement with a woman government employee to understand their challenges. This indicates that girls would prefer discussing their challenges with women officials. Additionally, Beaman et al., (2009) showed the gender gap in career aspirations of adolescents closed by 32% in villages that had been reserved for women in local village council elections for two election cycles. The gender gap in adolescent educational attainment was completely erased in villages with a reserved female head and girls spent less time on household chores. Having women officials can also serve as a role model effect, inspiring adolescent girls and young women to pursue positions of power without fear or intimidation. Therefore, appointing and promoting women officials is critical for girl-centered accountability as they would feel more comfortable with women officers. It is also critical as women in elected roles have demonstrated positive impact on adolescents' education, career, among others.

g) Girl's aspirational model of accountability mechanism:

The model accountability platform (see Table no 2) developed by the girls in many ways also reflects their own aspirations from the system. It is a platform that is localized to their community, at the village level. It includes multiple stakeholders, with representation from all key members within

their ecosystem i.e. parents, community leaders, school teachers, health workers and others. The girls would like the group to convene monthly, so that they are able to raise their concerns and monitor its progress regularly. They also want the platform to represent the views of all girls, so they have suggested that the girls meet prior to this meeting, and girl representatives can share their points at this platform. They are clear that if issues remain unresolved, they should be escalated to the higher authorities. Lastly, they have clearly articulated that each stakeholder should have a defined role and be held accountable to this group. Perhaps, the system can approach it as a starting point to develop a mechanism suited for their contexts.

6.2 Recommendations for Community and Parents:

a) Need to engage with parents and community leaders:

Adolescent girls faced significant challenges from their parents and community leaders. Embedded in patriarchal and restrictive gender norms, they curtail girl's movement and participation in activities outside of the household including engaging with the system. Parents, families and communities act as one of the key gatekeepers affecting girls' freedom. The girls themselves have recommended that efforts should be made to generate awareness and build capacities of parents on gender equality. It is crucial to engage with parents and build their perspectives on gender and rights-based approaches because the absence of their support severely curtails the ability of adolescent girls to demand accountability from the system.

b) Importance of engaging boys:

Girls reported bullying and harassment by boys, as a major challenge they face, both in schools, and in some cases, in public spaces within their communities. It is imperative to engage with boys to build their understanding of gender, power and patriarchy, and to strengthen their perspectives on girls' leadership and girl-

responsive accountability. This will help in ensuring that girls do not face backlash from boys, either in schools or in communities. Additionally, engaging with boys has the potential to promote shared responsibility between boys and girls in advancing gender equality, positioning it as a collective goal that the system should address and be accountable for.

The project has highlighted several critical issues affecting adolescent girls and their efforts to hold the system accountable to its commitments. It has also presented recommendations that could further strengthen systems' accountability towards the needs of adolescent girls. However, it is also critical to recognize how other intersecting identities such as caste, race, disability, and economic status, impact adolescent girls' participation in accountability mechanisms. Additionally, it is important to explore how adolescent boys are engaging with system stakeholders and the challenges they might face. Overall, an active citizenry is vital for demanding accountability from the system. Therefore, there is a need to also delve deeper into the reasons behind adolescents and young people's disengagement with citizen engagement processes.

Lastly, while the project has aimed to present the perspectives of adolescent girls, it is important to understand the experiences of system stakeholders in trying to meaningfully engage with adolescents in decision-making and accountability processes. This will help develop an evidence-backed comprehensive guide to strengthen systems' engagement with adolescents. Since it is the systems responsibility to fulfil the needs of adolescents and the onus of creating accountability mechanisms also lies with them, listening to system stakeholders will help in arriving at a model rooted in the principles of meaningful engagement that can be practically operationalized at scale.

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ANNEXURE 1: MODEL ACCOUNTABILITY PLATFORM TO ADDRESS HEALTH RELATED CHALLENGES



Level of Presence	Stakeholders involved	Role of stakeholders	Frequency of meeting	Escalation Mechanism
Village health center/ Village level with ties to school and local health facilities	11-12 members platform <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Community Health workers • 2 Community leaders • 2 Adolescent Girls representing different socio-economic groups • 2 Female Teachers & school counsellors • 3 Parents or Guardians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Health workers: Offer workshops on health topics & provide resources like sanitary pads, condoms and contraceptives • Community leaders: Cooperate with health workers, provide safe space for AGs for monthly meeting. Advocate for community health initiatives at all levels • AG representatives: Should meet other AGs at village level to discuss concerns on monthly basis at the end of each month and bring it to the attention of this group • Teachers: Teachers should teach AGs about their health. Health education should be integrated in curriculum • Parents/Guardians: More open with AGs and encourage open discussions at home • Advocacy and SRHR camps by this committee • Check ups for STIs and infections • De-stigmatize teenage pregnancy • Provide containers for disposing sanitary towels and create awareness on menstrual health 	Monthly meeting to adjust strategy, monitor progress, and give ideas to improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If not resolved, can be escalated to Block level and then to district level • 20-member committee of AGs at the block level with 2 AGs representing each village should be formed, this committee can engage in escalating and discussing concerns at the block level.

ANNEXURE 2: MODEL ACCOUNTABILITY PLATFORM TO ADDRESS EDUCATION RELATED CHALLENGES



Level of Presence	Stakeholders involved	Role of stakeholders	Frequency of meeting	Escalation Mechanism
School, community centre, Degree college village/district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AG leader Female teacher Principal Village council leader Block official State education department representative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create awareness about education schemes Give counselling to students in senior secondary for higher education Ensure that sanitary napkins are provided to needy girls in school Assigned female teacher who can listen to personal problems of the girls and read the complain box weekly Assign one person to look after ragging and the needs of disabled students Review sanitation and drinking water facility Ensure that curriculum is updated as per competitive vocational skills Ensure that abusive teachers are penalised Review transport/conveyance needs. Employ therapists in school and colleges. Advocate for Girls clubs in every school authorised by the government 	Once a month and once in three months with higher level officials	Escalate at the education department at the district level after taking signatures of the AG leaders/councillors of class 9-12, female teacher and principal to raise the issue. If unresolved, take it to state and then central level.

ANNEXURE 3: MODEL ACCOUNTABILITY PLATFORM TO ADDRESS CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE RELATED CHALLENGES



Level of Presence	Stakeholders involved	Role of stakeholders	Frequency of meeting	Escalation Mechanism
Commune level/ Block level	<p>13-15 members platform</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Local authorities • 3 Community people • 3 Student Council leaders • 3 Adolescent girls • School Principal • Representatives from School Management Committee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspection by local authorities to assess needs • Meeting with all members to discuss and divide roles and responsibilities • Integrate community infrastructure as priority into the Block/Commune Investment Plan or Development Plan • The representative of local authorities presents the plan to seek support from the district level and hold joint meeting in the monthly block/commune level meeting to raise the issues and seek support • Discuss community infrastructure issues with community members • Join the monthly meeting with student council members. • Regularly review that gender-inclusive infrastructure such as separate toilets for girls are constructed and hygiene is maintained • School should incorporate clause in their policies and guidelines where girls are sensitized on the importance of civic infrastructure and the benefits of a quality infrastructure for AGs 	AGs to meet every 2 weeks to discuss their challenges & Committee members to meet once a month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AGs work with school support committee & the principal raises concerns with local authorities or student council raises during commune/block level meetings. • AGs directly talk to community people to raise their issues during village meeting or escalate it to district level meetings.



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