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Claiming Power and Reshaping Governance: A Feminist Framework for the Philippines

Toward Gender-Just Governance



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List of Abbreviations

COA	Commission on Audit
CPA	Citizen Participatory Audit
CPIA	Citizen Participatory Internal Audit
CSO	Civil Society Organization
GAD	Gender and Development
IDIME	Identification, Design, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation
KABILIN	Kapunungan sa mga Kababyen-ang Banikanhon Ingon nga Lig-on ug Naghiusa
KAKASA	Kababayen-an Kontra Kalamidad ug Sakuna
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or questioning, Intersex, Asexual and more
LGC	Local Government Code
LGU	Local Government Unit
RA	Republic Act

Executive Summary

Women make up more than half of the electorate in the Philippines but hold only 24 per cent of elected posts, among which a significant portion are from family dynasties. Despite a strong legal architecture geared toward gender mainstreaming and decentralization (e.g., the Magna Carta of Women and the Local Government Code, both republic acts), Philippine governance remains elite-driven and centralized, producing gendered exclusion and coercive local politics as power remains concentrated in a top-down, dynastic and patriarchal structure. Women in governance continue to be structurally sidelined because representation without redistribution of power cannot produce equitable and just outcomes. Effective governance requires centering gender equality in all its processes so that the structural and intersectional roots of inequity become visible and actionable. The 2028 national elections present a critical opportunity for the country to prioritize a gender-transformative agenda.

A key argument of this paper is that vulnerability must be centered in governance processes. Vulnerability is not merely a condition of precarity; it is also a political resource that surfaces lived knowledge, sharpens policy priorities and illuminates the intersecting burdens borne by those at the margins. When governance acknowledges vulnerability, it creates space for power-to (the capacity of individuals and communities to shape outcomes) and power-with (the collective strength that emerges from solidarity, cooperation and mutual recognition). These forms of power are essential to dismantling the dominance of power-over (relational capacity to constrain or dominate others) that characterizes current institutions and political culture.

This paper proposes a feminist governance framework that overcomes tokenism by shifting who decides, who benefits and who evaluates across the policy cycle. It advances two mutually reinforcing principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability that work in tandem to redistribute power. Upward Agenda Setting relocates decision making from elite centers to communities, treating participation as civic labor and embedding lived vulnerabilities as primary policy inputs. In conjunction, Horizontal Accountability spreads evaluative authority laterally across citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), and Local Government Units so that performance is judged by tangible impacts—reduced unpaid care, safer services, equitable access—rather than procedural compliance. Together, these principles can reshape the relationship between the state and people, transforming governance

from a hierarchical, elite-centered system into a collaborative practice of care, co-responsibility and equitable decision making.

Key Systemic Challenges

The predominant strategy of a “mix-and-stir” approach to gender in governance—or expecting gender justice to be achieved through the superficial inclusion of women’s representation—paralyzes the progress made by the Philippines on gender equality. Gender policy is implemented as procedural checklists rather than as mechanisms for transforming the power relations between the state and citizens that reproduce inequality. Gender and Development (GAD) systems often function as compliance requirements rather than as transformative tools, with misallocated funds and inadequate tracking of actual benefits for vulnerable sectors. Agenda setting remains highly centralized, as unclear divisions of responsibility between national agencies and local governments undermine genuine devolution. Participatory mechanisms intended to democratize local planning tend to become formalistic and controlled by local elites, limiting meaningful involvement of women, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous communities. In many areas, the securitization of development has shrunk civic spaces and exposed grassroots women leaders to harassment, further discouraging participation. These challenges are exacerbated by fiscal opacity and cultural norms that devalue women’s leadership, normalize gender-based violence, and keep unpaid care work invisible within policy frameworks.

Case Studies: Emerging Models of Gender-Just Governance

Despite the systemic constraints discussed above, examples from across the country demonstrate the viability of a governance model grounded in Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability. In Sta. Catalina, Negros Oriental, the Indigenous and rural women’s federation KABILIN has reshaped local ordinances and GAD programs through co-governance with the municipal government, including family-centered gender training and agricultural policies that institutionalize women’s roles as

farmers and stewards of the land. In Salcedo, Eastern Samar, the women-led alliance KAKASA has used experiential and local technical knowledge to correct flawed infrastructure, influence disaster planning and create care-centered community monitoring systems. Meanwhile, in Odiongan, Romblon, a pioneering Citizen Participatory Internal Audit model has enabled citizens to jointly conduct audits with local officials, resulting in concrete improvements in transparency and grievance mechanisms. These cases demonstrate that when communities are treated as co-governors rather than as beneficiaries, governance becomes more inclusive, responsive and resilient.

Policy Pathways: Building Gender-Just Governance

To build on these promising practices, the paper outlines several policy pathways that embed gender-transformative principles throughout the governance cycle. Gender and intersectional analysis must be integrated from the earliest stages of policymaking—agenda setting, budgeting, implementation and evaluation—to ensure that all policies, including those not labeled as gender related, account for differential impacts. The redistribution of care work should become a central governance priority, with budgets, service delivery and monitoring systems explicitly designed to reduce the unpaid care burdens borne disproportionately by women. Community-based agenda setting must be institutionalized through inclusive formats such as mini-publics and roving consultations that reach individuals who cannot participate in formal meetings. Open and participatory budgeting requires unbundled financial reporting and traceable allocations, while participatory auditing must become a standard feature of national and local oversight. Moreover, the government must invest in CSOs and recognize civic participation as labor requiring support such as salaries, employment protections, mobility allowances and childcare. Finally, intersectional gender data collection systems must be strengthened to prevent the invisibility of vulnerable populations in policy.

Actionable Recommendations for Legislative and Executive Branches

The realization of gender-just governance demands coordinated action across the legislative and executive branches. For Congress, this includes mandating gendered reviews of all legislation, investigating the misuse of GAD funds, passing a robust Freedom of Information law, integrating protections against gendered corruption such as sexual extortion, prioritizing the unfinished devolution agenda and institutionalizing intersectional data systems. For the executive branch, implementation of a gender-just approach requires operationalizing devolution reforms under the Local Government Code, adopting culturally responsive evaluation frameworks, utilizing intersectional indicators in program design, institutionalizing community-led monitoring systems, establishing roving consultation mechanisms, and reframing patriarchal norms as governance failures warranting sanction. Through concerted action, the state can ensure that both policymaking and implementation reflect the lived realities of the most marginalized groups.

The Role of Women in Governance: From Representation to Solidarity

Women public officials play a crucial role in catalyzing gender-just governance, not only through representation but also through their role as solidarity actors who help redistribute power and open governance to marginalized communities. Their leadership can create opportunities for women from the basic sectors (e.g., farmers, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, urban poor, and others) to lead within the bureaucracy, strengthen partnerships with feminist CSOs, expand civic spaces, challenge patriarchal pressures and normalize care-centered decision making. Investment in leadership development, mentorship networks and cross-level alliances can help women in governance push for systemic reforms and advance gender justice within institutions.

1. Introduction

The commitment of the Philippines to gender equality is enshrined in its legislation and institutional frameworks. Republic Act (RA) 9710, or the Magna Carta of Women, is a comprehensive women's human rights law that works in tandem with the Philippine Commission on Women—the advisory body on Gender and Development (GAD) plans—to advance gender mainstreaming as the state's core strategy for addressing gender inequality across institutions (Rodriguez, 2025). These efforts have positioned the Philippines as one of the leading countries in global gender parity indices and the top-ranked nation in Asia for gender equality (Philippine Commission on Women, 2025).

However, these formal commitments do not reflect the deeper realities of how power is organized and exercised within governance. Beneath these indicators, governance structures remain centralized, elite-driven and exclusionary of vulnerable sectors (Choi, 2018). Current approaches often equate gender parity with statistics without interrogating the elite bargains and patriarchal norms that shape the practice of politics. Power continues to be maintained through extractive traditions that concentrate authority at the top (Allen, 2022).

Institutions reinforce one another in a “matrix of domination” (Kelly-Thompson et al., 2023, p. 26), where each level of government—from national to local—replicates domineering relationships toward particular social groups, such as women, through a “cage-like constellation of norms, laws and social practices” that renders gender itself a source of oppression. In the Philippines, this domination manifests in gendered spaces as coercion, corruption and the marginalization of vulnerable voices through social, infrastructural and financial barriers. National agencies overshadow local governments, while fragmented bureaucracies weaken the ability of governance to be genuinely responsive (Marquardt, 2017). Rather than empowering communities, the current political architecture in the country prioritizes elite legitimacy and the preservation of centralized power.

These structural dynamics have concrete consequences for women's political representation and participation. Women make up more than half of the country's electorate (ANFREL, 2025) but hold only 24 per cent of elected posts, among which a significant portion are from family dynasties (Philippine Institute of Development Studies, 2025). While mainstream strategies have emphasized

strengthening women's participation in politics, this “mix-and-stir” approach—expecting an unequal system to correct itself through limited inclusion of women—merely reproduces gendered hierarchies within the state (Winsor, 1988). Without transforming the systems that shape gendered behavior, women in public office are compelled to assimilate into and reproduce “the male paradigm of raw, coercive, and competitive politics” (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2008, p. 213).

In the Philippine context, women often enter politics as extensions of male relatives—as wives, daughters or widows—sustaining dynastic power. Their visibility, though significant, frequently functions to preserve elite dominance and familial interests rather than advance women's collective interests (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2008). Electoral incentives that reward patronage, coercion and dynastic continuity further discourage transformative leadership (Lambert et al., 2023). Women's representation without systemic transformation ultimately reinforces the very gender-oppressive dynamics that exclude vulnerable and marginalized voices from meaningful participation in governance.

The entrenchment of these power relations sustains dynastic and patriarchal networks that resist reform, embedding hierarchies in both political systems and cultural attitudes toward gender (Lambert et al., 2023). Gender blindness—the institutional tendency to overlook gender in assessing policy effectiveness—remains pervasive (Rodriguez, 2025). This neglect perpetuates and deepens gendered vulnerabilities, reflected in rising cases of gender-based violence such as trafficking, rape, domestic abuse and a high incidence of childhood pregnancy, as well as severe mental health outcomes including depression and suicide (Alibudbud, 2022; Davies et al., 2016; Mella, 2022; Tsai et al., 2021).

The 2028 national elections present a critical opportunity to reshape this trajectory. Beyond representation, governance must prioritize a transformative gender agenda that defines priorities, allocates resources and enforces accountability based on impact on the most vulnerable. **Effective governance requires centering gender equality in all its processes so that the structural and intersectional roots of inequity become visible and actionable.**

This paper advances a framework for gender-just governance that redistributes power across Philippine state institutions and society. It argues for restructuring

the way power shapes and is translated into policy through the dual principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability.

By building on these principles, governance shifts from the center to the margins—dismantling elite control and institutionalizing intersectional inclusion—thereby strengthening the participatory structures envisioned under the Philippine Local Government Code (LGC) of

1991 (RA 7160). Vulnerable communities—women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual and more (LGBTQIA+) people; Indigenous Peoples; persons with disabilities; youth; and senior citizens—are not only positioned to inform policy priorities based on lived realities but also empowered to participate and hold decision makers accountable throughout the entire cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation of public programs.



2. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, feminist policy analysis framework combining documentary review, institutional analysis and field-based inquiry to assess how power, participation and accountability are structured within Philippine local governance. The paper examined policy documents, audit reports and decentralization literature to trace how gender is sidelined or integrated in governance systems. Semi-structured interviews and community case studies with women leaders, civil society organizers and local officials captured the lived experiences of cooperation and exclusion across municipalities.

Guided by feminist methodologies, the analysis treats lived experience as political evidence and applies the twin principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability to identify institutional entry points for reform. The approach bridges feminist theory and policy design to translate community narratives into actionable pathways for redistributing decision-making power, improving accountability flows and centering gender justice within both legislative and executive practices.



3. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

This section outlines the theoretical foundations of a gender-just governance framework that redefines how power operates in public institutions. It treats gender as a relational and systemic construct—a set of norms and behaviors that shape who holds influence and whose needs are prioritized. By reframing vulnerability as a source of power, the framework enables the principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability to drive more equitable and responsive governance outcomes.

3.1. Gender-Transformative Continuum

Effective governance requires gender equality to be at the heart of all policy. The Gender-Transformative Continuum below outlines a gradation of gender policy responses—ranging from the total absence of gender to the structural approach required to achieve fully equitable outcomes. This continuum helps identify why policies that merely acknowledge gender but fall short of equalizing power relations among gendered groups and between the state and citizens will continue to face roadblocks and pitfalls in achieving their equality goals.

Gender negative: Denies or dismisses gender as relevant to governance; upholds policies and systems that reinforce patriarchy, exclusion and heteronormativity; continues male-dominated leadership without gender balance; silences or penalizes dissent from marginalized genders

Gender blind: Claims neutrality but ignores structural gender inequalities; develops uniform policies without gender analysis or disaggregated data; assumes governance is equally accessible and beneficial for all; lacks mechanisms to identify or correct gender-based exclusions

Gender sensitive: Recognizes that governance outcomes affect different genders differently; begins to collect sex-disaggregated data and conduct gender analysis; focuses on representation of diverse genders in consultative roles but without meaningful influence in decision making; identifies unequal access to power and resources but limits responses

Gender responsive: Develops targeted programs or policies for gender-disadvantaged groups; creates quotas or reserved seats in governance structures; promotes gender representation in leadership; allocates resources but still framed within power hierarchies

Gender transformative: Restructures power dynamics and institutions to address systemic inequalities; ensures full and equal participation and leadership across gender identities; mainstreams intersectional gender analysis in all governance mechanisms; embeds accountability mechanisms to track gender justice and transformation; fosters feminist leadership, care-centered policy models and co-creation of policies; challenges patriarchal, colonial and neoliberal governance norms; centers local agency and knowledge



3.2. Conceptualizing Power

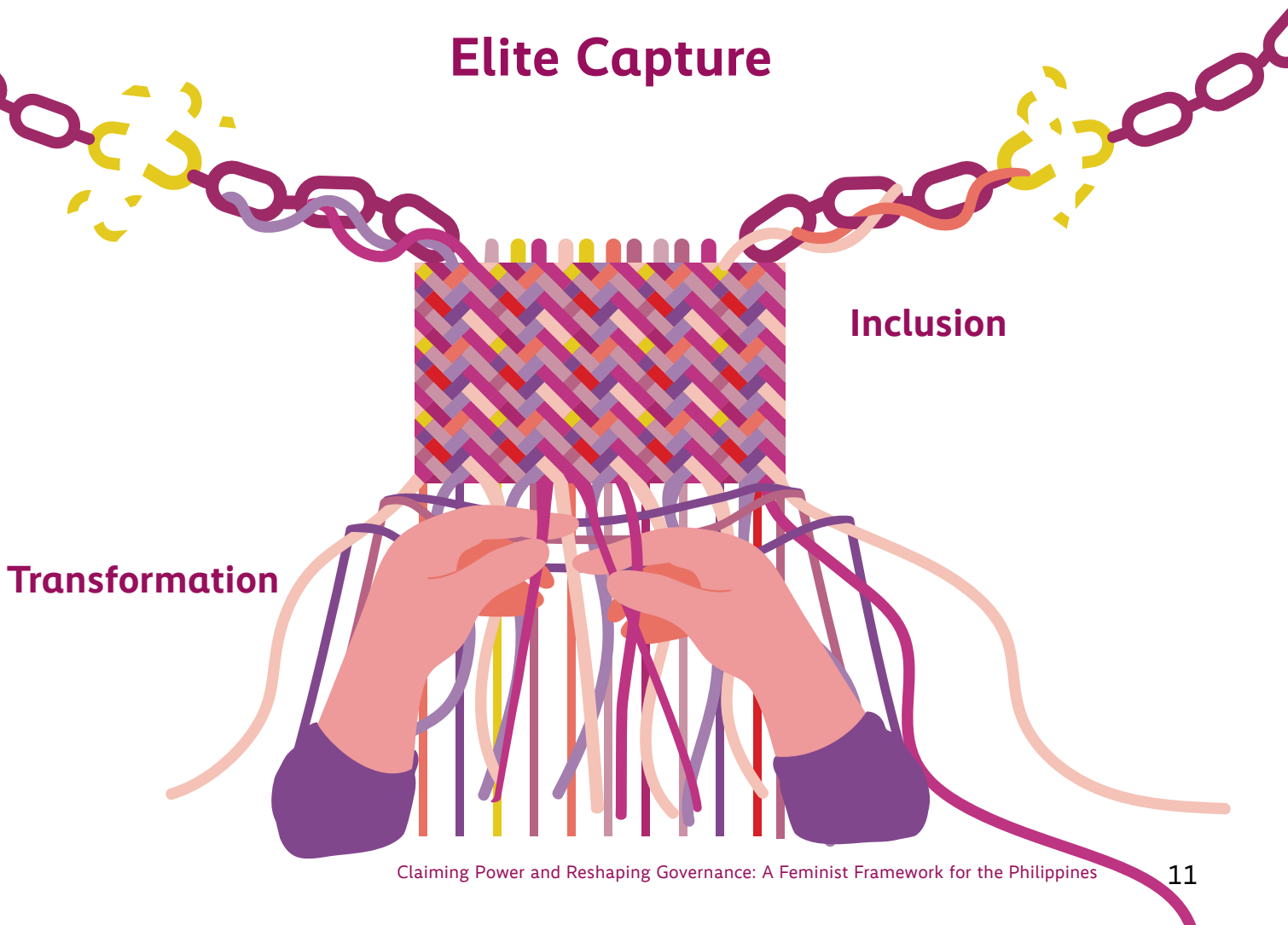
This paper adopts a multidimensional understanding of power as relational, productive and entrenched in social structures (Pansardi and Bindi, 2021). **Power-over** refers to the relational and often hierarchical capacity to constrain or dominate others—an exercise of control that may be coercive or structural (Haugaard, 2015; Rye, 2015). While traditionally viewed as negative, power-over is not inherently oppressive; its effects depend on whether it enables or limits others’ capacity to act. **Power-to** captures the individual or collective ability to act or bring about change (Morriss, 2002; Pitkin, 1972), representing agency and the capacity for transformation. **Power-with** refers to the shared ability that emerges through cooperation and collective organization toward common goals—a horizontal form of power grounded in mutual recognition and solidarity rather than domination (Allen, 1999; Partzsch, 2017). Recent debates suggest these forms are interdependent: **Empowerment processes often transform power-over into power-to and power-with, where agency and collaboration replace control and hierarchy** (Pansardi and Bindi, 2021). Within this paper’s framework, gender-just governance depends not only on redistributing power-over but also on expanding the social conditions that enable power-to and power-with to flourish.

3.3. Deliberation and Collective Empowerment

Participatory mechanisms must empower vulnerable populations with a sense of power-to or a collective influence over the social conditions of their lives (Young, 1997). This requires recognizing the material and social barriers that prevent full participation in shaping governance. Deliberative and collective action that links personal experience to political action is central to feminist governance (Sawer et al., 2023).

Genuine empowerment requires material ability to shape outcomes. The capacity of vulnerable communities to influence their own lives is a core component to ensuring that participation translates into decision-making power, resource access and accountability over policies that affect everyday life.

Power-with or the capacity for collective and collaborative action, aligns with Veneracion-Rallonza’s (2008, p. 213) call for a “transversalist form” which reconceptualizes governance as a network of many different public spheres and not a single top-down structure. Multiple experiences are then able to emerge from marginalization. However, this can only become effective and transformative if power is diffused toward the most vulnerable.



4. Principles of Gender-Just Governance

Gender is constructed through relations of power—not as a fixed category but as a dynamic set of roles, expectations and hierarchies entrenched in social, political and economic institutions (Radtke and Stam, 1994). Inequality is thus produced through systems and attitudes that assign more social and economic power to one gender over another (Ridgeway, 2011). In order for governance to be gender just, decision-making power needs to be dispersed so that agenda setting and accountability are anchored in the lived realities of vulnerable communities typically sidelined by gendered hierarchies (Lambert et al., 2023). Representation is insufficient if the governance structure does not distribute power-with and power-to across vulnerable sectors.

This section outlines the two structuring principles advanced by this paper for implementing gender-just governance reforms in the Philippines: Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability. Together, they provide a framework for redistributing decision-making power and ensuring that governance delivers tangible improvements in the lives of women and other marginalized groups. These principles transform governance from a top-down exercise into a collaborative system where decision making, implementation and oversight are co-managed by government, civil society and communities—resulting in equitable and responsive everyday governance practices.

4.1. Upward Agenda Setting

Upward Agenda Setting redefines how governance priorities are established. It entails a structural shift from viewing civic participation as virtue or goodwill to establishing it “as a form of labour that is distributed in society, and whose terms need to be renegotiated” (Holdo, 2023, p. 57). Civic participation is necessary democratic work that sustains governance itself, requiring institutional support and compensation. Citizens’ political activity is often limited to voting in elections or attending rallies, consistently positioned outside the locus of actual decision making (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2008). This restricts vulnerable sectors to symbolic rather than substantive political presence and reproduces exclusion rather than dismantling it.

To center gender justice in governance, Upward Agenda Setting must anchor marginalized communities directly

within decision-making spaces, not at their periphery. Traditional consultations and town halls frequently reproduce paternalistic dynamics where elite voices dominate and the concerns of women, LGBTQIA+ communities, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and senior citizens are made secondary (Porio, 2015). In these arrangements, vulnerability is obscured rather than engaged. Diffusing authority from elite centers to marginalized groups requires a relationship between the state and citizens that prioritizes and channels fiscal and temporal resources toward the lived problems of those at the margins. Ignoring the inherent vulnerabilities of these groups risks intensifying them, turning programs that should alleviate inequality into instruments of oppression.

Vulnerability, then, must be understood not only as a barrier but also as a potential driver of democratic participation. Veloso et al. (2025) argue that vulnerability is relational and evolving, requiring constant and ongoing interaction and deliberation between marginalized groups and the state and not limited by static, checklist-style approaches. Vulnerability is a political resource for collaborative action to achieve power-with and power-to: To be vulnerable is to be at risk and in a position to demand care, attention, and transformation (Velicu and Garcia-Lopez, 2018). Mobilized effectively, vulnerability can become a foundation for empowerment, enabling marginalized communities to reorient governance priorities toward equity.

This requires deliberative processes designed with explicit attention to power dynamics: Who is present? Who speaks? Who is silenced? Who remains excluded? And whose voice can actually shape the agenda? Upward Agenda Setting insists that co-creation processes privilege plural forms of knowledge, especially those rooted in lived experience rather than institutional expertise alone. This means recognizing domestic labor, care work and embodied risks as policy concerns on an equal footing with infrastructure or economic growth. Governance becomes transformative when it incorporates the daily realities of intersecting vulnerabilities into its agenda.

In practice, this principle would shift governance priorities. Programs shaped by equitable and impact-oriented resource allocation would be designed to reduce unpaid care burdens, enhance safety and accessibility and build resilience against environmental and economic shocks. This means moving beyond “women’s issues” as defined by

bureaucratic checklists and instead embracing a dynamic, relational approach to gendered inequalities.

By treating agenda setting as co-creation, feminist governance values diverse knowledge at the intersections of women, LGBTQIA+ people, Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities. Centering vulnerability, deliberation and civic labor in institutional processes transforms participation from episodic consultations into a daily democratic practice enacted both within and outside of formal institutions and across sites of inequality—*barangay* (village) halls, farms, markets and homes. This approach recognizes that democracy is not merely expressed through elections but maintained through the shared labor of governing.

Upward Agenda Setting is a corrective measure for elite-driven politics through its redistributive properties: It rebalances whose priorities shape collective action and how resources are allocated and concentrated. By centering people's vulnerability, the state affirms that legitimacy and capacity for change do not flow downward from central authority but upward from communities negotiating their realities at the margins. Through this principle, co-creation can transcend tokenism and become an institutional commitment to ensuring that governance itself is reoriented around those historically excluded.

4.2. Horizontal Accountability

Horizontal Accountability within gender-just governance requires a structural reorientation of power that expands beyond legal compliance and toward institutionalizing responsiveness, equity and care as the benchmarks of evaluation. Traditional accountability flows are hierarchical, moving upward toward national oversight bodies or inward through bureaucratic audits. While these mechanisms are critical, they often exclude the very communities meant to benefit from state programs, obscuring impact beneath technical reports, bundled budgets and quantitative indicators. A feminist reframing of accountability must interrogate power within institutions, challenge existing flows of accountability and incorporate care work as a fundamental political and economic system (Lambert et al., 2023).

Horizontal Accountability redistributes evaluative authority (power-to) across citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs) and local governments, positioning them as co-managers of governance (power-with) as opposed to passive recipients. This approach ensures that governance is primarily measured not only in terms of legality but also in terms of its capacity to reduce care burdens, ensure safety and expand access for women, LGBTQIA+ people, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities and other marginalized sectors. Maalat and Liwag (2008, p. 952) emphasize that identifying the “differently oppressed” provides insights invisible to those in positions of

relative privilege. This methodology for accountability allows the lived effects of overlapping inequalities to surface and be addressed (power-over).

The decentralization reforms of the LGC were intended to bring decision making closer to the people by anchoring subsidiarity and co-responsibility among central, regional and local institutions (Venugopal, 2016). Gender-just accountability reclaims decentralization by grounding it in participatory identification, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (IDIME) systems wherein communities go beyond merely observing to actively shaping evaluative criteria, project timelines and success measures. Such lateral accountability frames governance as a shared, transparent responsibility with communities able to shape impact as the primary receivers of the short- and long-term effects of these interventions.

Additionally, cultural perspectives and worldviews shape how value and impact are judged (Wehipeihana and McKegg, 2018). Thus, gender-just governance requires building accountability frameworks that respect Indigenous knowledge, recognize the expertise of local professionals and value the relational labor of care as a legitimate outcome of governance.

Many local professionals hold technical and specialized knowledge informed and enriched by their intimate relationship to the landscape and people. Beyond merely requesting their preliminary insight, experts from vulnerable sectors should be mobilized by the government as co-creators and project managers. Close collaboration throughout the full project cycle—from the design, planning and implementation to the monitoring and evaluation stages—can ensure responsiveness and effectiveness.

Such holistic systems of collaboration curb corruption by ensuring that public budgets generate material benefit for dispossessed groups instead of focusing on legality. Maladaptive projects—whether poorly planned infrastructure or securitized development initiatives—can be reined in by elevating communities as co-auditors and project managers who validate whether programs tangibly reduce vulnerabilities. In this sense, Horizontal Accountability becomes a safeguard against elite capture while also serving as a vehicle for empowerment, affirming that those who bear the brunt of policy failures must also be empowered to shape its corrections.

Through shared accountability, the objective of governance shifts from procedural compliance to impact in the everyday lives of vulnerable communities. When deliberation and accountability are laterally linked across institutions, organizations and vulnerable communities, the lived outcomes of policy—reduced care burdens, improved safety, access to livelihood and bodily autonomy, among others—become the primary measures of success.

5. Systems Analysis

This section assesses existing mechanisms for agenda setting and accountability in Philippine governance and identifies systemic gaps that hinder gender justice. Subsequently, it highlights cultural attitudes as a crucial dynamic to pushing gender-transformative principles.

5.1. Gaps in Agenda Setting

While the Philippines has adopted progressive legal frameworks for gender equality and decentralization, inclusive agenda setting is undermined by systemic weaknesses that maintain a top-down relationship between the state and citizens. Within that dynamic, Local Government Units (LGUs) maintain a position of coercion which limits the capacity of the experiences, observations and insights of vulnerable communities shared in consultations to produce material outcomes.

Elite Capture and Centralized Priorities

Recognizing decentralization as integral to gender-just governance, this paper pays particular attention to the capacities and responsibilities of LGUs. The LGC was passed as a tool to facilitate democratization by devolving political and administrative authority to localities (Atienza, 2006; Ichimura and Bahl, 2008). In practice, agenda setting remains highly centralized and politicized. The national budget is crafted by Congress independent of the actual expenditure and allocation at the local government level, which results in politicized prioritization rather than decisions based on local and efficiency considerations (Porio, 2015). Subsequently, development priorities at both the national and local levels are largely determined by the current elected administration, inhibiting long-term development benefits through subsequent administrations. This top-down orientation is compounded by the unclear delineation of responsibilities between national agencies and LGUs. The result is fragmented coordination, redundancy in programming and poor-quality implementation, including rampant “ghost projects” that dissipate scarce resources (Langran, 2011).

Furthermore, modern, efficiency-oriented administrative practices maintain a monopoly on legitimacy, which means

frequent erasure of regional communal practices, thereby excluding local actors whose cultural knowledge and collective decision-making traditions are vital to effective and inclusive governance. Forcing communities to abide by formal processes diminishes the agency of various groups across a diverse country like the Philippines and risks the loss of Indigenous knowledge and experience (Bamba et al., 2021).

Weak Participation

The participatory mechanisms envisioned in the LGC also fall short of their transformative promise. A recent baseline study on participation in LGUs found that Local Development Councils, while designed as institutional spaces for citizen involvement, have largely become “invited spaces”¹ controlled by local governments (Aceron, 2019; Medina-Guce et al., 2025). Because there is no incentive for the LGUs to be impact-oriented, civil participation is often formalistic and tokenistic and is measured in terms of attendance requirements rather than the quality or impact of citizen contributions (Medina-Guce et al., 2025).

Administratively, CSOs face late meeting notices, insufficient funding for participation, scheduling conflicts, high transportation costs and poor communication from LGUs. These constraints weigh most heavily on women, Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities, whose caregiving responsibilities and limited mobility already constrain their engagement. Technically, many grassroots CSOs lack the training, exposure or confidence to participate effectively in formal governance spaces. A number of respondents in Medina-Guce et al.’s (2025, p. 346) baseline study even described “shyness” as a practical hindrance to CSOs voicing concerns, highlighting the social and cultural dimensions of exclusion. Policy-related obstacles further undermine inclusion: Accreditation processes for CSOs are often restrictive, guidelines for honoraria remain unclear and CSO roles in planning and budgeting are poorly defined. Finally, political barriers persist. Because participation is frequently contingent on LGU invitations, CSOs are vulnerable to co-optation. Weak trust between LGUs and CSOs, compounded by interference from political elites, undermines the autonomy of citizen groups and limits their ability to shape outcomes.

¹ Invited spaces: Defined as forums for interaction between citizens and authorities that are established and governed by those in power where participation occurs under terms defined by the state or institution. In contrast, “claimed” or created spaces emerge when less powerful groups carve out arenas for engagement on their own initiative, either by asserting participation within official structures or by organizing autonomously outside them (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Gaventa, 2006).

Programs such as Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan—Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI-CIDSS), a flagship initiative of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, have enhanced participatory mechanisms for identifying community priorities. However, their overall impact remains constrained by incongruity in budget prioritization, which prevents both the shift of decision-making power to communities as well as the correction of entrenched power asymmetries (Imbong, 2025). Moreover, the program’s implementation largely depends on the political will of LGUs to adopt and sustain it, further limiting its transformative potential (Aceron, 2022; Mansuri and Rao, 2004).

Scholars have made similar observations of Bottom-Up Budgeting, the nationwide participatory budgeting program in the Philippines which ran from 2012 to 2016. Under Bottom-Up Budgeting, LGUs were incentivized to institutionalize consultative participation of CSOs and grassroots movements for additional funding, but the program overall failed to strengthen their capacity to hold their LGUs accountable to producing results (Aceron, 2019). The design itself concentrated power in the central government: National agencies determined a pre-set menu of projects for CSOs to choose from, ultimately assessing and deciding on whether the project would be accepted. This limited the capacity of CSOs to enact oversight and discouraged the participation of other groups who felt that their claim-making would be too closely controlled by the LGU.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a system where decentralization is superficial. Instead of empowering citizens, particularly those from marginalized sectors, participatory mechanisms often serve to legitimize decisions that have already been made at higher levels of authority. The voices of women, Indigenous Peoples and grassroots organizations are formally included but substantively marginalized, while local elites continue to capture the bulk of resources and decision-making power.

Securitized Development

A critical barrier to gender-just governance in the Philippines is the securitization of development. Under the framework of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, state resources intended for poverty alleviation and rural development have been reframed as counterinsurgency initiatives. Development projects are justified not by their capacity to address landlessness, hunger or livelihood insecurity but by their perceived utility in suppressing dissent. This dynamic has produced a profound distortion in agenda setting, where priorities are defined through military goals and not community needs (Imbong, 2025).

The gendered impacts of this securitization are severe. Women peasant activists—often at the forefront of

organizing for land rights, food sovereignty and social protection—have become primary targets of harassment, red-tagging and violence (Zimmermann et al., 2025). CSOs, particularly those led by women, face coercion and intimidation when attempting to participate in governance spaces. What should be processes of participatory agenda setting are instead sites of silencing, where those most dispossessed are excluded under the guise of “security threats”. The result is a chilling effect: CSOs withdraw from engagement, and women’s priorities remain structurally invisible in policy deliberations.

By redefining grassroots organizing as a threat, securitized development erodes both Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability. Communities are denied the opportunity to articulate priorities grounded in lived experience, while accountability channels—audits, participatory monitoring and grievance mechanisms—become ineffective in an environment of fear and repression. Instead of being responsive to vulnerable sectors, the state reproduces coercive dynamics that deepen their marginalization.

5.2. Gaps in Accountability

Systemic accountability gaps in the Philippines are sustained by fiscal opacity, fragmented devolution and coercive power relations that exclude citizens and civil society from meaningful oversight. While institutions like the Commission on Audit (COA) uphold procedural compliance, the absence of participatory and transformative accountability mechanisms allows corruption and intimidation to persist, undermining the impact of development projects.

Fiscal Opacity

According to an evaluation by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2025), the conceptually inadequate and poorly implemented devolution agenda has left institutional constraints that reduce LGU effectiveness. These include fiscal gaps, weak accountability and transparency mechanisms, and poor coordination between national and local governments. Hyper-fragmentation of LGUs creates bureaucracies that leave services uneven, vulnerable populations underserved and systems highly susceptible to corruption.

LGU reports are prone to bundled budgeting, which obscures line-item expenditures and prevents citizens from knowing how much is actually allocated to services (Jucu et al., 2004). This practice undermines fiscal transparency and makes it impossible to evaluate whether resources address the lived vulnerabilities of marginalized groups.

By realigning functional assignments, unbundling expenditure data and strengthening inter-LGU cooperation,

legislators can create accountability systems that are not only transparent and efficient but also equitable.

Coercion and Corruption

Under the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the COA serves as the central body of fiscal accountability, tasked with ensuring that public funds are not wasted or misapplied (Doceo, 2023). Although the COA is constitutionally independent from both the executive and legislative branches, its authority is limited to fiscal review and recommendation. It lacks direct enforcement powers, relying on the Ombudsman and Congress to act on its findings. This structure keeps the power to exact accountability internal to government institutions, effectively excluding citizens and vulnerable sectors from oversight. As a result, accountability remains procedural and compliance based, leaving gaps that enable coercion and corruption to persist beyond the COA's formal reach and scope.

This restriction is evident through gendered dynamics that existing frameworks fail to address. Women experience corruption differently and often more acutely than men, particularly through sexual extortion (sextortion), in which sexual favors are demanded in exchange for public services, permits or employment (Bjarnegård et al., 2022). Despite its prevalence, sextortion is not explicitly recognized under the country's current anti-corruption laws², which focus narrowly on financial misconduct (Caganan, 2018). This omission creates critical blind spots in institutional accountability and leaves aggrieved women without adequate avenues for redress.

This type of physical and sexual coercion is not limited to women. It is also highly likely among other vulnerable groups such as senior citizens, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people, who often face compounded risks of dependency and power asymmetry in accessing public services (Ray and Henry, 2024). These forms of abuse are rooted in patriarchal masculinities that normalize dominance, entitlement and control within state and community interactions. Addressing corruption, therefore, also requires confronting the gendered and cultural foundations of power that enable such coercive practices to persist within governance systems (Bockelie et al., 2017).

CSOs likewise face systemic coercion within accountability systems. Rather than being treated as governance partners, many CSOs report intimidation and exclusion from participatory mechanisms after raising concerns about fund misuse or inappropriate projects (Arugay and Baquisal, 2023). In several localities, the climate of securitized development, reinforced by mechanisms such as the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, has normalized harassment and violence against community leaders—particularly women and environmental defenders—who challenge local power structures (Zimmermann et al., 2025).

Corruption is not gender neutral in its causes or consequences (Maalat and Liwag, 2008). Strengthening accountability requires a gender-sensitive anti-corruption approach that promotes transparency, decentralization and the substantive participation of marginalized groups in fiscal oversight (Bockelie et al., 2017). Establishing gender-responsive measures—such as legally recognizing sextortion as a form of corruption, protecting CSO independence and establishing participatory audit systems—can move Philippine accountability frameworks beyond compliance toward a gender-just model of governance.

Limits of the Commission on Audit's Processes

The COA is the Supreme Audit Institution of the Philippines whose primary mandate is to ensure optimal and responsible expenditure. However, its current structure is a significant barrier to participatory and lateral accountability. As a general rule, the COA employs a post-audit system, reviewing government transactions only after funds have been spent and projects reported as implemented (Doceo, 2023). This retrospective approach, while safeguarding procedural compliance, limits the ability to prevent misuse or reorient spending toward community-defined priorities. The COA's current systems have led to habitual late reports, late dissemination and minimal public resonance, preventing timely and meaningful correction.

Moreover, the language and format of COA reports are heavily technical, written for bureaucratic and legal audiences rather than citizens. This renders audit findings opaque to the public and to CSOs that might otherwise use them for advocacy or monitoring. In effect, transparency exists in form but not in practice: Information is public, but inaccessible.

The COA created the Citizen Participatory Audit (CPA) as a strategy intended to evaluate the value-for-money of LGU expenditure, with the audit team involving citizens selected from CSOs to achieve greater transparency, accountability and involved and vigilant citizenry (Commission on Audit, n.d.). It was launched as a partnership among the COA, CSOs and citizen groups, and was internationally recognized for innovating collaborative accountability (Commission on Audit, 2021).

Despite its promise, the CPA faces structural limitations. While the mechanism is undergoing institutionalization as of 2023, there exist no formal, legally empowered bodies ensuring that findings translate into responsive policy or corrective action. Participation is often confined to select, formally accredited CSOs, narrowing civic engagement to a limited circle of “invited” actors rather than fostering broad-based community oversight (Doceo, 2023).

Spatial arrangements further complicate independence. With COA regional offices physically located inside city

² Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act (RA 3019), Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials & Employees (RA 6713), Art. 210 on Direct Bribery of Philippine Revised Penal Code

halls, the agency's auditors operate under spatial proximity to LGUs whose transactions they are meant to audit. This arrangement, while administratively convenient, exposes COA personnel to political pressure and coercion, undermining impartiality. It also symbolically reinforces the perception that accountability remains an internal bureaucratic exercise rather than a public right.

These structural weaknesses disempower women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups who lack the technical expertise, time or resources to navigate audit processes. Without accessible audit outputs, communities cannot meaningfully assess whether budgets reach programs that address unpaid care work, gender-based violence or livelihood insecurity.

A reimagined accountability system must therefore move beyond the passive release of audit reports to institutionalize participatory audit mechanisms at both national and local levels. This entails expanding CPA membership beyond accredited CSOs to include community clusters, women's collectives and grassroots networks, ensuring representation across vulnerabilities. Spatial and procedural independence must be safeguarded, perhaps through the relocation of COA offices to neutral public spaces and the creation of community-facing dissemination channels that translate audit results into accessible, actionable information.

5.3. Tokenistic Gender and Development Framework

The GAD framework in the Philippines, while formally institutionalized under the Magna Carta for Women (RA 9710), has often been reduced to fiscal compliance rather than functioning as a transformative tool. Weak accountability mechanisms on local spending patterns not only permit but incentivize misuse. As studies note, when accountability systems are weak or lack adequate controls on local spending, shortages in funding result in the chronic underpayment of local public officials, fostering an environment where petty bribery becomes normalized as compensation (Juco et al., 2024).

This dynamic is evident in the persistent misuse of the GAD budget. The most recent publicly available report on GAD was released in 2018, making a new edition already seven years overdue. The report highlighted widespread practices of misallocation, including the use of GAD funds for honoraria or ceremonial activities rather than substantive programs that advance women's rights and empowerment (Commission on Audit, 2018). Instead of incentivizing impact-oriented initiatives, the system rewards perfunctory reporting that masks the absence of gendered transformation in governance.

As a result, the GAD framework has become tokenistic: present on paper but detached from the lived realities of women and vulnerable groups. Without deeper inspection

of how GAD plans are designed, funded and monitored, the framework risks entrenching inequality by legitimizing the appearance of gender mainstreaming while perpetuating business-as-usual governance.

5.4. Patriarchal Attitudes

Legal and procedural frameworks in the Philippines, while formally aligned with international gender equality standards, often fail in practice because they collide with entrenched cultural norms. As Lee (1986, p. 77) argues, "... folk norms that are incongruent with legal norms motivate or force people to deviate from legal requirements". This tension between law and culture reveals that the mere proliferation of gender-responsive legislation is insufficient; policy effectiveness must be evaluated against the social systems within which it operates.

Patriarchal attitudes remain the most pervasive cultural barrier. Women are still largely perceived through restrictive roles—caretakers, dependents or moral guardians—rather than as autonomous political and economic actors. Firmase and Prieto-Carolino (2021) found that women in *barangays* were typically assigned committee work that was considered stereotypically feminine, such as Barangay Health Workers and Barangay Nutrition Scholars. Only 4 per cent occupied a top position in the *barangay*. Furthermore, these positions are voluntary, receiving only a negligible honorarium, not a salary, despite their crucial role in public health, illustrating how women's contributions and care work are undervalued in the system (Hartigan-Go et al., 2025; Querri et al., 2020).

These cultural framings constrain women's access to decision-making spaces, delegitimize their authority and normalize their exclusion. The acceptance of abuse and hierarchy also drives the persistence of gender-based violence, which Rodriguez (2025) identifies as a major factor in the lack of political will to advance gender equality initiatives.

Cultural barriers intensify inequalities across governance spaces. At the community level, traditional dispute settlement processes often privilege male authority, sidelining formal legal remedies. At the institutional level, even gender focal point systems mandated under the Magna Carta of Women can be reduced to token compliance when local leaders view gender mainstreaming as secondary to "more pressing" development priorities. At the policy level, legal provisions may be formally adopted but diluted through implementation practices shaped by cultural resistance.

Legal frameworks cannot be understood or reformed in isolation of their social context. Rodriguez (2025) emphasizes the importance of interrogating patriarchal norms within households, communities and institutions in addressing hindrances to gender policy implementation. Cultural norms toward gender are structural determinants of governance outcomes.

6. Case Studies

This paper has advanced the principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability to operationalize a feminist redistribution of power for gender-just governance. Having assessed the systemic barriers within existing mechanisms, this section will highlight a sample of existing initiatives and practices that can be built on to exercise these principles. The following case studies were selected for their transformative potential in terms of inclusive leadership and the demonstration of gender-just principles in their approach and goal setting. The interviews with the pioneers of the organizations and programs were conducted in September 2025. These examples represent opportunities, relationships and experiences that can serve as the foundation for transformative change.

Case Study 1. KABILIN: Co-Governance and the Redistribution of Power in Sta. Catalina, Negros Oriental

The Kapunungan sa mga Kababyen-ang Banikanhon Ingon nga Lig-on ug Naghiusa (KABILIN)—a federation of Indigenous and rural women in Sta. Catalina municipality, Negros Oriental province, led by Indigenous leader Luz Bador—is an example of how redistributive co-governance transforms the government’s priorities. Bador shares that KABILIN and municipal officials have co-constructed new understandings of participation, accountability and empowerment by insisting on collaboration with the LGU, reshaping both the content and culture of local policy.

According to Bador, the local government’s GAD Code limited interventions to annual gender sensitivity and anti-gender-based violence seminars. These sessions, however, triggered backlash: Women reported increased violence at home after attending, as husbands resented their absence from domestic duties. Guided by KABILIN’s women, the LGU restructured these activities to include family-based training, recognizing that cultural change requires collective participation.

The LGU constructed a communal space where families could gather on weekends, share meals and attend joint sessions on gender equality, unpaid care and household cooperation. This shifted gender programming from isolated lectures to community-building experiences that reoriented attitudes within families.

Through Upward Agenda Setting, KABILIN expanded what counts as legitimate governance concerns. By mobilizing testimonies from women farmers, caregivers and Indigenous members, the federation secured a seat in the Municipal Development Council and pushed for the Organic Agriculture Ordinance, which mandates municipal provision of organic fertilizer to women farmers. This institutionalized women’s roles as agricultural producers and environmental stewards, redefining economic participation as both livelihood and care for the land. Women-managed farms now inform local budget priorities, and men’s participation in the federation’s programs has evolved from resistance to support as husbands increasingly share caregiving responsibilities and willingly provide transportation for their wives to and from meetings and activities.

At the same time, KABILIN practices Horizontal Accountability by reframing how success is measured. Members emphasize that projects should be assessed by “*nakakaapekto ba ito sa buhay ng bawat isa*” (“whether it improves everyone’s lives”). The group monitors the alignment of budgets with community-defined needs, arguing that true accountability is not fiscal compliance but tangible wellbeing. Their organizing also includes gender-based violence watch groups where women members themselves link *barangay*-level gender-based violence reporting to municipal protection services, placing accountability within the community itself.

KABILIN’s collaboration with the LGU flags what is necessary for the redistribution of power: knowledge and decision-making authority flowing upward from communities rather than downward from officials. By normalizing women’s participation in local planning, the federation is slowly transforming the perception of governance—from a male-dominated structure of control to a shared civic labor rooted in care, inclusion and cultural sensitivity.

However, KABILIN leader Luz Bador’s reflection on women’s self-perception within Indigenous communities underscores the structural barriers to holding the government accountable for equitable outcomes. She observed, “*Mahirap yun sa mga IP kasi mas malakas sa kanila yung [lalaki] ... Mayroon pa dapat idevelop na kakayahan ng kababaihan na maging palaban ... Lalo na kasi pag kaharap pulitiko ... kahit may batas na ... kailangan ng legwork*” (“It’s difficult among Indigenous Peoples because men have more say ... The capacity of

women to assert themselves needs to be developed ... Especially because when facing politicians ... even with laws in place ... much lobbying is still required”).

Bador is cognizant of the complex power asymmetries that exclude Indigenous and rural women from influencing outcomes. Her reflection highlights how cultural hierarchies and gendered socialization constrain the political agency of vulnerable communities, illustrating that legal guarantees alone are insufficient without deliberate efforts to empower minorities by equipping them with the necessary tools and leverage to assert particular demands. Gains remain highly contingent on the political will of local officials and the ability of CSOs to sustain meaningful pressure, since bureaucratic systems routinely limit their participation and access to information during implementation.

KABILIN roots its efforts in a decentralized approach that prioritizes lived experience and collective negotiation with local officials. This case exemplifies the kind of state–civil society relationship that can be improved, strengthened and institutionalized to progressively embody the principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability.

Case Study 2. KAKASA: Community Accountability and Gendered Disaster Governance in Salcedo, Eastern Samar

The women-led alliance Kababayen-an Kontra Kalamidad ug Sakuna (KAKASA) based in Salcedo municipality, Eastern Samar, demonstrates how feminist accountability can emerge from local expertise and collective care. Formed in response to recurring floods and storm surges, KAKASA organized local women to challenge the technical bias of local infrastructure planning and assert their role in disaster governance.

When the LGU’s seawall project was being constructed, the alliance identified irregularities in material quality and design, which they knew—through years of experience living by the shoreline—would fail under strong tides and floods and endanger lives. Drawing on the technical knowledge of women engineers and the ecological insights of coastal residents, KAKASA mobilized a review of the project’s specifications, engaging directly with LGU engineers and *barangay* officials. The members took photos and gathered testimonies to substantiate their claims and pressure the LGU to act. Their intervention and lobbying resulted in design and material modifications, including reinforced foundations and drainage adjustments, that reflected lived experience.

This process embodies Horizontal Accountability: Not willing to be reduced to passive recipients of state projects, communities evaluated and co-managed public works,

redefining accountability as a shared civic responsibility. The assessments by the alliance became part of municipal audit documentation, setting a precedent for participatory verification of infrastructure quality moving forward.

At the same time, KAKASA’s organizing illustrates Upward Agenda Setting in action. Beyond technical corrections, members also pushed the LGU to integrate gendered disaster planning, accounting for the unpaid care burdens that intensify during floods when women must secure food and child safety. Although there are still improvements to be made, their advocacy is slowly shaping the inclusion of care infrastructure, free medical check-ups for women, and safe shelters for women and children in the municipal disaster budget. If members cannot attend meetings, able members actively do roving consultations that reach housebound women, senior citizens and persons with disabilities or illness, going house-to-house to consolidate priorities which have and continue to inform local contingency plans.

KAKASA leader Felisa Ramasta Castro states that their initiatives center the notion of dignity: “*Dignidad ng tao, iyon ang unahin*” (“The dignity of people should come first”). These efforts not only improved the community’s disaster resilience but also redistributed power: Women’s everyday knowledge gained institutional legitimacy, and local officials recognized them as partners in evaluating risk and public spending.

According to Castro, if KAKASA members are not invited to LGU consultations, they take the initiative to approach the LGU or still attend: “*Kami ang nagpupush na mayroong mga isyu*” (“We, ourselves, assert that there are issues that need to be addressed”). She cites the example of pushing the LGU to prioritize mental health programs because of an increase in suicides among youth, which she notes is a care burden disproportionately placed on women that needs to be shared by the community to protect women’s mental health.

Castro shares that the alliance acts with the mindset that “*Mayroon bang kaagarang solusyon kung sosolusyonan namin. ... Tulong-tulong sa aming munisipyo*” (“It is possible to find a timely solution if we choose to act on the issue. ... We help each other in our municipality”). However, members have experienced and remain vulnerable to political retaliation, underscoring the need to formalize protections for CSOs and institutionalize community monitoring and audit mechanisms.

KAKASA’s experience shows that genuine accountability is achieved through the collective authority of citizens to demand transparency, redefine expertise and shape the standards of safety and care. In doing so, they transform governance from compliance to co-responsibility—making gender justice a measure of resilience itself.

Case Study 3. Citizen Participatory Internal Audit in Odiongan, Romblon: Institutionalizing Shared Accountability

Odiongan municipality in Romblon province demonstrates how internal auditing, traditionally a closed bureaucratic function, was transformed into a participatory governance tool through the Citizen Participatory Internal Audit (CPIA). Initiated in 2021 by the Internal Audit Services Unit, the CPIA emerged from both necessity and innovation as the municipality faced severe internal audit capacity constraints, a challenge common across local governments. Drawing on risk-based and participatory audit frameworks, Odiongan municipality reimagined accountability through the CPIA as a shared and collaborative civic responsibility rather than a purely administrative task.

Under the leadership of Ivan Jon Ferriol, Head of the Internal Audit Services Unit, and endorsed by Trina Firmalo-Fabic, then-Municipal Mayor of Odiongan, Romblon, the CPIA institutionalized collaboration between municipal auditors and members of the Odiongan People's Council, representing groups such as women, persons with disabilities, farmers and youth. Through consultations and technical training, the Internal Audit Services Unit capacitated CSOs to participate in audit planning, implementation and reporting. This created a form of Upward Agenda Setting, in which ordinary citizens, through their sectoral organizations, could shape the priorities and performance criteria of internal audit activities—redirecting the locus of oversight toward responsiveness.

In one notable case, the CPIA of Odiongan's citizen feedback mechanisms led to the adoption of a municipal communications policy that improved public access to grievance channels and digital directories. This outcome exemplifies Horizontal Accountability, where community members co-produce evaluative knowledge with the LGU and their findings directly inform policy reform. In this structure, accountability is not only exercised over government but also with it—building relational trust and transparency between institutions and citizens.

However, the CPIA also reveals the structural limits of participatory mechanisms when not formally institutionalized. Despite support from the mayor and a technical working group, the proposed CPIA ordinance stalled amid political contestation. According to Ferriol, the Department of Budget and Management declined to support the initiative, citing inconsistencies with national internal audit standards and the need to uphold the hierarchy of applicable laws. This further demonstrates the structural monopoly of the state in accountability functions, limiting transparency and citizen ownership.

Moreover, participation remains uneven: While women, persons with disabilities and youth are represented, LGBTQIA+ people and Indigenous groups remain excluded due to accreditation barriers and limited organizational infrastructure. Unpaid participation also poses significant burdens on women and caregivers, underscoring the need to recognize civic participation as a form of labor.

The Odiongan experience underscores that participatory audit mechanisms, while promising, require legal recognition, sustained resourcing and gendered inclusion to be transformative. For replication, national and local governments must formalize co-audit mechanisms that embed CSO participation in fiscal governance cycles—from planning to evaluation—while ensuring that marginalized sectors have the capacity and institutional protection to engage meaningfully.

By grounding accountability in collaboration and formalizing citizen oversight in bureaucratic systems, Odiongan's CPIA moves governance closer to feminist principles of co-governance: redistributing evaluative power, privileging lived experience and aligning transparency with care and justice.

Synthesis

The experiences of KABILIN, KAKASA and the CPIA in Odiongan reveal that transformative gender-just governance depends on the relationships built between state and society. When collaboration is grounded in trust, recognition and shared responsibility, governance moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful co-creation. KABILIN and KAKASA demonstrate how partnerships between women's groups and LGUs transform participation into daily democratic practice, prioritizing the lived realities of minorities in local ordinances, family life and community priorities for the benefit of the whole community. The CPIA illustrates that accountability gains depth when citizens are empowered to jointly monitor and evaluate government performance.

Together, these initiatives show that Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability are necessarily mutually reinforcing: Genuine mechanisms for participation require systems for communities to enforce accountability by sharing responsibility. When practiced together, they transform governance into a shared endeavor of care, vigilance and learning anchored in state-society relationships capable of producing enduring, gender-just change.

7. Policy Pathways for Gender-Just Governance

To be truly gender transformative, gender-just governance must legitimize practices and processes that transform power relations in politics and governance spaces by redistributing authority to vulnerable sectors through the combined principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability. Together, these pathways shift decision making from elite-centered institutions to community-driven processes while ensuring that accountability flows laterally across government, civil society and citizens. Crucially, this requires institutions to move beyond surface-level representation toward examining their own outcomes and assumptions. By interrogating how policies and practices institutionalize gender inequality—and by surfacing the often-ignored foundations of the care economy—governance can reorient itself toward a genuine gender mainstreaming framework that seeks equity across the entire policy cycle (Sawer et al., 2023).

7.1. Gender-Responsive Analysis across the Governance Cycle

At the heart of gender-just governance is the recognition that all governance processes—whether legislative or executive, fiscal or programmatic—are gendered in their impacts. Gender analysis must therefore be present across the full life cycle of governance: policy conception, agenda setting, budget deliberation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. This approach involves proactive interrogation of how rules, incentives and institutional practices differently affect women, men, LGBTQIA+ people, Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities as a core feature of policy, rather than as an afterthought (Moussouti, 2020). Utilizing gender analysis across the governance cycle transforms it into an accountability tool, ensuring that equity is a core design principle in all legislation and in every stage of governance, not only in problems labeled as “women’s issues”.

7.2. Redistribution of Care Work as a Governance Priority

Unpaid and underpaid care work—childcare, eldercare, domestic labor, community caregiving—forms the invisible infrastructure sustaining economic and political life. Yet it remains largely excluded from governance priorities,

treated as a private burden instead of a collective responsibility. The absence of care work recognition creates systemic inequities: Women are overrepresented in informal labor, face barriers to political participation and carry disproportionate burdens during crises (climate disasters, pandemics, conflict).

Care work sustains the political and economic system and yet remains invisible in public policy. Gender-just governance requires prioritizing care redistribution across the whole policy cycle. Agenda setting must foreground testimonies of caregivers; budgets must include disaggregated line items for childcare, eldercare and community health; and implementation must provide flexible, decent work opportunities for caregivers through localized hiring. Monitoring and evaluation should track reductions in unpaid care burdens as success indicators, while reporting should include care economy audits to ensure visibility. Active care redistribution transforms governance from passively benefiting from unpaid labor to actively guaranteeing equitable responsibility, enabling women and other caregivers to engage fully in civic and political life.

7.3. Institutionalizing Community-Based Agenda-Setting Mechanisms

Establishing community-based agenda-setting mechanisms that go beyond token consultations is a key reform toward gender-just governance. At present, “invited spaces” limit citizen participation to formal invitations controlled by local elites, reproducing exclusion (Medina-Guce et al., 2025). Instead, governance should involve mini-publics that formally recognize CSOs, people’s organizations and sectoral groups, including non-organized citizens, as co-creators of policy priorities. These mechanisms must be mobile and accessible—reaching women, persons with disabilities, senior citizens and caregivers directly in their homes and communities—so that barriers of distance, resources and time do not silence those most vulnerable.

7.4. Open and Participatory Budgeting across Government

Participatory budgeting must prioritize CSOs and community initiatives not as peripheral stakeholders but as

central actors in shaping fiscal priorities. Budgets should be disaggregated into specific line items for vulnerable sectors, preventing concealment of funds under bundled categories (Juco et al., 2024). This reform allows resources intended for women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people to be clearly tracked for impact. Moreover, budgeting processes must be flexible and responsive to evolving vulnerabilities—such as those created by climate disasters, economic shocks or public health crises—ensuring that communities are not left behind when needs shift (Juco et al., 2024).

Beyond the level of the LGU, Congress's methods of budget allocation need to be in sync with LGU priorities and spending patterns. Currently, the National Expenditure Program is proposed by the Department of Budget and Management and shaped by the requests of national agencies. Further inquiry into devolved budgeting at the national level is beyond the scope of this paper but is nonetheless important to consider in creating policy reforms for genuine community-shaped outcomes.

7.5. Co-Creative, Vulnerable Sector-Led Identification, Design, Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation for Lateral Accountability

To anchor accountability in practice, transparency must be redesigned through vulnerable sector-led IDIME systems. Inter-accessibility of data through transparency of the complete project cycle empowers CSOs and grassroots movements to scrutinize government expenditure and creates a conducive environment for plural and independent watchdogs. This method empowers citizens with the needed tools and leverage to hold institutions accountable to the completion and outcomes of the projects.

Communities should act not merely as consulted participants but as co-managers of the project cycle. This requires the following:

- **Project and success indicators rooted in community-defined priorities** such as reduced care burdens, enhanced safety, improved accessibility and strengthened resilience. Project milestones and timelines likewise should be laterally agreed upon with the community.
- **Impact-oriented evaluation** that privileges qualitative improvements in lived conditions over narrow quantitative metrics (Lambert et al., 2023). This encourages tangible project outcomes beyond compliance.
- **Collaborative reporting** between LGUs and CSOs, producing findings that are accessible to citizens and

encouraging public feedback. An assessment of current barriers to communication should be made. Reporting language should be easy to understand for non-technical audiences, along with multiple and localized forms of dissemination for maximum reach.

7.6. Participatory Auditing and Reporting Reforms

Accountability must move beyond technical audits circulated among elites. LGU expenditure reporting should be unbundled and standardized across sectoral expenditure accounts, with mandatory crediting of expenditures to ensure traceability (Juco et al., 2024, p. 70). Citizen participation should be institutionalized through participatory auditing, positioning community and CSO representatives as key partners in performance monitoring. When linked with COA oversight, these reforms would bridge the gap between legality and equity, ensuring that budgets are both compliant and responsive to marginalized needs (Doceo, 2022; Juco et al., 2024).

7.7. Localized Hiring and Shared Ownership

Inclusive governance also requires redistributing opportunities through localized hiring. Development projects should prioritize recruiting from within communities, drawing on local expertise and fostering shared ownership of outcomes. Clear equity targets should guarantee the participation of women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people. This approach transforms representation into redistribution, acknowledging diverse knowledge and lived experience as crucial to effective and impactful governance (Maalat and Liwag, 2008).

7.8. Capacity Building and Recognition of Civic Labor

While this paper advocates for shared responsibility in governance, gender justice requires ensuring that those who participate are compensated and receive financial resources in exchange for their time and work. Meaningful participation demands sustained investment in the capacity development of CSOs and sectoral representatives. This requires going beyond episodic workshops to providing structured, continuous support that strengthens both technical and political skills. Such investment should include technical training, honoraria, childcare support and mobility allowances, recognizing that civic participation requires time, effort and resources.

Capacity building must also be co-created with communities, ensuring that training complements rather

than displaces local knowledge and practices. This means equipping CSOs and sectoral groups with policy tools—such as gender analysis frameworks, participatory budgeting methods and monitoring instruments—that amplify their voices in formal governance processes while validating Indigenous and other local expertise and lived experiences.

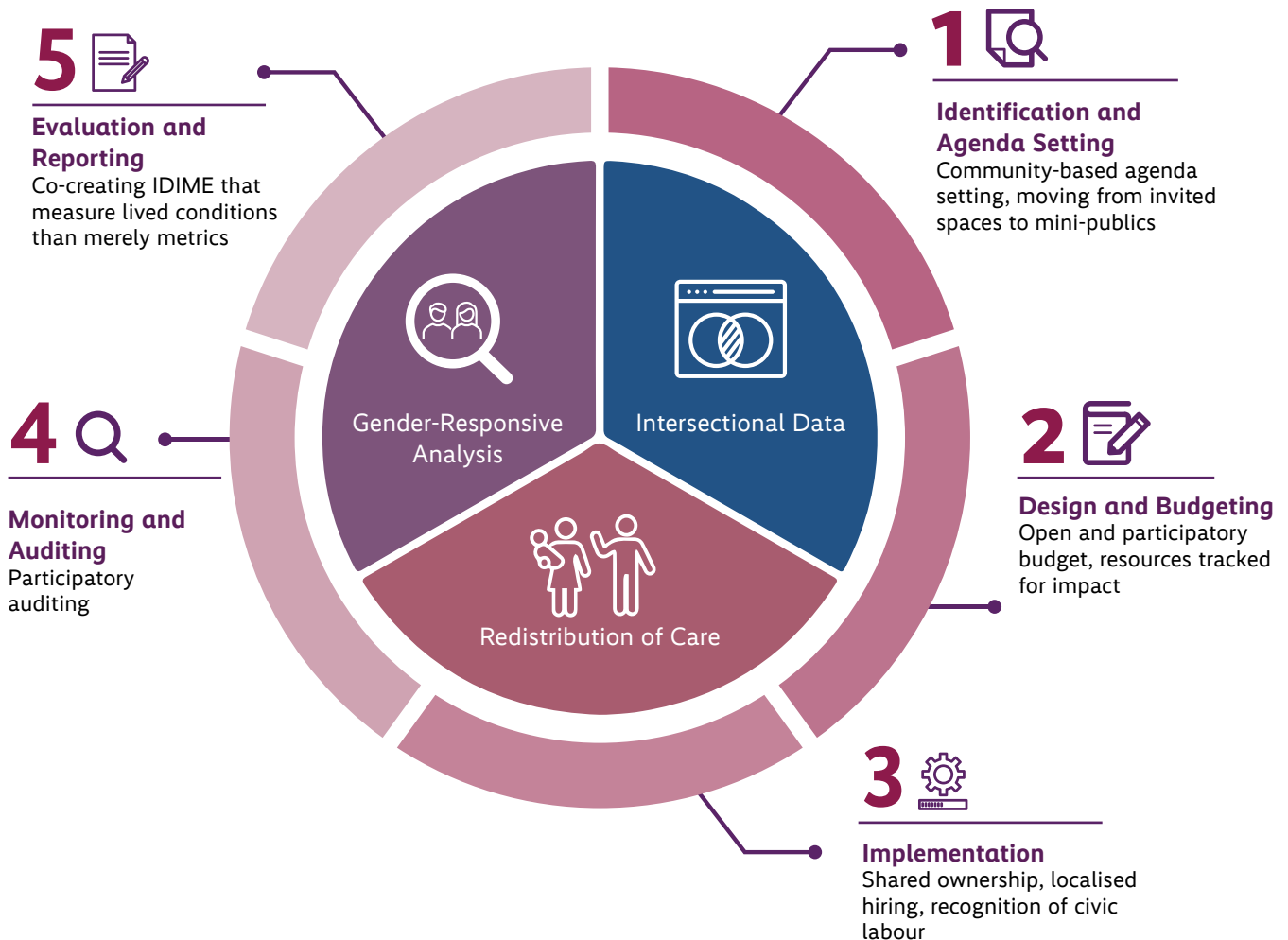
Furthermore, existing volunteer programs should be assessed as forms of civic labor, accompanied by appropriate salaries and employment benefits such as insurance. Many volunteer roles at the *barangay* level are occupied by women who are already burdened with unpaid care responsibilities and limited economic resources; recognizing these positions as paid labor is essential to ensure their financial security and dignity.

Recognizing civic labor and co-creating capacity development transforms participation from symbolic consultation into redistributive practice, ensuring that gender-just governance is sustained by equitable contributions and that marginalized groups can engage in decision making on fair and empowered terms.

7.9. Intersectional Gender Data Collection

To design and evaluate responsive governance, data must capture the plurality of women’s experiences across intersecting identities. Disaggregated data should extend beyond binary sex categories to include age, sexuality, disability status, indigeneity and class. Without such granularity, policy reproduces invisibility: Indigenous women, women with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people are rendered absent in official statistics, and thus in public priorities. Intersectional data collection provides the empirical foundation for gender-just governance, enabling policymakers to understand differentiated vulnerabilities and target resources accordingly.

These policy pathways establish a system of participatory transparency and accountability in which projects are co-created, implemented and assessed through inclusive, community-led structures. Upward Agenda Setting ensures that governance priorities emerge from the lived realities of marginalized groups, while Horizontal Accountability guarantees that these priorities are monitored, reported and adjusted through ongoing, shared knowledge and evaluation. In this way, gender-just governance becomes not a rhetorical commitment but a redistributive practice of shared power and responsibility.



8. Policy Actions and Recommendations for Gender-Just Governance

A transformative agenda for gender-just governance requires an explicit redistribution of power across institutions, alongside the recognition of women in governance as solidarity actors. Women legislators, executives and local officials occupy positions within existing structures of power; their role is not only to represent but also to dismantle exclusionary practices and open governance to those historically dispossessed. This roadmap sets out aligned actions across the legislative and executive branches, ensuring that Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability are institutionalized as complementary principles.

8.1. Women in Governance as Solidarity Actors

Transformative gender-just governance cannot emerge from institutions alone. It requires the deliberate reallocation of voice and power, with women in governance positioned as both allies and catalysts of solidarity. However, as discussed earlier in the paper, current cultural attitudes and dynastic norms restrict women's ability to initiate alternative modes of governance.

The paper offers the following recommendations to seek solidarity from women in governance for an institutional shift toward gender-just governance:

- Create more opportunities for women from the basic sectors (e.g., farmers, fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, urban poor, and others) to occupy leadership positions within the government bureaucracy, contributing to a transformative process to equalize power relations by diversifying the backgrounds and experiences of women who have access to such positions.
- Institutionalize gender-transformative leadership programs for elected women officials, focusing on negotiation, coalition building and feminist policy analysis.
- Support peer learning and mentoring networks (e.g., across local and national levels) so women in governance can share strategies for resisting patriarchal pressures
- Create safe spaces for political dialogue where women can discuss structural challenges, harassment and ethical dilemmas without fear of retribution.

- Encourage cross-alliance caucuses for women legislators and local officials to collaborate on gender justice initiatives.
- Create women-in-governance alliances across LGUs and the legislature that connect women leaders to feminist CSOs, researchers and grassroots women's movements.
- Mandate that GAD budgets at the national and local levels include allocations for women leaders' continuing education on gender, inclusion and care economies.

8.2. Legislative Recommendations

Gendered Review of Existing Legislation

Non-gender or gender-neutral legislation is assumed to impact women and men equally. A mandatory gendered review of all legislation must be institutionalized—including non-gender or gender-neutral legislation, especially among basic services identified under the LGC such as health, agriculture, social services, environmental protection and public works (Langran, 2011)—to assess the distributive impact across women and LGBTQIA+ people and further intersecting with Indigenous Peoples and persons with disabilities. This would shift legislative oversight from compliance-oriented audits toward equity-focused impact reviews, ensuring that laws do not reproduce patriarchal norms or exacerbate vulnerabilities.

Gender-sensitive post-legislative scrutiny offers the possibility of assessing cross-cutting impacts to identify achievements or unwanted impacts from a gender equality perspective and ways to correct or change them (Mousmouti, 2020).

Investigate GAD Budget Use and Update GAD Mandate

The proper use of the GAD budget must be investigated to evaluate the misappropriated GAD funds already discovered by the COA (Commission on Audit, 2018). Identifying corrupt practices in GAD budget expenditure can expose the institutional blind spots that further normalize GAD's secondary status.

This is also an opportunity to reformulate the assumptions under the GAD framework. Congress should require that

GAD plans move beyond compliance-driven seminars and orientations toward impact-oriented programming that reflects women’s lived experiences of care burdens, reproductive autonomy and safety, among others. Enforcement mechanisms must penalize misattribution of GAD funds.

Strengthen Transparency and Prioritize Freedom of Information

To address fiscal opacity which isolates spending activity from impact, the priority passage of a robust Freedom of Information Law that ensures proactive disclosure of government transactions, budgets and audit results is urgent. This law must include mandatory disaggregated reporting by sector, ensuring visibility of allocations for women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people.

Freedom from Coercion

Legislation strengthening protections against coercion in governance processes must be introduced—whether in the form of intimidation or gendered corruption such as the demand for sexual favors. Gendered amendments to the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act (RA 3019) need to be made to address coercive practices beyond financial or material bribery. Such coercive practices should be treated as grave violations that warrant stronger penalties and accessible and inclusive complaint mechanisms.

Institutionalize Participatory Agenda Setting

Community-based agenda-setting mechanisms, including mini-publics and citizen assemblies, must be mandated as required stages in municipal and provincial planning cycles. These mechanisms must be gender-balanced and inclusive, with quotas for women, youth, persons with disabilities and Indigenous representatives.

Clarify Responsibilities under the Devolution Agenda

Legislation must address the unfinished devolution agenda, which has resulted in fragmented authority, redundant projects and accountability gaps (Juco et al., 2024). Congress should:

- Realign functional assignments between national agencies and LGUs to reduce overlap.
- Require provinces to act as inter-LGU coordinators and provide incentives for collaboration.
- Mandate the creation of sectoral expenditure accounts across all LGUs, with crediting requirements to prevent cross-charging and ensure resources reach intended beneficiaries.

- Link devolution reforms with gender justice by foregrounding participatory mechanisms to ensure women, Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable groups define priorities in devolved functions.

Mandate Intersectional Gender Data Collection

Congress must legislate mandatory intersectional disaggregation of gender data across all national and local agencies. This requires the following:

- Expanding existing GAD reporting to cover age, indigeneity, disability and sexuality, alongside gender.
- Requiring intersectional reporting in the Magna Carta of Women and related laws, ensuring that invisibility in official statistics does not perpetuate invisibility in governance.
- Establishing penalties for agencies and LGUs that submit incomplete or non-disaggregated data in order to prevent the routine erasure of marginalized groups.

8.3. Executive Recommendations

Implement Devolution Reforms in Practice

The executive must operationalize legislative reforms on devolution by:

- Establishing clear coordination channels between national agencies and LGUs.
- Supporting provinces as convenors of inter-LGU initiatives, especially on issues that transcend municipal boundaries (e.g., watershed management, disaster response).

Culturally Responsive Evaluation

The executive needs to adopt culturally responsive evaluation frameworks that acknowledge prevailing folk norms while actively countering patriarchal practices. Through assessments of cultural and behavioral change, governance can be evaluated by its capacity to transform lived realities. Programs should address culture through the following:

- **Culturally responsive implementation frameworks** that identify and engage with prevailing values and practices, while actively creating counter-narratives that affirm women’s rights.
- **Intersectional participatory monitoring mechanisms** to capture how communal norms differently affect women across class, age, sexuality, disability and indigeneity.

- **Institutional capacity building** that changes the focus from quantitative compliance indicators to qualitative measures of cultural and behavioral change.

Culturally responsive evaluation involves a nine-step process (Chouinard and Cram, 2020) which should guide all national and local program evaluations: (1) preparing for the evaluation; (2) engaging stakeholders; (3) identifying evaluation purposes; (4) framing the right questions; (5) designing the evaluation; (6) selecting and adapting the instrument; (7) collecting data; (8) analyzing the data; and (9) disseminating and using the results (Chouinard and Cram, 2020; Hood et al., 2015; Rodriguez, 2025).

Institutionalize Intersectional Data in Program Implementation

The executive, through the Philippine Statistics Authority and the Philippine Commission on Women, must operationalize intersectional gender data collection by:

- Designing survey instruments and monitoring frameworks that capture differentiated vulnerabilities, such as care burdens of women in informal labor, safety risks faced by LGBTQIA+ youth or accessibility gaps for women with disabilities.
- Requiring LGUs to integrate intersectional indicators in their annual investment plans, GAD plans, and local development plans.
- Publishing disaggregated datasets in accessible formats, ensuring civil society and communities can hold the government accountable for how programs address the lived realities of women, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Institutional Capacity Building for Qualitative Change

Capacity building within LGUs and agencies must move beyond technical training. Programs should cultivate inclusive leadership skills, create awareness of patriarchal

bias and develop tools for engaging with vulnerable communities. Qualitative indicators—such as reductions in gender-based violence or increased political participation by marginalized women—should replace reliance on quantitative compliance targets.

Normative Accountability

Patriarchal practices must be recognized as governance failures. This reframing requires executive orders and administrative issuances that classify the persistence of harmful gender norms as violations of public accountability, with corresponding sanctions for inaction.

Institutionalize Participatory Mechanisms

Executive bodies must establish community-based mini-publics and sector-led IDIME systems. These ensure that programs are co-created with communities, success indicators reflect lived priorities and transparency is redesigned to include collaborative reporting accessible to the public.

The executive should institutionalize project monitoring systems that capture how projects differently affect women across class, age, sexuality, disability and indigeneity. Data must be collected with communities as partners, ensuring that monitoring is both participatory and intersectional. Furthermore, co-evaluation between the local government and CSOs is necessary to build stronger systems of accountability by strengthening transparency.

Institutionalize Roving Participatory Consultations

Local governments should develop and fund roving consultation mechanisms such as door-to-door dialogues or mobile participatory units to ensure that non-organized women, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities can participate in agenda-setting and monitoring processes. This ensures equitable access to governance for citizens unable to attend formal consultations due to care burdens, limited mobility, or other social barriers that prevent formal membership in CSOs.

Conclusion

Effective governance requires gender justice to be at the heart of all its processes. When governance fails to confront how power is produced, distributed and reinforced, it sustains the inequalities it seeks to remedy. As this paper has demonstrated, despite progressive legislation such as the Magna Carta of Women and the devolution provisions of the LGC, the Philippines remains stalled in the mid-range of the gender continuum. Gender policies often operate as procedural checklists rather than transformative instruments, while hierarchical, elite-driven and patriarchal systems continue to define public decision making. The result is a governance environment where vulnerability is obscured, participation is weakened and gender justice remains aspirational rather than structural.

A key argument of this paper is that vulnerability must be centered in governance processes and reframed as a political resource that can surface lived knowledge, inform policy priorities and spotlight how marginalized groups bear intersecting burdens. When governance acknowledges vulnerability, it creates space for grassroots shaping of outcomes (power-to) and the development of collective strength through solidarity, cooperation and mutual recognition (power-with), which are essential to dismantling the dominance of entrenched institutions and political culture (power-over).

Accordingly, the structuring principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability—the two mutually reinforcing principles that guide this paper’s feminist governance framework—offer design pathways to operationalize gender transformation. Upward Agenda Setting elevates the lived realities of marginalized groups—women, LGBTQIA+ communities, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, youth and senior citizens—as the starting point of policymaking. Horizontal Accountability ensures that oversight and evaluation flow laterally across communities, civil society and government, embedding care, transparency and responsiveness into the governance cycle rather than relying solely on bureaucratic legality. In tandem, these principles move governance toward a model where vulnerability becomes a catalyst for empowerment and where power-to and power-with can flourish.

The experiences of KABILIN, KAKASA and the Odiongan CPIA show that such transformation is possible. These

initiatives demonstrate how Indigenous women, rural leaders and community auditors can redefine priorities, reshape institutional behavior and strengthen accountability through collective action. They illustrate how centering vulnerability leads to more grounded and adaptive policies, and how cultivating power-with among communities and government officials can produce enduring shifts in attitudes, resource flows and governance culture. At the same time, the fragility of these gains underscores the need for institutionalization, legal protection and sustained resourcing to ensure that collaborative governance does not depend solely on political will or individual champions.

To achieve gender-just governance at scale, reform must move beyond technical compliance toward a structural reimagining of how institutions function. This includes embedding intersectional gender analysis across the policy cycle; designing budgets that redistribute care work; ensuring that participatory spaces are accessible, inclusive and co-created; expanding participatory auditing; strengthening the visibility of marginalized groups through intersectional data; and recognizing civic participation as labor deserving compensation. It also requires challenging patriarchal norms that constrain women’s agency and impede accountability, while empowering women in public office as solidarity actors capable of expanding political space for others.

Ultimately, gender-just governance requires reshaping the relationship between the state and citizens. It calls for transforming governance from a system of hierarchical control to one of shared responsibility; from top-down priority setting to community-rooted co-creation; from compliance to impact; and from symbolic representation to substantive empowerment. By centering vulnerability and nurturing both power-to and power-with through the principles of Upward Agenda Setting and Horizontal Accountability, the Philippines can build governance systems that are inclusive, equitable and grounded in care. In doing so, the country can strengthen gender justice and the legitimacy, resilience and responsiveness of its democracy—making the work of governing a truly collective endeavor.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

The Gender Justice Competence Center Asia-Pacific (GJCCAP) coordinates FES’s work on gender justice in Asia and the Pacific region. Together with colleagues, feminists, and partners in the region, we create spaces for exchange and mutual learning, and develop transformative strategies for a more gender-just future.

Claiming Power and Reshaping Governance: A Feminist Framework for the Philippines

This policy paper offers a feminist framework for understanding power for structural transformation in the Philippines. It highlights the importance of building “power to” and “power with” to fundamentally shift the governance landscape, a system often characterized by elite capture and centralization. The paper advocates for a transformation toward gender-just governance by strengthening horizontal accountability and upward agenda setting.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➔ asia.fes.de