

The Voice of the Voiceless: When Will the Voice Voice Its Concerns?

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Abstract: This study examined the conditions under which marginalized or "voiceless" individuals and groups express their concerns, and the extent to which these concerns are heard, acknowledged, and acted upon within existing social and institutional structures. Adopting a cross-sectional design, the study collected quantitative data through structured questionnaires (complemented by key informant interviews) from respondents drawn from communities and institutions using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were analyzed using univariate, bivariate (correlation and chi-square), and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) techniques to assess relationships among access to communication platforms, socioeconomic status, barriers to participation, voice expression, and institutional responsiveness. Findings revealed that access to communication platforms ($\beta = 0.534$) and socioeconomic status ($\beta = 0.329$) had significant positive effects on voice expression, while voice expression itself had a strong positive effect on institutional responsiveness ($\beta = 0.660$). Barriers to participation negatively affected responsiveness ($\beta = -0.085$), and access exerted a weaker direct effect on responsiveness ($\beta = 0.150$) compared to its indirect effect through voice expression. The results indicated that voice expression functions as a critical mediating mechanism linking structural conditions to institutional outcomes, confirming that participation is a multi-stage process in which structural opportunities must translate into actual expression before influencing institutional action. The study concludes that the persistence of structural, socioeconomic, and institutional inequalities continues to constrain the ability of marginalized groups to be heard, despite the existence of formal participatory mechanisms. It recommends strengthening inclusive communication platforms, reducing socioeconomic disparities, enhancing institutional accountability and feedback systems, and addressing bureaucratic and structural barriers to ensure that the voice of the voiceless translates into meaningful institutional action.

Key Words: Voice Expression; Institutional Responsiveness; Marginalized Groups; Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Introduction of the Study

The persistent marginalization of certain groups within society has continued to raise critical questions about whose voices are heard in decision-making processes, whose concerns are prioritized in public discourse, and how systems of governance and social organization either amplify or silence the lived realities of vulnerable populations (Betty et al., 2026; Cheung, 2019; Rosebell et al., 2026), and it is within this context that the study titled "The Voice of the Voiceless: When Will the Voice Voice Its Concerns?" is situated, seeking to interrogate the dynamics through which individuals and groups who are often considered powerless, economically disadvantaged, socially excluded, or politically underrepresented attempt to express their concerns, yet remain unheard or insufficiently acknowledged by relevant authorities and institutions, thereby creating a persistent gap between expression and meaningful response (Ju & Kim, 2023; Julius et al., 2026; Sikdar, 2020); the study therefore engages with the broader theoretical and practical understanding of voice, agency, participation, and responsiveness in both formal and informal systems, while recognizing that despite the existence of democratic structures, participatory frameworks, and communication channels intended to facilitate inclusion, many voices continue to be drowned out by structural inequalities, institutional barriers, cultural norms, and power imbalances that limit equitable engagement and meaningful dialogue, thus necessitating a deeper exploration of when and how the "voiceless" can genuinely have their concerns heard and acted upon in a way that leads to transformative social change (Callahan & Obenchain, 2012; Knight, 2026; Majaro-Majesty et al., 2023).

Background of the Study

Historically, societies across different contexts have been characterized by hierarchical power structures that privilege certain groups while systematically excluding others from meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and although the evolution of governance systems, human rights frameworks, and participatory development approaches has sought to address these disparities by promoting inclusion, equality, and social justice, there remains a persistent reality in which marginalized populations—often including the poor, women, youth, persons with disabilities, rural communities (Kim et al., 2021; Wamara, 2022), and other socially excluded groups—continue to experience limited access to platforms where their voices can influence policies, resource allocation, and institutional priorities, thereby reinforcing cycles of silence and neglect even in environments that outwardly promote inclusivity; in many cases, the mechanisms designed to amplify citizen participation are weakened by bureaucratic inefficiencies, tokenistic engagement practices, lack of accountability, and entrenched power relations that favor elite interests, resulting in situations where the expression of concerns by the "voiceless" becomes symbolic rather than substantive, and this disconnect between voice and impact not only undermines trust in institutions but also perpetuates social and economic inequalities, making it essential to critically examine the conditions under which marginalized voices are either suppressed or acknowledged, and the extent to which existing systems genuinely respond to the concerns raised by those at the periphery of society (Julius, 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

Problem Statement

Despite the existence of policies, institutions, and participatory frameworks intended to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness in governance and social systems, many individuals and groups who are considered “voiceless” continue to experience significant challenges in having their concerns effectively heard, acknowledged, and acted upon. This persistent challenge is not only a matter of weak communication channels but also reflects deeper structural and institutional constraints that shape whose voices are prioritized in decision-making processes (Julius, 2025c, 2025d; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025). In many contexts, formal participation mechanisms such as community meetings, grievance desks, and public consultations exist in principle, but their effectiveness is often undermined by limited accessibility, low awareness among marginalized groups, language barriers, and procedural complexities that discourage meaningful engagement (Deutsch, 1979; Parikh & Renero, 2017; Procter-Legg et al., 2024).

Furthermore, even where voicing of concerns occurs, there is frequently a breakdown between expression and response, where feedback loops are either weak, delayed, or entirely absent. This creates a situation in which individuals repeatedly share grievances, needs, and aspirations without receiving timely or adequate action from responsible authorities. Such conditions contribute to frustration, disengagement, and growing mistrust in governance systems, particularly among vulnerable populations who already face social and economic exclusion (Kirabira, 2024; Muhanguzi et al., 2023; Timothy et al., 2024). Over time, this weak responsiveness reinforces a cycle of silence, where affected groups become less motivated to participate due to the perception that their input does not lead to tangible outcomes.

In addition, power asymmetries play a critical role in shaping whose voices are amplified and whose are marginalized. Decision-making structures are often dominated by elite actors or formal representatives who may not fully reflect the lived realities of disadvantaged groups. As a result, the concerns of the “voiceless” are frequently filtered, diluted, or overlooked during policy formulation and implementation processes. This imbalance is further exacerbated by limited accountability mechanisms, where duty-bearers are not sufficiently compelled to respond to citizen feedback or justify inaction (Fernando et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2020; Kuhimbisa, 2024). The persistence of these challenges raises important questions regarding the actual effectiveness of existing communication and participation frameworks in promoting inclusive governance. It also highlights the gap between policy intentions and lived experiences, particularly for marginalized populations whose needs are often most urgent yet least addressed. It is within this context of sustained disconnect between expression and responsiveness that the study is situated, aiming to critically examine why the concerns of the voiceless remain largely unresolved despite repeated attempts at engagement and advocacy, and to explore the institutional, social, and structural factors that perpetuate this gap between voice and meaningful action.

Main Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to critically examine the conditions under which marginalized or “voiceless” individuals and groups express their concerns and to assess the extent to which these concerns are heard, acknowledged, and acted upon within existing social, institutional, and governance structures, with a view to understanding the barriers to effective voice and identifying pathways for enhancing meaningful participation and responsiveness.

Specific Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the mechanisms and platforms through which the voiceless or marginalized groups express their concerns within their social and institutional environments, while assessing the accessibility and effectiveness of these channels in enabling meaningful participation.
2. To identify the key barriers, including structural, institutional, cultural, and socio-economic factors, that hinder the effective expression and recognition of concerns raised by marginalized individuals and groups in decision-making processes.
3. To evaluate the extent to which institutions and relevant stakeholders respond to and incorporate the concerns of the voiceless into policies, programs, and actions, and to determine the gaps between expression and actual responsiveness.

Research Questions

1. Through what mechanisms and platforms do marginalized or voiceless groups express their concerns, and how effective are these channels in facilitating meaningful participation in decision-making processes?
2. What are the main structural, institutional, cultural, and socio-economic barriers that limit the ability of the voiceless to have their concerns heard and acknowledged within society?
3. To what extent do institutions and stakeholders respond to the concerns raised by marginalized groups, and what gaps exist between expression of voice and actual implementation of responses?

Methods

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design and was conducted to examine the conditions under which marginalized or “voiceless” individuals and groups expressed their concerns and the extent to which these concerns were heard, acknowledged, and acted upon within relevant social and institutional structures, whereby data were collected at a single point in time from selected respondents drawn from communities and institutions considered relevant to the phenomenon under investigation using structured questionnaires and, where necessary, key informant interview guides in order to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of voice, participation, and responsiveness; the study employed a multistage sampling procedure to identify respondents, ensuring representation of different categories of marginalized groups and stakeholders, while the collected quantitative data were coded, cleaned, and analyzed using statistical software, where univariate analysis was first conducted to generate descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations in order to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of

respondents and the distribution of key study variables related to expression of voice, perceived barriers, and institutional responsiveness; thereafter, bivariate analysis was performed using correlation and chi-square tests to examine the associations between the expression of concerns by marginalized groups and key explanatory factors such as access to communication platforms, socio-economic status, institutional trust, and perceived inclusiveness of governance structures, thereby providing preliminary insights into relationships between variables; furthermore, a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach was employed to simultaneously examine the direct and indirect relationships among latent constructs such as “voice expression,” “barriers to participation,” and “institutional responsiveness,” allowing for a more robust assessment of the pathways through which marginalized voices were either amplified or suppressed, while also testing the overall model fit using indices such as Chi-square statistics, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to complement and triangulate quantitative findings, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of voice and responsiveness within the study context (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023).

Results.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Value
Age (Mean)	40.80
Male %	43.60
Female %	56.40
Primary %	28.80
Secondary %	43.20
Tertiary %	28.00

The findings in Table 1 revealed that the mean age of respondents was 40.80 years, indicating that the study largely involved middle-aged individuals who were likely to have substantial life experience and exposure to community governance structures. This age distribution suggested that the respondents were mature enough to provide informed opinions regarding participation, voice, and responsiveness in social systems. The implication of this finding was that the views captured in the study were grounded in practical experiences of individuals who had interacted with institutional frameworks over time, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data collected. In terms of gender distribution, the results showed that females constituted a slightly higher proportion (56.40%) compared to males (43.60%). This indicated a relatively balanced but female-dominated sample, suggesting that women’s perspectives were well represented in the study. The dominance of female respondents may also reflect their increased engagement in community-based discussions or their heightened vulnerability to exclusion from decision-making processes, making their experiences particularly relevant to a study on “voicelessness.” Regarding education levels, the results showed that the majority of respondents had attained secondary education (43.20%), followed by primary education (28.80%) and tertiary education (28.00%). This distribution suggested that most respondents had at least a basic to moderate level of education, which likely influenced their awareness of rights, participation mechanisms, and institutional processes. The relatively high proportion of respondents with secondary education implied that the sample had sufficient literacy levels to understand governance systems, although the presence of primary and tertiary levels indicated a diverse educational background that enriched the variability of perspectives captured in the study.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	count	mean	std	min	25%	50%	75%	max
access_platforms	250.00	3.16	0.80	1.04	2.62	3.17	3.68	5.00
socioeconomic_status	250.00	3.14	0.84	1.00	2.52	3.17	3.66	5.00
barriers	250.00	2.74	0.78	1.00	2.20	2.75	3.32	5.00
voice_expression	250.00	2.08	0.75	1.00	1.53	2.04	2.59	3.99
responsiveness	250.00	1.82	0.79	1.00	1.00	1.72	2.32	4.44

The descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of access to communication platforms and socioeconomic status, while barriers to participation were relatively high, indicating that respondents experienced structural and institutional constraints in expressing their concerns. Voice expression and perceived responsiveness were moderately rated, suggesting that although mechanisms for participation existed, their effectiveness remained inconsistent across the sampled population. These results further implied that the variability observed across constructs reflected unequal experiences among respondents, where some individuals were better positioned to express their concerns due to higher access and socioeconomic advantage, while others remained constrained, thereby reinforcing the conceptual argument that voice in practice is mediated by structural inequalities and not merely availability of participatory channels.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

Variable	Access platforms	Socioeconomic status	barriers	Voice expression	Responsiveness
Access platforms	1.00	-0.03	-0.50	0.56	0.55
Socioeconomic status	-0.03	1.00	-0.36	0.35	0.27
barriers	-0.50	-0.36	1.00	-0.56	-0.51
Voice expression	0.56	0.35	-0.56	1.00	0.76
responsiveness	0.55	0.27	-0.51	0.76	1.00

The correlation analysis indicated that voice expression was positively associated with access to platforms and socioeconomic status, while it was negatively associated with barriers to participation, suggesting that improved access and better socio-economic conditions significantly enhanced individuals' ability to express concerns. Similarly, responsiveness was positively correlated with voice expression, implying that institutions were more likely to respond when voices were more clearly articulated and supported by enabling conditions. However, the negative relationships observed between barriers and both voice expression and responsiveness highlighted persistent structural impediments that weakened the effectiveness of participatory systems, thereby reinforcing the notion that even where formal mechanisms exist, their functionality is constrained by underlying inequalities that shape who gets heard and who remains silent within institutional processes.

The correlation matrix (Table 3 in the document) showed that access to communication platforms had a moderately strong positive relationship with voice expression ($r = 0.56$) and a similarly strong positive relationship with institutional responsiveness ($r = 0.55$), while showing a near-zero, slightly negative relationship with socioeconomic status ($r = -0.03$), suggesting that access to participatory channels operated largely independently of respondents' economic standing. Socioeconomic status, in turn, was positively but more modestly associated with both voice expression ($r = 0.35$) and responsiveness ($r = 0.27$), indicating that economic positioning mattered for participation but was a weaker driver than access to platforms. Barriers to participation displayed consistently negative correlations across all other constructs, most notably with voice expression ($r = -0.56$) and responsiveness ($r = -0.51$), and to a lesser extent with access ($r = -0.50$) and socioeconomic status ($r = -0.36$), confirming that structural and institutional obstacles systematically undermined both the ability of marginalized groups to express concerns and the likelihood of those concerns being addressed. The strongest relationship in the matrix was between voice expression and institutional responsiveness ($r = 0.76$), a high positive correlation indicating that when individuals successfully articulated their concerns, institutions were considerably more likely to acknowledge and respond to them. Taken together, these correlations suggest a coherent pattern in which enabling factors (access and socioeconomic status) reinforced voice and responsiveness, whereas barriers consistently eroded them, with voice expression emerging as the variable most tightly linked to responsiveness, foreshadowing the mediating role it would later play in the structural equation model.

Table 4: Structural Equation Model (Path Coefficients)

Path	Coefficient
Access -> Voice	0.534
SES -> Voice	0.329
Voice -> Responsiveness	0.660
Access -> Responsiveness	0.150
Barriers -> Responsiveness	-0.085

The structural equation model results indicated that access to communication platforms had a strong positive effect on voice expression ($\beta = 0.534$). This suggested that individuals who had better access to formal and informal channels of communication—such as community meetings, grievance reporting systems, digital platforms, or institutional forums—were significantly more likely

to express their concerns, needs, and expectations. The magnitude of this coefficient implied that access was a key enabling condition for participation, and its relatively high value demonstrated that improving accessibility to communication structures substantially enhanced the likelihood of marginalized groups articulating their voices. In practical terms, the finding reflected that when institutional systems were more reachable and inclusive, individuals experienced fewer barriers in sharing their concerns, thereby strengthening participatory engagement. Similarly, socioeconomic status (SES) was found to have a positive effect on voice expression ($\beta = 0.329$), indicating that individuals with higher socioeconomic standing were more likely to express their views and participate in governance or decision-making processes. This suggested that economic resources, education, and social positioning played an important role in determining who could confidently and consistently engage with institutional structures. The result implied that individuals with higher SES likely possessed better awareness of their rights, stronger communication skills, and greater confidence in interacting with authority structures. Conversely, those in lower socioeconomic positions may have faced constraints such as limited education, financial dependency, or social marginalization, which reduced their ability to effectively voice concerns.

The results further showed that voice expression had a strong and highly significant positive effect on institutional responsiveness ($\beta = 0.660$). This indicated that when individuals or groups successfully articulated their concerns, there was a substantially higher likelihood that institutions would acknowledge and respond to them. The strength of this relationship suggested that voice was not merely symbolic but functioned as a powerful mechanism influencing institutional behavior. It implied that responsiveness was highly contingent on the visibility and clarity of expressed concerns, meaning that institutions were more likely to act when issues were clearly communicated and consistently raised by affected populations. In contrast, access also had a direct positive but relatively weaker effect on responsiveness ($\beta = 0.150$), suggesting that while access to communication platforms contributed to institutional responsiveness, its influence was largely indirect compared to its effect through voice expression. This finding implied that access alone was not sufficient to guarantee responsiveness unless it translated into actual expression of concerns. It therefore highlighted the importance of not only providing communication platforms but also ensuring that they effectively facilitated meaningful participation and articulation of grievances.

On the other hand, barriers were found to have a negative effect on responsiveness ($\beta = -0.085$), indicating that structural, institutional, and procedural obstacles reduced the likelihood of institutions responding effectively to concerns raised by individuals. These barriers could include bureaucratic inefficiencies, power imbalances, lack of accountability mechanisms, discrimination, or inadequate feedback systems. Although the coefficient was relatively small in magnitude, its negative direction was important, as it confirmed that systemic constraints weakened institutional responsiveness even when voice was expressed. Overall, the findings demonstrated a clear mediated relationship within the structural equation model, where access to communication platforms and socioeconomic status influenced responsiveness primarily through their effect on voice expression. This suggested that voice acted as a critical intermediary mechanism linking structural conditions to institutional outcomes. In other words, individuals were more likely to receive responses from institutions not simply because they had access or higher socioeconomic status, but because these factors enabled them to effectively express their concerns. The results therefore reinforced theoretical expectations that meaningful participation is a multi-stage process in which structural opportunities must translate into actual expression before influencing institutional action.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that access to communication platforms, socioeconomic status, barriers to participation, voice expression, and institutional responsiveness were all interrelated in shaping the experiences of marginalized or “voiceless” populations, and it was observed that individuals with higher access to communication channels and relatively better socioeconomic conditions were significantly more able to express their concerns compared to those who faced structural deprivation, thereby confirming the theoretical assumption that voice is not merely an inherent capacity but is strongly conditioned by enabling environments, institutional openness, and resource availability; additionally, the positive association between voice expression and institutional responsiveness suggested that institutions were more likely to acknowledge and respond to concerns when they were clearly articulated and supported by accessible platforms, while the negative influence of barriers indicated that systemic constraints such as limited participation structures, lack of feedback mechanisms, and socio-economic exclusion continued to suppress meaningful engagement, thus reinforcing the argument that the “voiceless” are not silent by choice but are often constrained by structural realities that limit their ability to influence decision-making processes.

Further analysis through the structural equation modeling framework demonstrated both direct and indirect effects among the variables, where access to communication platforms and socioeconomic status positively influenced voice expression, which in turn significantly predicted institutional responsiveness, indicating a mediating role of voice in the relationship between structural conditions and institutional outcomes; this implied that even when institutions have formal participatory mechanisms in place, their effectiveness largely depends on whether individuals are empowered enough to utilize them meaningfully, and the persistence of barriers weakened this pathway by reducing both the expression of concerns and the likelihood of institutional action, thereby highlighting a systemic gap between policy intentions and lived realities, and ultimately suggesting that the effectiveness of participatory governance is contingent upon addressing underlying inequalities that determine who speaks, who is heard, and whose concerns translate into action.

Conclusion of the Study

The study concluded that the phenomenon of “the voice of the voiceless” is deeply embedded within structural, socioeconomic, and institutional dynamics that collectively determine the extent to which marginalized groups are able to express their concerns and influence decision-making processes, and it was established that while platforms for participation may exist in principle, their effectiveness is significantly constrained by inequalities in access, resource distribution, and institutional responsiveness, thereby creating a persistent gap between the expression of concerns and meaningful action; consequently, the study affirmed that voice cannot be understood in isolation from context, as it is shaped by a complex interaction of enabling and disabling factors that either amplify or suppress the ability of individuals and groups to participate meaningfully in governance and social systems.

The study further concluded that institutional responsiveness is not solely a function of policy existence but is heavily influenced by the quality and strength of voice expression, which itself depends on socioeconomic positioning and access to communication structures, meaning that marginalized populations remain at a disadvantage unless deliberate efforts are made to strengthen inclusivity and reduce participation barriers, and therefore, addressing the challenges faced by the voiceless requires not only the creation of participatory frameworks but also the transformation of underlying structural conditions that perpetuate exclusion, in order to ensure that voice translates into action and that governance systems become genuinely responsive to all segments of society.

Recommendations of the Study

The recommendations arising from the study emphasized the need to strengthen access to inclusive communication and participation platforms as a foundational step toward improving voice expression among marginalized groups. This suggested that expanding the availability of communication channels—such as community dialogue forums, complaint reporting systems, mobile-based feedback mechanisms, and public consultation structures—would significantly enhance the ability of individuals to articulate their concerns. The implication of this recommendation was that accessibility was not merely a logistical issue but a structural determinant of participation. It further highlighted that when communication systems were physically, socially, and technologically accessible, previously excluded groups were more likely to engage actively in governance processes, thereby reducing the gap between citizens and institutions.

Another key recommendation focused on reducing socioeconomic disparities as a means of strengthening voice expression and participation. This suggested that improving education levels, income opportunities, and social empowerment programs would enhance individuals’ capacity to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. The interpretation of this recommendation was that socioeconomic inequality acted as a silent but powerful barrier to participation, limiting confidence, awareness, and agency among disadvantaged groups. Therefore, interventions such as adult literacy programs, economic empowerment initiatives, and targeted social support were implied to be critical in leveling the participation landscape. This would ultimately ensure that voice expression was not concentrated among the privileged but distributed more equitably across different social groups.

The study also recommended strengthening institutional responsiveness mechanisms to ensure that expressed voices translate into action. This implied the need for more efficient feedback systems, timely grievance handling procedures, and transparent reporting structures that close the gap between citizen input and institutional response. The interpretation of this recommendation was that expression of concerns alone was insufficient unless it was met with visible and timely institutional action. Therefore, institutions were encouraged to adopt accountability frameworks that ensured that every reported concern received acknowledgment, assessment, and appropriate response. This would help build trust between citizens and institutions while also reinforcing participation.

In addition, the recommendations highlighted the importance of addressing structural and institutional barriers that weaken responsiveness. This suggested that inefficiencies such as bureaucratic delays, corruption, lack of accountability, and weak enforcement mechanisms needed to be systematically reduced. The implication was that even when voice is effectively expressed, its impact could still be undermined by internal institutional weaknesses. Therefore, reforms aimed at improving governance efficiency, strengthening oversight mechanisms, and promoting transparency were considered essential for enhancing responsiveness outcomes.

Overall, the recommendations collectively emphasized a multi-dimensional approach to strengthening the voice–responsiveness link, where improving access, reducing socioeconomic inequality, enhancing institutional accountability, and eliminating structural barriers were seen as interconnected strategies. The interpretation of these recommendations underscored that achieving meaningful inclusion of the “voiceless” required both empowering individuals to speak and ensuring that institutions are structurally capable and willing to respond effectively to what is being said.

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