



Every Voice Counts

Social Inclusion in Fragile Contexts: Pathways Towards the Inclusion of Women in Local Governance Processes – Perspectives from Afghanistan

CARE Nederland
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‘Women should participate in those issues that are most important, and those that are most complicated, and men cannot solve alone...’

- Women’s Focus Group Discussion participant

‘If I had individually participated, this would have been taken less seriously, but through these groups we participate in meetings with men and discuss problems, and it is more effective than individual actions.’

- Women’s Focus Group Discussion participant

‘I am personally brave, I can stand in front of any gathering of people, no matter how they behave, even if they have the ‘war brain’. I am honest and I can do something good for society, so people started to appreciate me. I am not thinking about being a female or a male, I am thinking that I am a human.’

- Female Head of Community Development Council

Thank you to the author of this study, **Rebecca Haines**, Independent Consultant. Gratitude is also extended to the Every Voice Counts team in Afghanistan who made the study possible through their tremendous support.

Introduction

This brief provides a summary of the findings from exploratory research examining the social inclusion of women in subnational governance in Afghanistan, with a focus on informal and semi-formal governance bodies and processes. The research sought to identify which groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors are currently providing opportunities for women's participation and influence in subnational public decision-making. It also explored how women's participation and influence may be changing, and the key obstructing and enabling factors that impact that process. The research then points to a set of promising pathways that have potential for enabling women's increased voice in local public affairs in Afghanistan. It concludes by offering a set of recommendations for donors, practitioners, civil society and government.¹

This research adds to a set of research products focused on the social inclusion of women in subnational governance processes in fragile contexts. Others include case studies from Rwanda² and Burundi,³ and a thematic paper on women in local governance structures in fragile and conflict-affected settings.⁴ The research series is a product of the multi-country Every Voice Counts (EVC) programme, an inclusive governance programme managed by CARE Nederland and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Afghanistan, along with CARE Afghanistan, the programme has been implemented by the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF), and the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC). The research aims to contribute to future programming and initiatives focused on supporting women to have a stronger public

voice and gain influence in public affairs in fragile contexts, including within Afghanistan itself.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The core lines of enquiry for this research series were derived from CARE's **Gender Equality Framework**,⁵ which conceptualizes the factors that contribute to gender equality within three domains: **agency**, **relations**, and **structures**. Questions were included within the research tools that explore women's participation in local governance within each domain. Likewise, the research assesses the identified obstructing and enabling factors against the three domains of the Gender Equality Framework.

Furthermore, the research series applied a three-part **participation spectrum** within its conceptual framework and analysis. Based on the work of Anne-Marie Goetz,⁶ this paper distinguishes between 'access', 'presence', and 'influence'. '**Access**' focuses on opening arenas of influence to socially-excluded groups, ensuring that they are technically allowed and enabled to participate. '**Presence**' entails the physical or numerical occupation of a decision-making space or process. It may also entail institutionalizing presence provisions, as in the case of legally enshrined quotas. '**Influence**' requires that those present also have power, including substantive opportunities for voice. Based on this spectrum, the research assesses the degree to which the identified barriers tend to obstruct women's participation at the level of access, presence, or influence.

The research is based on a set of focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with women and men at community level, and a further set of key informant interviews with government staff and members of civil

¹ This brief summarizes the wider set of findings presented in the full paper: Haines, Rebecca. 'Social inclusion in fragile contexts: Pathways towards the inclusion of women in local governance processes – perspectives from Afghanistan.' The Hague: Every Voice Counts, CARE Nederland, 2020.

² Whipkey, Katie. 'Social inclusion in fragile contexts: Pathways towards the inclusion of women and girls in local governance processes – Rwanda Case Study.' The Hague: Every Voice Counts, CARE Nederland, 2019.

³ Douma, Nynke. 'Social inclusion in fragile contexts: Pathways towards the inclusion of women and girls in local governance processes – Burundi Case Study.' The Hague: Every Voice Counts, CARE Nederland, 2019.

⁴ Pinnington, Rose. 'Social inclusion in fragile contexts: Pathways towards the inclusion of women and girls in local governance processes.' The Hague: Every Voice Counts, CARE Nederland, 2019.

⁵ CARE International. 'Gender Equality and Women's Voice: Guidance Note.' CARE International, 2018. 7.

⁶ In various publications, Anne-Marie Goetz has discussed a spectrum of women's participation that ranges from 'simple access' to 'presence' or 'numerical or descriptive representation', and onward to 'strategic presence', 'substantive representation', 'voice' and 'influence': Goetz, Anne-Marie. 'Institutionalising Women's Interests and Institutional Accountability to Women in Development', IDS Bulletin 26(3), 1995; Goetz, Anne-Marie. 'The Politics of Integrating Gender to State Development Processes: Trends, Opportunities and Constraints in Bangladesh, Chile, Jamaica, Mali, Morocco and Uganda.' United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Occasional Paper 2, 1995; Cornwall, Andrea and Anne-Marie Goetz. 'Democratizing Democracy: Feminist Perspectives.' *Democratization*, 12:5, 2005. 783–800; Goetz, Anne-Marie and Celestine Nyamu Musembi. 'Voice and Women's Empowerment: Mapping a Research Agenda.' The Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC), 2008.

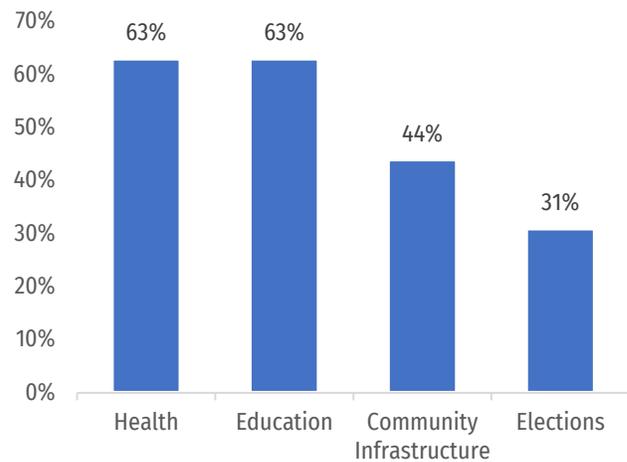
society organizations at district, provincial, and national levels. At the community level, data was collected in ten communities in eight districts, across four provinces (Kabul, Parwan, Balkh, and Khost). The study sample included 32 FGDs, in which 202 people (109 women and 93 men) participated. At community level, 42 KIIs were conducted, while 15 KIIs were conducted at district level, 18 at provincial level, and nine at national level, totaling 84 KIIs (27 with women and 57 with men). Overall, the study included 116 separate data collection events, attended by over 280 individuals.

Key Findings

Firstly, the research findings surfaced considerable **ambiguity among men around women’s involvement in community decision-making overall**. At community level, a significant proportion of men were not sure that women are, or should be, involved in any public decision-making. Many other men described women as being involved in ‘women’s issues’ and men being involved in ‘men’s issues’, often implying that what these ideas entail should be self-evident. Despite this, the research findings point to notable **variation among men regarding which issues are considered to be ‘women’s issues’** and for which public decisions women’s participation is relevant. Several men also clearly stated that they are **not aware of what women talk about in women’s groups**, and do not believe it to be relevant to them. This finding demonstrates that, although gender-segregated groups may be intended to offer parallel and even coordinated opportunities for discussing community issues, very often these groups are actually operating in vacuums, with little awareness of what the other is doing and limited forms of cooperation.

Nonetheless, the research demonstrated that in Afghanistan today, there are a variety of **local spaces and mechanisms** that could be further supported to enhance women’s participation in local governance. Most of them are informal or semi-formal, in the sense that they are not part of formally elected government bodies or the government bureaucracy. Many have been set up by large national development programmes, but their function has evolved beyond the timeframes of specific projects. **Community Development Councils (CDCs) and separate CDC Women’s Committees** (where parallel men’s and women’s committees exist) were consistently viewed as the most effective of

Figure 1: Types of Public Decisions Involving Women (Views of Male FGDs)



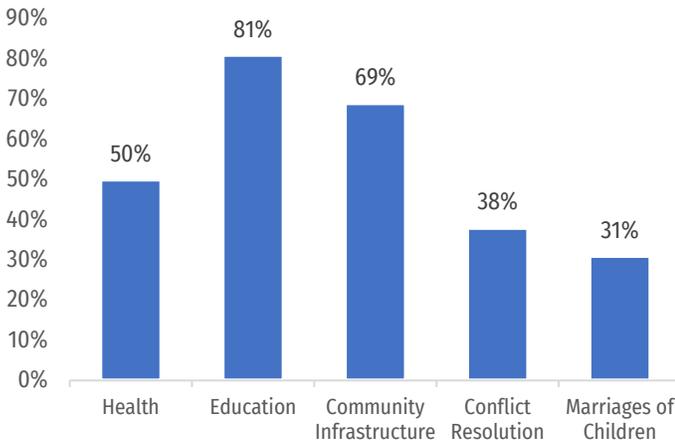
these spaces for women’s participation, in the research sample areas.

Men often viewed the community-based **education and health shuras (or committees) as natural spaces for women’s influence**, but women demonstrated a **higher degree of scepticism** about how much influence they really have in these spaces (particularly for health shuras). This discrepancy appears to indicate that the education and health shuras may be *socially acceptable* places for women’s participation, because the issues discussed there are seen as relevant to women. However, in practice, men over-estimate the degree to which these shuras are currently effective spaces for women’s influence. This may be due to the under-supporting of these shuras, causing them to be either not very functional, or non-inclusive in practice. This presents an entry point for strengthening inclusion and women’s voice in these spaces.

In terms of which **types of decisions** women are most likely to be involved in, women and men tended to generally agree on a few key points, while disagreeing on a range of others. There was broad agreement that women’s participation in **health and education issues** is important and appropriate, along with their role in the **selection of community-based infrastructure priorities**. However, while the same proportion of men believed that women are involved in health issues as in education issues, women asserted that they are involved in decision-making related to education issues much more than in health issues.

A majority of men at all levels felt that **women could not be involved in conflict management, justice and security issues**, and some believed women could not be involved in

Figure 2: Types of Public Decisions Involving Women (Views of Female FGDs)



managing public funds. By contrast, women provided a series of concrete examples of being involved in the kinds of local governance issues that men believed they could not be involved in, including the oversight of community budgets, conflict resolution between and within households, and even conflicts between communities and ethnic groups. Throughout the research, women’s contributions within public affairs and community governance frequently appeared to go unrecognized (or under-acknowledged) by men at all levels.

A considerable proportion of women in the study asserted the importance of their involvement in **decisions around the marriages of their children**, although they varied in the degree to which they felt they are actually involved in marriage-related decisions in practice at the moment. No men in the study mentioned decisions around the marriages of their children in any way, either as a critical area of decision-making generally, or one that women are or should be involved in.

While research participants spoke at length about which public decision-making *issues* women can or cannot be involved in, the findings also demonstrate that women’s participation is not always determined by the type of issue, so much as **the space that decision-making happens within**, and **who else is present** in that space. Several common decision-making spaces, such as jirgas and mosques, were considered by some to be only suitable for men. In this case, any public issue discussed in that space could not include women’s participation. Some research participants noted that the presence of certain men in a decision-making forum, including government staff from outside the community, male doctors, and maliks, could preclude women from

participating in those discussions, no matter what they were about.

However, as with the specific issues discussed above, some women research participants gave **concrete examples of participating in jirgas and community meetings held in mosques** (or even leading such meetings). Region and ethnicity appeared to play a strong role in explaining variations in practice around which spaces women could be present in, and with whom.

Overall, a majority of men in the study **qualified their support** for women’s participation in public decision-making and local governance in some way. General support for women’s roles in public affairs was stronger among male government staff than among male community leaders or regular community members. However, ultimately the majority of male government staff also qualified their support in some way. Among the qualifications discussed, many men said that women should participate in public affairs, but not as much as men, should have different roles than men, should participate only when the issue at hand is relevant to women, and should participate only after they are properly educated and prepared to do so. This demonstrates that **men’s support for women’s participation in public affairs remains quite conditional**, and largely dependent on standards that are open to interpretation. Only a small minority of male research participants based their support for women’s participation on a concept of innate equality, a citizenship right, or a sense of fairness.

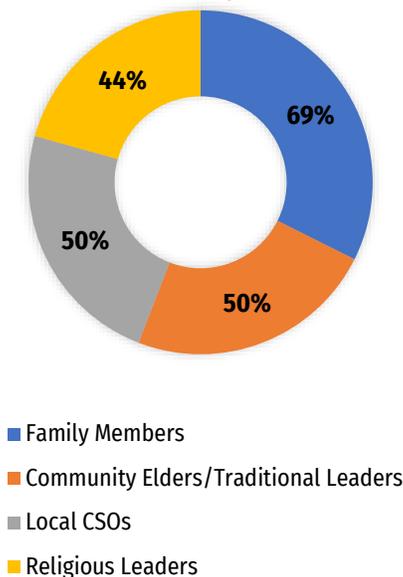
Some men throughout the research process also periodically expressed a belief that women might in some senses to **be better at men in certain aspects of governance**. These individuals often believed that women are more kind, more honest, and more accountable than men. While these views might be an entry point to building support for women’s public roles, they also represent a risk of women in public influencing roles being held to higher behavioural standards than men – a further condition placed on their participation. These expectations may also limit the ability of a woman to be effective once in community-based or government leadership roles, as tough decisions, disagreements, or necessary disciplinary action may be taken as evidence that she is being unwomanly by not being sufficiently kind/nice.

Views on which **individuals, positions or institutions have substantial influence** over whether women can participate in public affairs tended to vary somewhat by location. All research participants agreed that women’s key family members have the greatest influence over whether those

women can participate and how. However, beyond this point of consensus, community level views on the relative influence of traditional elders, religious leaders and others varied by region. Community level respondents in Parwan and Khost indicated that religious leaders have considerable influence over the social norms and permissions related to women's participation, while those in Kabul and Balkh did not. By contrast, **government staff appeared to view religious leaders as quite influential across regions.** Government staff (and possibly 'outsiders' in general) may over-estimate the degree to which religious leaders are consistently influential in rural communities. This finding indicates that an accurate understanding of important allies and influential individuals requires localized analysis. Government staff also viewed government institutions as somewhat influential over women's participation in local governance, while community members did not mention the government as being influential in this regard.

Men from different groups (community members, community leaders, and government staff at various levels), held fairly consistent perceptions of the **key barriers to women's public participation.** By contrast, the views of community level women differed from those of men on several key points, especially the comparative weight they put on certain barriers over others. While all groups emphasized the barriers posed by family members and wider community social attitudes, men felt that women's relatively low formal education levels, wider societal insecurity, and the workloads of women, were all major

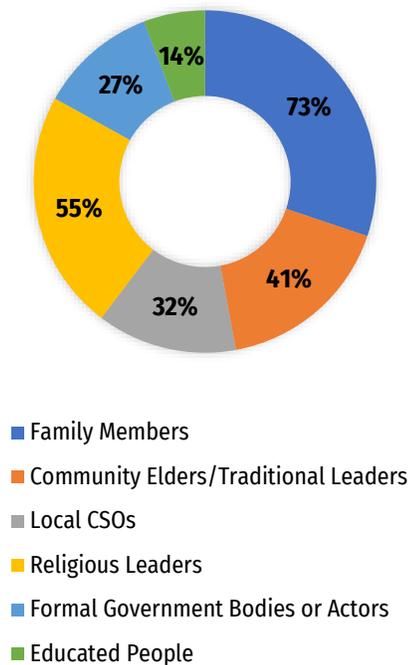
Figure 3: Actors with Influence over Women's Participation (Male Community Leaders)



barriers to their participation in public affairs. Women consistently focused on these factors far less than men from all groups, instead placing the emphasis on social norms and restrictions imposed by their key relationships. Given this divergence of perspective, it is likely that some measure of men's focus on formal education, insecurity, and to a lesser degree, women's workloads, may be driven by a tendency to 'externalize' the problem, relating it to factors beyond their control or associating it with women's own lack of capacity.

Women did frequently express a sense that they were **not well-informed about how community and public decision-making processes work**, along with having a lack of information related to some of the specific issues that often figure in their decision-making agendas. No men in the study expressed feeling they lacked needed information to participate effectively in public decision-making. Access to information that is critical to public decision-making is still a basic barrier for women at the community level, in a way that it is not for men. Women identified male family members as their most significant source of information about public affairs. However, relying on male family members to pass along information to women is problematic, especially given the study's findings about men's mixed attitudes regarding whether women should be involved in public decision-making, and which issues might be relevant to them.

Figure 4: Actors with Influence over Women's Participation (Government Staff)



Government staff pointed to a series of cases in which women's roles, and citizen participation in public affairs more broadly, have been affected by **political interference**. Some specific examples related to party politics at the provincial level, often manifested in the prevention of political appointments of women to government staff positions. In other cases, political interference took the form of politicians overruling community-driven development processes, replacing community-selected priorities with their own. Other examples were provided of power-holders outside of communities, such as area-based commanders, exerting control over women's participation in public affairs. A member of a CSO in Balkh reinforced this point by describing how armed actors hinder his organisation's own efforts to support citizen participation and women's voice: "The big challenge is that elders and warlords are interfering in our activities and trying to stop our work and discouraging people from participation in community decision-making processes...".

On the other hand, an example was provided in which an influential local member of parliament assisted in persuading a specific district governor to allow women's participation in a major national programme. These anecdotes demonstrate that vested political interests and specific features of local political settlements often limit women's space for participation in public affairs, but may also at times be used strategically to promote support for women's participation.

All groups in the research tended to agree that having **supportive family members was a critical enabler** of women's public participation. At the community level, both women and men recognized the importance of women having women-only groups to participate in (often supported by local CSOs). While the research did identify examples of individual women who have taken prominent leadership roles without an obvious support group of other women around them, their personal circumstances were almost always somehow unusual. For most women, at least at the community level, a collective action model is likely essential to gain greater influence in public affairs.

Beyond this, men at the community level tended to emphasize the importance of **supportive male community leaders** and **women's formal education** as two critical enabling factors. Male government staff focused on women's formal education and access to information. By contrast, women spoke most frequently about the importance of women leaders in the community and their ability to channel information and voice support for other women, along with

the role of **individual character traits**, such as courage. Tellingly, very few male respondents mentioned four of the most prominent enabling factors discussed by women at the community level: the importance of individual female community leaders, the need for women to have courage and determination, the supportive role of local CSOs, and the importance of women-only spaces for solidarity and collective action.

Agency, Relations, and Structures

Overall, research participants tended to understand *barriers* to women's participation in local governance as being factors strongly related to women's core **relationships (particularly within their families)**, and secondarily, related to **structural barriers** like social norms. Very few of the named barriers were associated with agency (skills and capacities), with the notable exception of male actors (of all categories) strongly emphasizing the barrier of women's relative lack of formal education. Women generally did not believe their education levels to be a significant barrier to participating in local governance processes. Male actors also emphasized that insecurity prevents women from participating, while women generally did not believe insecurity to be as serious a barrier to their participation in local governance processes as men did.

When discussing the key *enablers* of women's public participation, research participants understood these to likewise have to do with women's core **relationships**, but also to relate to their **personal skills and capacities (agency)**. The most significant enabling factor identified by women in the domain of agency was specific personal traits, with courage mentioned most often. The most significant enabler identified by men in the domain of agency was women's formal education.

All actors appeared to struggle to name structural or systems-related enabling factors. This is perhaps most notable when it comes to government staff, only one of whom recognized policy-based enablers of women's participation. Given the dearth of enablers identified at the level of structural factors, it may be that people tended to focus more on what they can control (in the realm of agency), possibly feeling that **systemic or structural change is beyond their power**. While this is understandable in the context, it may also point to the need for civil society to invest in articulating pathways toward systemic change,

working against the individualizing of the vision of women's equal roles in governance.

Trajectory of Women's Participation

A majority of research participants agreed that women's participation in local governance and public decision-making has **increased in the past five years**. Of those who disagreed, several said that women's participation in public decision-making has decreased in the past five years, while several others said it had stayed about the same, and a couple of respondents said there had been an increase in urban or secure areas but a decrease in rural or insecure areas. This latter response recalls that the research was not conducted in any opposition-held territories, within which the trajectory may be quite different.

For those who believe progress toward women's public participation has been variable, they pointed out that **declining security makes it harder for women to take up roles that may have been previously open to them**, such as teachers or community health workers, both of which often require travel. Even if opportunities are increasing for women in cities or at higher levels, some previous entry points for women's participation in public life at local levels may be contracting. Being a teacher or a health worker may also have served as a steppingstone for women, from community-based roles to those at higher levels. If these positions are getting harder to hold, women's participation may be more bifurcated in the current context. In other words, there may be community-based women's groups at local level and women in political positions or larger CSOs at higher levels, but less opportunity for leadership mobility for women from rural communities, along with less interaction and connectedness between women and women's groups at different levels.

Women's Participation Spectrum

Most of the barriers identified in this research **obstruct women's participation at the level of 'access'**. For example, in many cases women do not have access to decision-making processes because the issues or the spaces in which decisions are made are considered to be the domains of men. While some spaces are formally open for women's participation, and some women are able to take advantage of this level of simple access, most women are still

negotiating informal social 'permissions' for their participation.

A few of the barriers identified in the research may exist more at the level of 'presence'. For example, political or community interference in appointments for women, along with the gossip, security threats, and reputational risk that constitute penalties for women who participate in public life, may act to push women out of public participation, while also deterring those who have not yet tried.

Throughout the research, women gave concrete examples of achieving specific goals through participation in local governance processes, clearly representing a measure of 'influence'. However, given the restrictive conditions at the previous levels, it is reasonable to conclude that **women's influence remains limited in public decision-making**. Barriers like the practice of side-lining women once they have specific positions in communities and government hinder substantive opportunities for women's voice. Furthermore, while women provided examples of their influence, these were often under-recognized by men (such as the examples of women's influence in conflict resolution processes). This habit of denying or underplaying women's contributions to local governance further underscores the views of some men that women do not, and cannot, have substantial influence in public decision-making.

Pathways toward Women's Participation and Influence in Local Public Decision-making

Findings from this study indicate several promising pathways to supporting women's participation in public decision-making and local governance. Among the most prominent, support to **community-based women's groups that provide women-only safe spaces for solidarity, participation and collective action** is critical. In the examples provided in the study, these groups work best when they are supported by CSOs, which act as channels of information, establish platforms for voice, negotiate audiences with power-holders, and provide material support to the goals of these groups. However, women still often feel isolated and disconnected from information and decision-making processes. Interventions with women's groups should pay close attention to how these groups are linked to men's groups and local and subnational leaders, and how they might collaborate with other groups and gain influence.

Social accountability models like Community Score Cards might be effective tools for structuring women's priorities in specific sectors and feeding this information to key power-holders.

The study surfaced examples of women who have gained experience and support at the community level through a history of volunteer community service, and became community leaders like CDC members or chairpersons, based on this reputation. In some cases, these community leadership roles were translated into higher level government positions. Other examples were provided of women who were able to participate more in community decision-making based on their roles as teachers or public health workers, which helped them gain respect in their communities. Based on these examples, **supporting women's groups to take on community service projects or local initiatives**, and **intentionally engaging individual women leaders** who have unique status in their communities, could be effective interventions for shoring up support for women's public participation.

The research findings are unequivocal that underlying social norms, and how these norms are enforced by women's predominant relationships, strongly determine their ability to participate in local governance and public decision-making. **Any approach to supporting women's public roles in Afghanistan should include (or link up to) supportive work on shifting social norms**, as an essential approach to improving the enabling environment for any other intervention. This is also an important harm mitigation strategy, in recognition of the risks Afghan women take by seeking to participate more in public life.

Supportive **government policy and legislation is also critical**, and the research provides evidence that some existing policies have generated space for women's participation in community decision-making. These have often been bolstered by inclusion norms within international organisations. However, effective and sustainable existing examples are few. Interventions along this pathway would first need to identify strategic further opportunities to support improved policies and legislation for women's participation in public decision-making. These opportunities may present themselves as and when a further set of formal subnational government bodies are established, or in the form of national programme design or policy-making related to health and education service delivery.

Furthermore, aspects of local political settlements emerged as barriers in the research, including party politics, the power dynamics around political appointments, and political interference in community-driven decision-making processes. Given this, particularities of the local political settlement, often interacting with prevailing social norms, can easily derail the intentions of inclusion policies or legislation. Substantial continued work is needed to ensure that policy or legislative measures become a reality on the ground for women, especially for those in rural areas.

Further to this point, this research points to the importance of **supporting initiatives that are led by, or strongly engage, subnational government actors**, with the aim of **generating ownership and innovation** at these levels related to women's public participation. During the research process, government staff at subnational levels often appeared to struggle with concepts of women's influence or leadership in public decision-making processes, reverting to ideas of women as workers or simply beneficiaries of services or social security benefits. Subnational work with elected representatives and the government bureaucracy on what women's substantive participation and influence might look like (as opposed to a tokenistic presence), appears strongly needed. While it would be premature to call this a 'promising pathway', working with subnational government bodies to better understand and take leadership on women's public participation might address a break in the chain that limits policy-focused efforts to support women's public participation.

Finally, the research pointed to a pattern among men of denying or under-recognizing women's existing roles in community governance and public affairs, while women in the same communities or areas were often able to give concrete examples of their involvement and influence. **Initiatives that seek to document and make women's existing roles and influence more visible (and more valued)** may contribute to an increase in perceptions that women already have skills and capacities that qualify them to participate. This might go some way in countering the prevalent male perception that women require more education and preparation before they can participate at the level of men.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the full research findings, and are relevant to practitioners and civil society, government, and donors:

- It is critical to **support women-only groups at community level** to enable more women to participate in spaces in which community issues are discussed, to find solidarity with other women, and to access collective action platforms. Supporting women's groups to undertake self-identified local initiatives and community service could be a promising approach to helping women's groups gain community respect and greater participation space. However, interventions with women's groups should **pay close attention to how those groups can develop linkages and systems of information-sharing with male groups and local and subnational leaders**, so that they can go beyond being spaces of community-based solidarity for women, to also act as channels for women's influence. Seek to broker 'audiences' with power-holders at various levels, on behalf of women's groups. Connect with prominent national, grassroots and mid-level women's groups;
- **Women CDC members and CDC women's committees** (where separate committees exist) can be significant entry points for supporting women's roles in community decision-making. They can be effective opportunities for women CDC members themselves, and an access point to community decision-making for other women. **Deliberate linkages should be supported** between women in CDCs and other women's groups, and with wider initiatives, groups, and individual leaders at community level and beyond. However, the degree to which women in CDCs are active needs to be assessed in each community before working with them. They may need re-activating, or further support to fully take up their roles, or they may be already active and ready to build stronger connections with others;
- Supporting **women's voice and influence within core service delivery interventions** is also a useful entry point. Women's participation in health and education shuras appears to be generally socially acceptable, but simultaneously under-supported and weaker than it could be. Strengthening these bodies, with particular attention to how inclusive they are, could be a critical support to women's opportunities for participation in public life. Given their often-respected status in society, work in this area could also enlist the support of women teachers and health workers, as potential spokespersons for women's issues in education and health and as respected voices able to amplify women's priorities more generally;
- Furthermore, deliberately looking to **offer enhanced leadership opportunities** to women who have gained experience through community-based leadership (such as in CDCs) or as teachers and health workers, has been shown to be an effective way to support women (especially those from rural communities) to translate their most typical opportunities into higher levels of influence;
- **Social accountability models such as Community Score Card or Social Audit approaches**, which often provide opportunities for citizen engagement in improving frontline service delivery, can be valuable spaces for women's voice. However, it is also possible for social accountability and citizen voice models to be used in ways that are themselves non-inclusive and amplify already dominant voices at the local level. Careful attention to the details of how social accountability models are designed is needed, to ensure pathways toward increased voice and influence for women;
- Women who participated in this study also prioritized **negotiating more space for their decision-making related to the marriages of their children**. This may also be an opening to working on women's voice and influence at community level, reflecting a priority that community level women themselves hold;
- Women in communities still lack critical information that would support them to participate effectively in public decision-making. Capacity-building remains essential, to help **bridge the information gap between women and men** at local levels. However, training content needs to focus on specific topics relevant to community governance, such as how decision-making and local governance processes work at different levels. This may include topics about how budgets are allocated and expended within subnational government units, or specific information about types of community-based infrastructure or service delivery standards. Women in this study also emphasized wanting support on public-speaking skills;

- Any approach to supporting women’s public roles in Afghanistan should include (or link up to) supportive work on addressing **restrictive social norms and unequal gender relations**, as an essential approach to improving the enabling environment for any other intervention. This is also an important harm mitigation strategy, in recognition of the risks Afghan women take by seeking to participate more in public life;
- This includes the need to work with community members (both male and female) **to unpack what is entailed in the loaded concepts of ‘women’s issues’ and ‘men’s issues’** – commonly heard terms that often remain ambiguous. The purpose of this exercise would be to look into whether there is space to expand perspectives on which community issues are relevant for women’s participation;
- It is also critical to ensure that those working on social norms **engage in a robust discussion about how change might happen**. Several research participants (including members of CSOs and INGOs, along with community members and government officials) expressed the belief that harmful gender-related social norms will change when those who hold them gain information about women’s rights. However, this likely underestimates the degree to which norms emanate from fundamentally competing values and worldviews. **Social norms are often not a simple matter of a lack of information**, and this formulation can lead to a failure to address social norms robustly;
- Men’s support for women’s participation in public affairs remains highly conditional. There is a need to **shore up support** for women’s roles in public decision-making based on both *normative* arguments (rooted in a sense of fairness and the prevailing social value of consultative and consensus-based decision-making processes), along with *instrumental* arguments for why women’s participation can improve outcomes related to public issues. Social norms work should consistently include **engaging with men**, including both members of communities and government staff;
- Among other approaches, this could take the form of **concrete capacity-building for government officials**, ideally culminating in action planning and support to implementing action plans over time. Subnational government officials often demonstrate a limited view of how women in rural areas can and do participate in public life and local governance, so capacity-building should seek to better acquaint government staff with local women’s groups and their initiatives;
- **Working with religious leaders** to support women’s participation can be productive, but should not be done to the neglect of working with other traditional leaders and influential individuals. Social mapping is required to determine who has influence over women’s participation in public affairs (by area).
- Consider initiatives that seek to **document and make women’s existing roles and influence more visible (and more valued)**. This may counter the pattern that surfaced in the research of men under-recognizing women’s existing contributions within community governance;
- Developing, and advocating for, **stronger policies and legislation** to support women’s public participation and roles in governance can be effective. Look for strategic opportunities to enshrine women’s participation in policy or law. Programme design or policy related to large health and education service delivery systems, or the establishment of new subnational government bodies, could be key entry points for policy-strengthening around women’s participation in the future;
- However, substantial continued work is also needed to ensure that policy or legislative measures become a reality, especially for women in rural areas. **Subnational work with the government bureaucracy and elected representatives**, on why women’s influence in governance is important, and what women’s *substantive* participation might actually look like (as opposed to their tokenistic presence), appears strongly needed;
- Consider programming that creates **a distinct role for mid-level units of government**, like provincial, district, and municipal government bodies, to **incentivize more ownership, innovation, and a more developed understanding** of issues related to women’s public participation. This could involve activities that seek to better acquaint provincial government staff with rural women’s groups and their initiatives, incentivize greater interaction with Departments of Women’s Affairs, and generate innovation and government leadership in this area.