

Social Inclusion in Fragile Contexts: Women's Voice in Local Public Decision-making

Pathways Towards the Inclusion of Women in Local Government Processes – Perspectives from Afghanistan

Pathways and Recommendations

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

This section assesses the findings against the six identified pathways for women's participation in local governance and public decision-making in the central thematic paper in this research series. It also indicates areas where further pathways (or an expansion of existing ones) might be needed to enhance understanding.

1. **Women-led Movements and Associations:** The research demonstrates that both women and men acknowledge the importance of women's groups and the role of their collective action in enabling women's voice and participation (though women place greater value on this than men). Women articulated appreciation for both community-based groups and more formal local CSOs. Both women and men in the study acknowledge that many women would be unlikely to gain voice or influence as individuals and need the support (and safety) of a group to push for collective priorities. This pathway demonstrates evidence of effectiveness in the current environment and is critical for future interventions.

The research found that women valued women's groups and CSOs specifically insofar as they are locally embedded, provide safe spaces for women to work together, and help to bridge the substantial information gap that women clearly still experience. In that sense, interventions should seek to use women's groups partly as a platform to provide critical information to women. However, the research demonstrates a need for information beyond women's rights trainings and other typical topics, toward more information about specific decision-making topics relevant to community governance, along with broad information about how planning and decision-making processes work at different levels in society. This may entail topics about how budgets are allocated and expended within subnational government units, or specific information about community-based infrastructure projects and service delivery standards.

It is also clear that, while women value women's-only spaces, they simultaneously express frustration that decisions are often made in male-only spaces and that the gender-segregation of decision-making spaces poses a barrier to their influence. Interventions with women's groups should pay close attention to how those groups could develop linkages and systems of information-sharing with male groups and local and subnational leaders, so that they can go beyond being spaces of solidarity for women, to also act as channels of women's influence. In this regard, CSOs were valued for their ability to facilitate 'an audience' for community-based women's groups, securing meetings for women's groups with government staff at district and provincial levels, for example.

2. **Government Policy and Legislation:** Clear evidence exists for the ways in which affirmative policy measures have increased opportunities for women's participation in Afghanistan. From this research, the channel of influence commonly cited by women as most popular and most effective – women in CDCs and CDC women's committees – exists due to quota-based policy measures within several consecutive national programmes (NSP and CCAP).

However, beyond this case, very few examples emerged in the research of how policies or legislation effectively support women to participate in subnational governance processes in Afghanistan. Therefore, this pathway is relevant to the context and can be effective, but only if opportunities to further influence through new policies and emerging legislation arise. For example, design or policies related to large health

and education service delivery systems, or future policies and legislation establishing new subnational government bodies (for example, District Councils), will be critical junctures for advocacy around quotas and other affirmative action measures. One government staff member argued that the ‘government has a policy related to violence against women (however)...it is only focused on violence now, but it should be more about job opportunities and involvement of women in government departments, and other public policies that insist on women’s participation.’

Furthermore, as examples from the research findings demonstrate, particularities of the local political settlement, along with prevailing social norms, can easily derail the intentions of inclusion policies. Substantial continued work is also needed to ensure that policy or legislative measures become a reality on the ground for women, especially for those in rural areas.

3. **The Underlying Political Settlement:** 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. Women’s participation is nested within a wider environment of disrupted citizen participation and often non-inclusive political leadership. While this is important to understand, concrete work in this area is challenging, and leverage over relevant aspects of the political settlement should be assessed realistically before pursuing interventions along this pathway.

Supporting a representative and inclusive peace process may be one way of trying to shift the political settlement toward more favourable conditions for citizen participation more broadly, and women’s voice in particular. However, subnational work with the government bureaucracy 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. This is likely to be important groundwork for supporting a more just political settlement.

What is clear from the research is that local political economies vary widely, and effective interventions across any pathway need to consider the specificities of political settlements in different places. The research surfaced examples of leveraging one power-holder’s influence over another, to support women’s participation. Interventions that include identifying and working with champions of women’s participation need to first understand who holds real influence over whom in each community or area.

4. **Social Accountability Spaces and Tools:** A large World Bank study on participatory development¹ noted that an important way in which participatory interventions can work is ‘by changing the character of everyday interactions’, which is a process that, over time, can reshape social relationships. Social accountability models are not extremely widespread in Afghanistan, and while these kinds of processes were not often mentioned as critical pathways for women’s public participation, more women than men in the research did view Community Score Card exercises as important spaces for voice. It is likely that this is an under-explored area that deserves further attention in the future.

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 understand the degree to which they might be pathways toward increased voice and influence for women.

5. **Social Norms and Gender Relations:** The research findings are unequivocal that underlying social norms, and how these norms are enforced by women’s predominant relationships (most often those with key family members), strongly determine their ability to participate in local governance and public decision-making. On the other hand, the research highlights the existence of relevant positive social norms, like the

¹ Mansuri, Ghazala and Vijayendra Rao. ‘Localizing Development – Does Participation Work?’ Washington DC: World Bank, 2013.

shared value of collective or consensus-based decision-making and a general respect for community service or volunteerism, that could be used to further promote women's inclusion in public decision-making processes. Any approach to supporting women's public roles in Afghanistan should include (or link up to) supportive work on social norms and 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.

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 expressed narrow views of social norms change processes, such as '...if people know about women's rights, they will allow (women) to do more.' Reducing harmful social norms to a simple lack of knowledge underestimates the degree to which norms underpin fundamentally competing values and worldviews. Social norms are often not a simple matter of a lack of information, and this formulation can lead to missed opportunities to address social norms from a variety of angles.

6. **International Norms and Agendas:** Finally, there is evidence that international norms and support for the gender equality agenda have positively impacted women's public participation in Afghanistan, including through promoting affirmative programming policies (like those in CCAP), and supporting women's rights organizations. This indicates that when opportunities are carefully chosen, and there is accompanying political will and longevity with the commitment, international agencies may be able to contribute to opening opportunities for greater women's participation. However, Afghanistan's own women's movement was active well before the international community scaled up operations in the post-2001 era, so the degree to which women's participation in public decision-making can be understood as a particularly *international* norm or agenda is questionable. In any case, the continued efforts of international agencies to support Afghanistan's women's movement and broader gender equality aims are essential and provide a much-needed boost to local efforts.
7. **Experience through Community-based Leadership/Local Professional Roles:** Anecdotes from the research underscore the potential for roles in community-based leadership (like serving as a CDC member) or local professional positions (such as being a teacher or health worker), to support women to negotiate more space for influence in public life and to act as steppingstones for other opportunities. An example was provided of a woman head of a CDC later becoming a district governor. In another case, a woman interviewee explained that she believes her role as a local teacher allows her to speak more in public meetings than other women, with greater social acceptance. Women who have gained experience in these types of local roles can be sought out as supporters of other women and leaders for new positions, within communities and beyond.
8. **Community Service/Volunteerism:** Likewise, some examples discussed in the research indicate that when women take on volunteer initiatives to improve their communities, they gain the respect of men and may then be able to negotiate increased space to participate in community decision-making. This builds on a prevailing social norm that values volunteerism and generous public service. Supporting women's groups to plan and lead community service initiatives could be an effective approach for their group to gain greater community support and more voice in public issues.
9. **Subnational Government-led Initiatives:** The findings in this research indicate that 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 either workers or simply beneficiaries of services or social safety net benefits. Interviewees also pointed out the prevalence of tokenistic appointments of women and their side-lining from real power within government agencies. Subnational government interviewees (with a couple of notable exceptions) tended to view the national government as responsible for supporting women's roles in public life and could point to very few initiatives taken at subnational level

to further support women's public voice. While it would be premature to call this a 'promising pathway', working with subnational government units and bureaucrats to support greater understanding and to foster action in this area might address a break in the chain that will ultimately limit policy-focused efforts to support women's public participation. This could involve activities that seek to **better acquaint** provincial government staff with rural women's groups and their initiatives. Seed grant or challenge fund approaches might **incentivize innovation from local government offices**, including greater interaction with the local Departments of Women's Affairs.

10. **Making Visible Existing Women's Contributions to Local Governance:** The research pointed to a trend among men of tending to under-recognize women's existing influence in public affairs. Some men felt that women in their area simply have no role in local governance or community decision-making, while others argued that women could not be involved in certain types of decisions. By contrast, women often argued that they are in fact already involved in public decision-making and community governance. They provided concrete examples of how they are involved, often related to the very issues that men said they could not be involved in. 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 the skills and capacities needed to participate, countering the prevalent male perception that women require more education and preparation before they can participate at the level of men. This kind of approach is akin to efforts in gender equality work to make women's current economic contributions more visible and valued, to counter perceptions that women are economic 'dependents' of men.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the research findings, and organized by their relevance to practitioners and civil society, government, and donors:

Practitioners and Civil Society:

- 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. Civil society should seek to **broker 'audiences' with power-holders** at various levels, on behalf of women's groups. Support to connect **prominent national women's rights organizations with grassroots and mid-level women's groups** is also valuable;
- **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 and have influence 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;

- **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 underpin 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 a wide range of public issues. Social norms work should consistently include **engaging with men**, including both members of communities and government staff;
- **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**. Who has influence over women's participation in public affairs varies by area, and requires social mapping in order to be well understood;

- 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;
- 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 on the ground** for women, especially for those 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 subnational 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 and influence. 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.

Government:

- **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, with men's groups, and with wider initiatives, groups, and individual leaders at community level and beyond;
- 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 priorities 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;
- Men's support for women's participation in public affairs **remains highly conditional, including among government officials**. 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 a wide range of public issues. 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**;

- Developing **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 policies related to large **health or 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 on the ground** for women, especially for those in rural areas. As noted, **subnational capacity-building 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 subnational 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 and influence.

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. Support CSOs to **broker 'audiences' with power-holders** at various levels, on behalf of 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, men's groups, and with wider initiatives, groups, and individual leaders at community level and beyond. Support to connect **prominent national women's rights organizations with grassroots and mid-level women's groups** is also valuable;
- 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 priorities in education and health and as respected voices able to amplify women's priorities more generally;
- **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 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;
- 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 a wide range of public issues. Social norms work should consistently include work on **engaging with men**, including both members of communities and government staff;
- **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**. Who has influence over women's participation in public affairs varies by area, and requires social mapping in order to be well understood;
- 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;
- **Look for strategic opportunities** to support stronger policies and legislation for women's participation. Programme design or policies related to large **health or 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 on the ground** for women, especially for those 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 and influence might actually look like (as opposed to their tokenistic presence), appears strongly needed;
- Consider programming that creates a **distinct role for mid-level subnational 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 and influence. This could involve seed grant or challenge fund approaches, among others. Consider activities that seek to **incentivize interaction with local Departments of Women's Affairs** and **better acquaint provincial government staff** with rural women's groups and their initiatives.