

**Social inclusion in fragile contexts:
Pathways towards the inclusion of
women in local
governance processes
Perspectives from Afghanistan**

ABSTRACT

This exploratory research focuses on the social inclusion of women in subnational governance in Afghanistan, particularly investigating informal and semi-formal governance bodies and processes. It identifies groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors that provide opportunities for women's participation and influence in public decision-making. It also explores how women's participation may be changing, and the key obstructing and enabling factors that impact that process. It then provides an assessment of promising pathways toward enhanced women's voice in local public affairs. Finally, it concludes by offering a set of recommendations for donors, practitioners, civil society, and government.

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13 May 2020

‘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

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Acronyms

AWRC	Afghan Women's Resource Centre
CAG	Community Advocacy Group
CCAP	Citizen Charter for Afghanistan Program
CDC	Community Development Council
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DDA	District Development Assembly
EVC	Every Voice Counts (programme)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HRRAC	Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium
IDLG	Independent Directorate of Local Governance
KII	Key Informant Interview
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development
NSP	National Solidarity Program
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation for Development
WCLRF	Women and Children Legal Research Foundation

Executive Summary

The research conducted for this paper is the final instalment in a set of research products focused on the **social inclusion of women and girls in subnational governance processes in fragile contexts**. The other research products include case studies from Rwanda¹ and Burundi,² which feed into a thematic paper on women in local governance structures in fragile and conflict-affected settings.³ The thematic paper assesses relevant global literature and presents six promising pathways for women's influence in subnational governance, based on the existing evidence base. It then extracts a set of key findings from the two case studies, particularly outlining obstructing and enabling factors for women's participation and influence in local governance processes.

The research presented in this paper was based on the same conceptual framework as the foregoing work and explores the same central lines of enquiry. However, it focuses on a context that differs considerably from the two previous case studies in several ways. Most notably, Afghanistan is in the midst of long-term active conflict, and at the time of data collection and writing, was continuing to experience a sustained upward trend of intensifying violence. Secondly, as compared with the other two countries of focus in the series, Afghanistan's government has a far less formalized subnational governance structure. These points, along with a different set of cultural characteristics, drove adaptations to the research focus.

This exploratory research examines the social inclusion of women in subnational governance in Afghanistan, with a focus on **informal and semi-formal governance bodies and processes**. It seeks to identify which groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors are currently **providing opportunities for women's participation and influence in public decision-making**. It also explores how women's participation and influence may be changing, and the **key obstructing and enabling factors** that impact that process. It then provides an assessment of the findings against the six **promising pathways** identified in the central thematic paper, and points to any additional pathways that have potential for enabling women's increased voice in local public affairs in Afghanistan. Finally, it concludes by offering a **set of recommendations** for donors, practitioners, civil society and government.

This research 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. The social inclusion of women is a central focus of the programme, including within community-based and subnational public decision-making spaces. 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**,⁴ which conceptualizes the factors that contribute to gender equality within three domains: **agency, relations,**

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ CARE International. 'Gender Equality and Women's Voice: Guidance Note.' CARE International, 2018. 7.

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, this paper distinguishes between 'access', 'presence', and 'influence'.⁵ **'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 and key informant interviews with women and men at community level, and a further set of key informant interviews with government staff and members of civil society organizations at district, provincial, and national levels.

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. **CDCs and separate CDC Women's Committees** (where parallel men's and women's committees exist) were consistently viewed as the most effective of these spaces for women's participation, in the research sample areas.

Men often viewed **education and health shuras 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

⁵ While this framing is nearly identical to the spectrum used in the rest of this research series, the central thematic paper in this series refers to 'access', '*participation*', and 'influence'. For this paper on Afghanistan, the middle term has been replaced with 'presence'. This adjustment was made to highlight that 'participation' can happen at different points on the spectrum, but in more or less meaningful ways, while 'presence' focuses on the physical or numerical occupation of a decision-making space. This framing is in line with CARE's forthcoming position paper on voice and leadership for poor and marginalized women in public life and decision-making (CARE, forthcoming), which itself refers to the 'ladder of participation' in (Arnstein 1969, 216 – 224).

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 **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 or 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 barriers to their participation in public affairs. Women consistently focused on these factors far less than men from all groups, instead placing the emphasis **squarely 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.

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 organization'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 organizations. 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.

I. Introduction

The research conducted for this paper is the final instalment in a set of research products focused on the social inclusion of women and girls in subnational governance spaces in fragile⁶ contexts.⁷ The other research products include case studies from Rwanda⁸ and Burundi,⁹ which feed into a thematic paper on women in local governance structures in fragile and conflict-affected settings.¹⁰ The thematic paper assesses relevant global literature and presents six promising pathways for women's influence in subnational governance, based on the existing evidence base. It then extracts a set of key findings from the two case studies, particularly outlining obstructing and enabling factors for women's participation and influence in local governance processes.

The research presented in this paper was based on the same conceptual framework as the foregoing work and explores the same central lines of enquiry. However, it focuses on a context that differs considerably from the previous two case studies in several ways. Most notably, Afghanistan is in the midst of long-term active conflict, and at the time of data collection and writing, was continuing to experience a sustained upward trend of intensifying violence. Secondly, as compared with the other two countries of focus in the series, Afghanistan's government has a far less formalized subnational governance structure. These points, along with a different set of cultural characteristics, drove some adaptations to the research focus.

To accommodate the greater variability across regions and multiplicity of semi-formal or informal governance structures, the focus of the research in Afghanistan was broader and more exploratory than in the previous cases. Rather than focusing on one main local governance structure or process, it attempts to assess which groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors are viewed as significant for local public decision-making and provide space for citizen voice, and the degree to which women, in particular, are able to influence them. It explores how women's participation and influence may be changing, and the key obstructing and enabling factors that impact that process. The research concludes with an assessment of the findings against the six promising pathways identified previously from the literature (outlined in the central thematic paper), and points to any additional pathways that appear to have potential for women's voice in local public affairs.

This research 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. The social inclusion of women is a central focus of the programme, including within inclusive community-based and subnational public decision-making spaces. 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

⁶ This study follows the Organisation for Economic Cooperation for Development (OECD)'s definition of fragility as: *'the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies'* (OECD 2016, 22).

⁷ Local *government* is a formal set of institutions with statutory public authority over a subnational area. Local *governance* (the focus of this study) is the collective system and practices around who gets what, when, how, and who decides these things within public affairs, whether formally or informally. Local governance systems include statutory local government and a wider set of formal, informal, and semi-formal bodies, positions, and processes.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

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 in Afghanistan.

Gender and Voice in Fragile and Conflict-affected Settings¹¹

In global development policy and research, there is growing recognition of the connections between social inclusion, gender equality, violence reduction, and building more peaceful and stable societies.¹² As noted by Sweetman and Rowlands, ‘gender inequality is part of the very DNA of what makes societies violent and insecure.’¹³ On the other hand, there is evidence to demonstrate that women policy-makers are more likely to pursue policies that support social welfare and address violence,¹⁴ and women both inside and outside of formal politics are more likely to consistently call for peace and pursue inclusive political settlements¹⁵ than their male counterparts.¹⁶ A strong evidence base exists that correlates the increased presence of women in meaningful leadership positions in peace negotiations with improved chances for successful negotiations and more sustainable peace.¹⁷ However, high levels of social exclusion, including high levels of gender inequality, persist, despite evidence demonstrating net positive benefits in the areas of social welfare, violence reduction, and durable peace, resulting from the participation and influence of women.

The dynamics of conflict-affected environments often make it particularly challenging to address social exclusion issues. On the one hand, conflict environments push populations into ‘emergency’ coping mechanisms that can disrupt prevailing norms and make space for new precedents and the re-writing of social rules. On the other hand, the drive to maintain a measure of stability in conflict-affected contexts can cause communities and societies to cling to existing social norms and rely on pre-existing power-holders rather than challenge the status quo. In environments in which security priorities often dominate public concerns, the abilities to negotiate with predominantly male armed actors and to protect communities (including through force) are often seen as essential characteristics of leadership typically possessed by men. Attempts to de-escalate conflicts may rely on appeasing traditional power-holders and predominantly male armed actors, resulting in political settlements that re-invest in, or even deepen, unequal gendered power relations.

Furthermore, in conflict-affected contexts the formal state apparatus is often fragile, a characteristic which may both drive and be a result of conflict. Consequently, conflict-affected environments are often characterized by a high degree of informality or hybrid governance, filling a gap when the state and its

¹¹ This sub-section (‘Gender and Voice in Fragile and Conflict-affected Settings’) has been adapted from the sub-section ‘Challenges & opportunities for social inclusion in fragile contexts’ in the foregoing thematic paper in this research series (Pinnington 2019, 10 – 17).

¹² O’Rourke, Catherine. ‘Gender, Conflict and Political Settlements: What do we know?’ Special Issue Editorial, *feminists@law*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019.

¹³ Sweetman, Caroline & Jo Rowlands. ‘Introduction: Working on equality in fragile contexts.’ *Gender & Development*, 24:3, 2016. 347.

¹⁴ Beaman, Lori, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande, and Petia Topolova. ‘Women Politicians, Gender Bias, and Policy-making in Rural India.’ UNICEF, 2006; Bholtra, Sonia and Irma Clots-Figueres. ‘Health and the Political Agency of Women.’ The Centre for Market and Public Organisation, 2011; Brollo, Fernanda and Ugo Troiana. ‘What happens when a woman wins an election? Evidence from close races in Brazil.’ University of Alicante and Harvard University, 2013.

¹⁵ The UK Department for International Development defines political settlements as: ‘...the expression of a common understanding, usually forged between elites, about how power is organized and exercised. They include formal institutions for managing political and economic relations, such as electoral processes, peace agreements, parliaments, constitutions and market regulations. But they also include informal, often unarticulated agreements that underpin a political system, such as deals between elites on the division of spoils.’ (Department for International Development 2010, 22).

¹⁶ Domingo, Pilar, Aoife McCullough, Florence Simbiri, and Bernadette Wanjala. ‘Women and Power: Shaping Kenya’s 2010 Constitution.’ Overseas Development Institute, 2016; Domingo, Pilar, Alina Rocha Menocal, and Veronica Hinestroza. ‘Progress despite adversity: women’s empowerment and conflict in Colombia.’ Overseas Development Institute, 2015; UN INSTRAW. ‘Women, Peace, and Security in Liberia: Supporting UNSCR 1325 in Liberia.’ UN INSTRAW, 2009.

¹⁷ O’Reilly, Marie, Andrea O’Suilleabhain and Thania Paffenholz. ‘Reimagining Peacemaking: Women’s Roles in Peace Processes.’ International Peace Institute, 2015.

institutions are contested or have been weakened by conflict. In this kind of environment, informal or semi-formal power-holders have considerable influence over public decision-making, citizen voice, and how public services are delivered, often particularly at subnational levels. Informal leaders are usually men whose authority is rooted in longstanding social norms that provide a stable structure for social hierarchies. Gender inequality is typically deeply embedded in these social hierarchies, presenting a persistent challenge to women's influence and leadership. Moreover, within and beyond conflict environments, women's engagement with governance spaces is often further mediated by their households and families, based on social norms that emphasize women's primary position in the private sphere.

Donor-funded programming in conflict-affected contexts is often not adept at addressing social exclusion issues, perhaps at least partly because of a weak understanding of the ways in which the social norms that drive gender inequality are intricately linked to those that perpetuate violence and insecurity. A recent OECD review of donor efforts concluded that programmes could do more to enable women as active agents in post-conflict and state-building processes. It found that programmes tended to include women affected by violence and conflict as passive beneficiaries only, and failed to address social norms that perpetuate gender inequality.¹⁸ However, the literature also points to a general 'inclusion norm' among international agencies and institutions, meaning that most international institutions require and monitor at least some level of social inclusion in initiatives they fund.¹⁹ In some conflict-affected contexts, international agencies have more influence than in more stable environments, providing an opportunity to further promote inclusion norms.

For these reasons, in conflict-affected contexts it is particularly critical to understand state and non-state decision-making bodies and processes, and how they are gendered. However, the thematic paper published earlier in this research series found several critical gaps in the relevant literature: firstly, the literature has a stronger focus on women's participation and influence in *national* governance processes in conflict-affected contexts, with little attention to *subnational* governance; and secondly, the literature tends to focus on *formal* or state-driven processes over *informal* or semi-formal ones.²⁰ Earlier CARE research on inclusion in fragile contexts emphasizes the importance of local governance as the nexus of state-society relations, and a critical entry point for women's voice.²¹

Based on a review of the relevant global literature, the foregoing thematic paper identified six promising pathways for women's participation and influence in public affairs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (outlined in Box I below).²² These pathways are often closely related to each other and can be mutually reinforcing. For example, working with women's movements (the first pathway) can support gender equality activists and women's organizations to push for critical legislative or policy change (the second pathway). Likewise, addressing social attitudes and norms (the fifth pathway) is likely to have reinforcing effects on

¹⁸ OECD. 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations: a review of donor support', OECD Development Policy Papers, No. 8, 2017.

¹⁹ O'Rourke, Catherine. 'Gender, Conflict and Political Settlements: What do we know?' Special Issue Editorial, *feminists@law*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2019.

²⁰ Pinnington, Rosie. '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. 11.

²¹ Spearing, Michelle. 'Addressing state fragility from the bottom up through inclusive community governance: Exploring theories of change.' The Hague: CARE Nederland, 2016.

²² Pinnington, Rosie. '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. 12 – 17.

efforts to facilitate women's voice through social accountability mechanisms (the fourth pathway). Numerous other integrated and mutually reinforcing approaches could be conceptualized among these pathways.

Box I: Pathways toward women's participation and influence in public affairs in fragile contexts
(as identified in the global evidence base)

- **Women-led movements and associations:** Supporting women's movements, CSOs, and grassroots informal groups shows promise, particularly as they have potential to connect with community level women, represent their needs and priorities, and incorporate into their work a strong understanding of the social norms and political economy driving gender justice issues. Collective action is often productive for women for whom individual power may be limited.
- **Government policy and legislation:** New constitutions, quota systems, electoral processes, and decentralization measures, often part of efforts to seek a post-conflict settlement, can open new opportunities for citizen voice, including women's participation and influence (O'Connell 2014).
- **The underlying political settlement:** Conflict-affected contexts present the risk of returning to, or even further entrenching, gendered political settlements in the name of stability. However, they can instead present the opportunity to pursue a 're-articulation of the rules of the game' about how power is distributed (Rocha Menocal 2017). Supporting women to make a case for the redefinition of aspects of the political settlement might be productive in a time of change.
- **Social accountability spaces and tools:** Women's participation in social accountability mechanisms, often used to influence local services, can result in concrete service delivery wins, along with shifts in participation norms and perceptions of acceptable roles for women (Wild et al 2015; Mansuri and Rao 2013). This can be especially productive in a constrained environment, because core service delivery sectors are often viewed as the most acceptable spaces for women's participation, while social accountability mechanisms focused on health or education services can simultaneously influence governance norms.
- **Social norms and gender relations:** Working to shift social norms that justify and buttress unequal gender relations is a critical approach that can alleviate barriers within other pathways, while also addressing a root cause of conflict.
- **International norms and agendas:** In conflict-affected environments in which international agencies and institutions have significant involvement, the prevailing consensus around the 'inclusion norm' within internationally backed initiatives can positively influence programming and policies. While this may be a useful entry point, it should be pursued in conjunction with other pathways, with careful efforts at localization.

Box 1: Pathways toward women's participation and influence in public affairs in fragile contexts (as identified in the global evidence base)

Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan

A series of conflict phases have heavily influenced Afghanistan's development trajectory over the last four decades. In 2001 – 02, the country entered what has often been viewed as a post-conflict reconstruction period, after the fall of the Taliban government and the beginning of a NATO military mission and substantial influx of international aid. However, in the last decade or more, that effort has faced a formidable challenge in the form of an ascendant insurgency and increased insecurity, along with declining aid.

In the post-Taliban period, efforts have been made to influence the political settlement in favour of greater women's participation and influence, most prominently in the form of formal policy and legislation. For example, the 2004 constitution put in place an affirmative quota system for women in Afghanistan's main elected bodies. Of the 249 parliamentary seats in the lower house (the Wolesi Jirga), 27% (68 seats) are reserved for women, while half of the presidential appointees in the upper house (the Meshrano Jirga) are also for women. In provincial councils, 20% of seats are reserved for women (a reduction from an original 25% quota). Despite these provisions, women candidates have consistently reported high rates of harassment, intimidation, security threats, attacks, and lack of protection on the campaign trail.²³

Women have also played a role in Afghanistan's peace process at various stages, though their inclusion has been inconsistent and at times tokenistic. Women participated in Afghanistan's two foundational Loya Jirgas,²⁴ making up 12% of delegates in 2002 and 20% in 2003. These meetings established the post-Taliban political system and proposed the 2004 constitution, respectively. However, various international and national conferences and major events where key decisions have been made about security and aid have had an uneven track record of meaningfully including women. For example, the London Conference in 2010, which focused on transitioning military leadership to Afghan forces and initiating peace talks with the Taliban, took place without any official Afghan women delegates.²⁵ The most recent peace negotiations (in 2019-20) included some Afghan women delegates in early stages, but were not far enough advanced at the time of writing to understand the degree to which women would be able play a substantive role.

Subnational Governance

Historically, Afghanistan has largely lacked formal subnational government bodies or positions (elected or otherwise). Subnational governance has been a mixture of informal individual leaders (typically elders) and traditional local councils (both standing and ad hoc), with various actors and types of bodies taking prominence at different times and varying by region and among different ethnicities. Key pieces of law and policy that provide a picture of what a future subnational government structure should look like include Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, a subsequent subnational governance policy, a set of relevant laws including the Local Administrative Law, the Municipal Law, and the Provincial Council Law, and most recently a roadmap for subnational governance reform.²⁶ Together, these envision a subnational government structure that includes individual positions and representative bodies at provincial, district, municipal, and village levels.

Despite these plans, Afghanistan has not yet completed the process of setting up its subnational government structure, namely in terms of establishing elected councils at district and sub-district levels. The lowest level of formally elected councils is the province (the Provincial Councils), whilst appointed provincial and district governors are also in place. Currently, there is no mechanism for systematic bottom-up planning that feeds into an annual planning and budgeting cycle. Annual planning and budgeting are primarily driven by national line ministries and the Ministry of Finance, with some limited influence from provincial level line departments. There is no mechanism for systematic citizen consultation and input into annual planning and budgeting.

²³ Olesen, Asta and Rebecca Haines. *Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future: Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges* Kabul: World Bank, 2014. 145.

²⁴ 'Jirga' refers to an ad hoc assembly of advisors (traditionally, elders), brought together for consultation on a particular issue. 'Loya Jirga' refers to a grand jirga, usually at the national level.

²⁵ Olesen, Asta and Rebecca Haines. *Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future: Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges* Kabul: World Bank, 2014. 151.

²⁶ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan – Citizen-centred Governance: A Roadmap for Subnational Reform.' Kabul: Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2018.

Community-driven Development and Associational Life

Notwithstanding the still highly centralized formal government system, Afghanistan is characterized by a rich tapestry of community groups. Forms of consultative bodies and collective decision-making processes are part of a long rural tradition, and traditional shuras²⁷ and jirgas continue to be widespread, often forming the backbone of local decision-making processes. Post-2001 programmes and initiatives have often sought to build on these traditions through community-driven development models.

After 2001, one of the first significant programmes launched by the government of Afghanistan, with support from the international community, was the National Solidarity Program (NSP).²⁸ NSP was a large community-driven reconstruction and development programme, which provided block grants to communities for rural development priorities and supported the establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) to oversee the use of these grants. From 2003 to 2015, approximately 35,000 CDCs were established around the country, representing about 80% of Afghanistan's communities.²⁹ In NSP, CDCs moved through a programme cycle that included the design of community development plans, the selection of project priorities, and the implementation of the selected projects. It did not, however, follow an annual process that would approximate a regularized planning and budgeting cycle; a minimum of three years lapsed between block grants, but often gaps were considerably longer.

NSP took somewhat different forms in different places, and also iterated in various ways over time. Given the informal nature of CDCs as governance bodies, there have been wide variations in election practice and CDC structure. In a detailed study, eight types of CDC election practices were identified, resulting in four types of CDCs, often distinguished by gendered structures and practices.³⁰ Most significantly for the present study, in subsequent phases of NSP, the programme strengthened quotas for women in CDCs, eventually requiring half of CDC members to be women, including half of the officer positions in each council.³¹ According to a number of studies on the impact of NSP, communities that participated in NSP are more likely to perceive women as having a role to play in community decision-making and political activity.³² It also appears that participating in NSP improved women's mobility and enhanced their interaction with each other (strengthening their social networks).³³ In general, NSP appears to have had a measurable effect on the space for women in community decision-making, contributing to normalizing a process of more inclusive consultation that may not have been present before.³⁴

In 2015, a follow-up programme called the Citizen Charter for Afghanistan Program (CCAP)³⁵ went into its design phase, and implementation began by 2016. CCAP builds on the NSP model, with its most notable

²⁷ 'Shura' refers to a council, usually with regular membership and a standing role.

²⁸ NSP was led by Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD), through a set of mostly NGO implementing partners, and supported by the World Bank and their donors.

²⁹ Ahmed, Naila. 'Afghanistan - National Solidarity Program III: Implementation Status Results Report.' Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2017. 2.

³⁰ Nixon, Hamish. 'Subnational State-building in Afghanistan.' Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008. 40 – 1.

³¹ Olesen, Asta and Rebecca Haines. *Women's Role in Afghanistan's Future: Taking Stock of Achievements and Continued Challenges* Kabul: World Bank, 2014, 150.

³² Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia & Ruben Enikolopov. 'The National Solidarity Program: Assessing the Effects of Community-Driven Development in Afghanistan.' *International Peacekeeping*, 22:4, 2015. 312.

³³ Beath, Andrew, Fotini Christia & Ruben Enikolopov. 'Empowering Women: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Afghanistan.' Kabul: World Bank, 2012. 16.

³⁴ Echavez, Chona. 'Does Women's Participation in the National Solidarity Programme Make a Difference in their Lives? A Case Study in Balkh Province.' Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2012.

³⁵ The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The World Bank Group. <http://www.artf.af/portfolio/active-portfolio-investment-projects/rural-development/citizens-charter-afghanistan-project>. Accessed 28 January 2020.

differences including: the addition of a set of service delivery oversight responsibilities for CDCs (beyond implementing their block grants), a further institutionalization of the latter more ambitious requirements for women’s participation from the last phase of NSP, and a new urban version of the programme overseen by the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG).

Alongside CDCs, other community councils have been established since 2001, most notably health shuras (also referred to as health committees) and education shuras (also referred to as education committees or school management committees). There are also a range of project-based shuras or councils – groups set up for a wide variety of purposes, timebound and linked to specific project cycles. Some version of more traditional shuras or jirgas continue to serve a purpose in most communities as well. In some communities there is significant overlap between the membership of ‘traditional’ councils and that of newer ones attached to projects, even to the point of a pre-existing shura becoming the CDC in a given community. However, in other cases, traditional shuras and CDCs operate in parallel, with a division of labour between them. In these cases, traditional shuras or jirgas often focus on issues like security, conflict mediation, and informal justice, while newer councils are more likely to focus on development planning, project oversight, and service delivery.

II. Research Purpose, Conceptual Framework, and Methodology

This research focuses on the social inclusion of women in Afghanistan’s governance processes. With the aim of addressing identified gaps in the literature, the research takes a primary focus on *informal* and *semi-formal subnational* governance processes. The research design was intended to explore which groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors are viewed as significant for women’s participation and influence. It also explores how women’s participation and influence may be changing, and the key obstructing and enabling factors that impact that process. Finally, it assesses the findings against the six pathways for women’s participation and influence identified in the central thematic paper in this research series, and offers a set of recommendations for donors, practitioners, civil society and government.

In keeping with the wider set of research products in the series, the central research question for this paper is: ‘*What are the pathways and factors that enable women to participate in and influence subnational governance processes?*’

Conceptual Framework

The core lines of enquiry for the research series were derived from CARE’s Gender Equality Framework,³⁶ which conceptualizes the factors that contribute to gender equality within three domains: *agency*, *relations*, and *structures*.

‘Agency’ refers to the capacities of women, including for example, specific skills, personal traits, formal education, and awareness of rights. ‘Relations’ refers to the ways in which personal and group bonds and interactions with others can limit or support

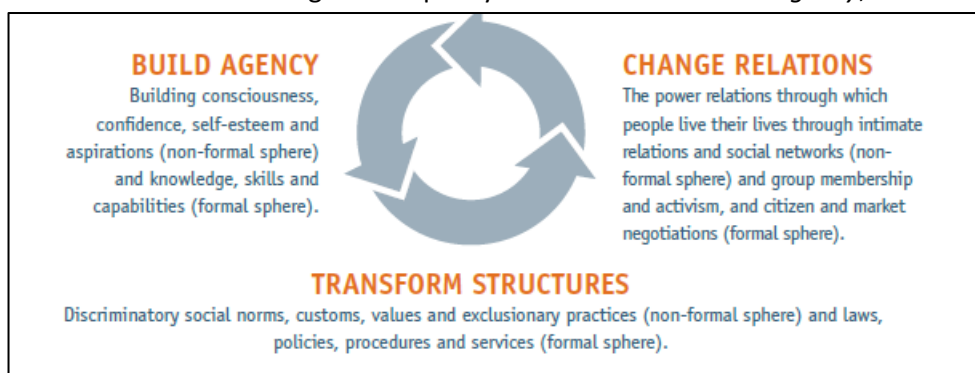


Figure 1: CARE’s Gender Equality Framework

³⁶ CARE International. ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Voice: Guidance Note.’ CARE International, 2018. 7.

gender equality aims. 'Structures' relates to both formal laws, rules, and policies, along with informal customs, beliefs, and norms that impact gender equality outcomes. Questions were included within the research tools that explore women's participation in local governance within each domain. Likewise, the research assesses the identified barriers and enablers against the three domains of the Gender Equality Framework. For a list of the key research sub-questions in each domain, see Annex I.

One of the challenges faced within any research on social inclusion is to ensure that the simple *presence* of marginalized groups in decision-making spaces is not equated with them having *power* or *influence*. For CARE, '*meaningful participation*' requires that people not only have access to, or are present within, decision-making processes, but also are able to *actively* participate in and have *influence* over their format and outcomes.³⁷ In order to address this challenge, the research series applied a participation spectrum, informed by the work of Anne-Marie Goetz.^{38,39} Based on Goetz' work, this paper distinguishes between 'access', 'presence', and 'influence'.⁴⁰ 'Access' focuses on opening arenas of influence to socially-excluded groups, formally or legally, but potentially also investing in the social permission and resources for their participation (depending on how robust the access is). 'Presence' entails the physical or numerical occupation of a decision-making space or process, and may range from a small minority presence to a critical mass or a majority. 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. Influence has been achieved when robust access and presence culminate in the tangible achievement of the goals of socially excluded groups. It is therefore possible to say that all three levels reflect degrees of social inclusion, but that the most substantive forms of participation lead to influence.⁴¹ 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.

Research Methods

This research began with a review of context-specific literature, policies, and project documents related to Afghanistan's subnational governance system, most relevant programming, and women's voice and influence in public affairs in Afghanistan. This country-specific review complemented the wider literature review conducted for the foregoing thematic paper in the research series.

Data collection tools were developed based on the central research framework and key lines of enquiry for the wider research series. Data collection methods were qualitative, including a set of focus group discussions

³⁷ CARE International (forthcoming). 'Transforming Leadership, Challenging Injustice: Position Paper on CARE's approach to equal voice and leadership for poor and marginalised women in public life and decision-making.' London: CIUK, 2020.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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'.

⁴⁰ While this framing is nearly identical to the spectrum used in the rest of this research series, the central thematic paper in this series refers to 'access', '*participation*', and 'influence'. For this paper on Afghanistan, the middle term has been replaced with 'presence'. This adjustment was made to highlight that '*participation*' can happen at different points on the spectrum, but in more or less meaningful ways, while '*presence*' focuses on the physical or numerical occupation of a decision-making space. This framing is in line with CARE's forthcoming position paper on equal voice and leadership for poor and marginalised women in public life and decision-making (cited above), which itself makes reference to the 'ladder of participation' in Arnstein 1969, 216 – 224.

⁴¹ Pinnington, Rosie. '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. 9.

(FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). FGDs and KIIs were semi-structured, with primarily open questions. Several multiple-choice questions were also included.

Scheduling and logistical coordination for data collection was provided by CARE Afghanistan and EVC partners AWRC, HRRAC, and WCLRF. Data was primarily collected by a team of eight female and eight male external enumerators overseen by ASK Consulting, with no CARE or partner staff present during FGDs or KIIs. However, national level KIIs, along with provincial level KIIs in Balkh province (in Mazar-i-Sharif), were conducted by the lead researcher, accompanied by a translator. Translation was provided by CARE or partner staff, depending on the interview. In all cases at the community level, female data collectors facilitated FGDs and conducted KIIs with women, whilst male data collectors facilitated FGDs and conducted KIIs with men. However, in a few cases female data collectors conducted KIIs with male government or civil society representatives at the district level or above. The lead researcher (a woman) conducted interviews with both women and men at national and provincial levels. FGDs were facilitated by a two-person team, with one person facilitating the discussion and the other observing and taking notes. KIIs were typically conducted by one person, who both facilitated the discussion and took notes (with the exception of those conducted by the lead researcher, for whom translation was provided by another team member).

The FGDs and KIIs were audio recorded in most cases, after receiving consent from participants. If any participant did not consent to the audio recording, then only notes were taken. Depending on the community, FGDs were conducted in a mixture of three languages: Dari, Pashto and Hazaragi. KIIs were conducted in Dari, Pashto, and English.⁴² Following data collection, recordings were transcribed, and transcriptions were translated into English.

Ahead of data collection, the study's lead researcher conducted a two-day training in Kabul for key members of the data collection team along with the research coordinating team from CARE and partner staff. The workshop's aims were to ensure comprehension of the key research themes, questions, and data collection tools, while also reinforcing good research practices within the data collection team. Before use in communities within the research sample, members of the data collection team field-tested the data collection tools in Bagرامي district (in Kabul Province). The field test consisted of one female FGD and one male FGD, along with one female KII and one male KII.

The data was analyzed by a single analyst (the lead consultant) and managed manually in Excel. An initial basic coding system was devised deductively but evolved considerably during coding based on an inductive process. Coded data was then analyzed by frequency of types of responses and cross-referenced with key respondent characteristics like gender and location.

Sample

Overall, data collection took place at four levels, including community, district, provincial, and national levels, with all FGDs taking place at the community level and KIIs taking place at all four levels. At the community level, data was collected in ten communities in eight districts, across four provinces (Kabul, Parwan, Balkh, and Khost), spanning three different regions. The districts were selected due to their prior inclusion in the EVC programme. Communities in each district were selected due to their potential to demonstrate a degree of contrast and diversity, as compared with other selected communities across the study sample. Factors including majority ethnicity, relative proximity to the district centre, relative education levels, relative access

⁴² Some national level KIIs were conducted directly in English with the lead researcher, in cases in which respondents felt comfortable doing so.

to services, existence (or non-existence) of an active CDC/CDC women's committee, along with security conditions, were considered.

In each community, two FGDs with women and two FGDs with men were conducted.⁴³ Efforts were made to create contrasting groups, where one female and one male FGD in each community were made up of community leaders and active participants in local governance processes, while the other female and male FGDs in each community were made up of a wider set of community members who were not notable leaders or active participants. In some cases, the former type of FGD (with leaders and active participants) was a pre-existing group (e.g. the FGD was with an existing shura or committee), while in others they were a mixture of people in leadership or active public roles, but not necessarily participating in the same local governance body or associative group.

KIIs were conducted at community level with female and male adults and a few female and male youth. Efforts were made to include religious, traditional, and opinion leaders. KIIs were also conducted at district, provincial, and national levels, with members of the government, civil society, and a few representatives of international institutions. While efforts were made to ensure gender parity across the sample, not enough female government staff members at subnational levels were interviewed to draw conclusions about how their views might differ from male government staff members. KII participants were identified through purposive sampling by CARE Afghanistan, EVC partners, and the lead researcher.

In total, 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 KIIs 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.

Limitations of the Research

Due to the broad exploratory nature of the study, it was not possible to triangulate claims of *influence*. For example, a study focused entirely on women's influence through CDCs could have attempted to trace minutes of women's CDC meetings to better understand the main priorities discussed by women in that space, and compare that analysis with how the local CDC's budget was actually used. This could have triangulated women's *perceptions* of their influence with the degree to which community level budgets were actually committed to their priorities. Instead, the study relies on research respondents' perceptions of which spaces afford them substantial opportunities for influence, which of their barriers are most significant, etc.

To some extent, a selection bias is likely built into the research. CARE and its EVC partners selected the communities and individuals who would be part of the study. Some criteria (as detailed above) were followed to build diversity into the sample and to ensure that not all participants were actively engaged in local governance leadership (and CARE-led programming) in their communities. The collected data reflects this intended diversity. However, respondent selection was not formally randomized, and particularly for KIIs, purposive sampling sought out well-informed people likely to have a clear perspective on women's participation and influence in local decision-making. The study was also unable to include some of Afghanistan's most insecure areas due to risk to the data collection team, inevitably building a 'relatively secure areas' bias into the research. For example, no communities within opposition-held areas were included in the sample. Still, communities included in the research frequently discussed security challenges.

⁴³ Exceptions to this pattern occurred in Bagrami and Bagram districts. See Annex I for more details.

The data collection process encountered challenges and was substantially delayed. The first round of data submitted to the lead researcher contained a number of interviews that were of limited analytical value, either skipping a high number of questions, reflecting a misunderstanding of the questions and topics on the part of the interviewees, or being generally difficult to understand. CARE and partner staff spent considerable extra time checking transcripts and translations, and in several cases, the data collection team chose alternative communities and conducted new FGDs and KIIs. In part, the data collection tools were likely too long for the density of the topic and could have been simplified by reducing the overall length or replacing some open-ended questions with multiple choice ones. However, enumerator capacity was also an issue.

Most of the FGDs and a significant number of the KIIs were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then translated. The audio recording proved to be a critical tool, particularly given the need to re-transcribe and re-translate some of the FGDs and KIIs, to improve clarity. However, the presence of recording equipment can influence the kind of responses that are given. All participants were given the opportunity to decline to be recorded, and some of them chose this option. However, for those who agreed to recording, it is possible that they chose not to mention certain sensitive topics due to their awareness of being recorded.

III. Findings

This section discusses the main findings for all groups. Findings are presented in two main sub-sections:

- those related to community level respondents, including both community leaders and regular community members (drawn from FGDs and KIIs); and
- those related to formal government officials (drawn from KIIs with government staff at the district, provincial, and national levels).

Qualitative reflections from individuals representing civil society organizations and international institutions are included throughout to enhance understanding of specific issues or provide alternative perspectives. At the community level, special attention is paid to comparing the perspectives of female and male respondents.⁴⁴ Regional differences are reported throughout, where they were significant; where reflections on regional differences are not provided, this is because no clear regional patterns emerged in the data.

⁴⁴ As noted, while efforts were made to ensure gender parity across the sample, not enough female government staff members at subnational levels were interviewed to draw conclusions about how their views might differ from male government staff members. Consequently, quantitative data for government staff has only be calculated and reported for male interviewees. Qualitative data from female government staff is shared where possible/relevant.

a. Women's participation in local governance: Community level

Box II: Women's participation in local governance – Perspectives from community members and informal leaders

- Community members most often named **the CDC** as a key decision-making space at community level. CDCs were most prominent in Balkh province (named in 100% of FGDs).
- **Women CDC members and CDC women's committees** were named as a key decision-making channel in 63% of all Balkh FGDs (more than twice the frequency of other provinces). Overall, women named the CDC women's committees or women CDC members as **the most likely group they would turn to** when they want to influence a public decision.
- 25% of male FGDs disagreed among themselves about whether **women participate in public decision-making in their communities at all**.
- In nearly a third of female FGDs, all participants agreed that they **do not know the key public decision-making spaces in their community**. No male respondents said the same.
- A large majority (88%) of women's FGDs stated that their **primary source of information** about public affairs in their community is their **male family members**.
- No women at community level mentioned any governance bodies or processes **above the community level**, as a key decision-making space or a primary place for women's influence.
- Religious leaders were never named as key decision-makers by any study respondents. However, 44% of male community leader key informants believed that mullahs do have **considerable influence over the attitudes of others**, related to women's participation. While significant, this is a lower result than for other actors (like family members and community elders), and it varied considerably by region.
- Male FGD members **significantly over-estimated** the degree to which women view education and health shuras as a likely space for influence, most notably related to the health shuras.
- Almost a third of women's FGDs viewed **decisions about marriages** (of their children) to be critical areas of decision-making for women. This issue was **never mentioned by any male research participant**.
- Women and men **diverged significantly** in their views on **women's involvement in conflict resolution**. More than one third of women's FGDs named conflict resolution as a key area for their community involvement, while 75% of men's FGDs said it was actually *impossible* for women to be involved in conflict resolution.
- Over half of male FGDs qualified their support for women's participation in community decision-making. Half said that women should only participate in issues **considered relevant to women**, and half said women should only participate once they have been **properly informed and educated**.
- Men's FGDs were more than three times as likely as women's FGDs to assert that **insecurity was a substantial impediment to women's participation in public decision-making**.
- In comparison to women, male respondents held a **much stronger belief that women's formal education is decisive** in their ability to have a voice in public decision-making.

Key Decision-making Spaces and Mechanisms

Community level governance can take a variety of shapes in Afghanistan, particularly in the absence of some of the planned bodies in the formal system. Consequently, FGDs opened with a question aimed at identifying

the key public decision-making spaces or channels that communities were using in each area. A wide variety of responses were mentioned throughout the discussions, demonstrating the heterogeneity of decision-making spaces in Afghan communities. These spaces and processes are summarized in Table I below.

Overall, the most named decision-making spaces were CDCs, mentioned by 24 FGD groups (75% of all FGDs). CDCs were mentioned most frequently in Balkh province, where they were named as key decision-making spaces in all eight FGDs that took place in the province. This is somewhat unsurprising, as community profiles demonstrate that all eight of the communities originally targeted for the study currently have functional CDCs.⁴⁵

Education shuras/committees and health shuras/committees were the next most commonly mentioned local governance spaces (although mentioned considerably less frequently than the CDCs). These were named by 12 (38%) and 11 (34%) of FGDs, respectively. Formal elections (for either president, members of parliament, or members of provincial councils), were also named by 11 (34%) of FGD groups.⁴⁶ While education and health shuras were mentioned at about the same frequency in Kabul, Balkh and Khost provinces (either in three or four of the eight FGDs conducted in each province), they were only mentioned in one FGD each in Parwan province, suggesting that they may be less prominent mechanisms in the Parwan districts included in the study. In Khost, formal elections were only named as a key space for local governance decision-making by one (male) FGD – the lowest frequency among the provinces in the sample.

Other relatively common decision-making spaces or channels, in order of frequency, included CDC women's committees, mentioned in 10 FGDs (31%); seeking influence through individual traditional leaders, mentioned in eight FGDs (25%); other shuras, mentioned in 7 FGDs (22%);⁴⁷ District Development Assemblies (DDAs), mentioned in six FGDs (19%); Community Advocacy Groups (CAGs – advocacy groups established by the EVC programme), also mentioned in 19% of FGDs, and various unspecified conflict resolution mechanisms, mentioned in 19% of FGDs. In small numbers of cases, FGD participants mentioned Community Score Card processes and other advocacy groups or women's groups. CDC women's committees were mentioned most in Balkh (in five FGDs, or 63%); in fact, they were mentioned more than twice as often in Balkh than in any other province.

Despite six mullahs being physically present in FGDs, religious leaders were not explicitly identified as key channels for public decision-making by any FGD groups. However, male community leaders who acted as key informants were separately asked to identify the most influential actors when it comes to women's participation in community decision-making. Nearly half (44%) believed that religious leaders are among the most influential actors in determining the degree to which women can participate in public life in communities. So, while religious leaders may themselves not be key decision-makers, they do appear to have some notable influence over attitudes that relate to women's participation (though overall they were not considered to be among the *most* influential actors). This is discussed more below, in the sub-section on 'Attitudes toward Women's Participation and Influence.'

⁴⁵ For the purposes of the study, a functional CDC was considered to be a CDC that had met at least three times in the last six months.

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that voting in presidential elections had recently finished (on 28 September 2019) at the time of data collection (in October – November 2019), so the electoral process may have been particularly fresh in the minds of research participants.

⁴⁷ There is some indication within the qualitative data that FGD groups may have under-reported the relevance of traditional shuras in response to this question, perhaps because they were aware they were speaking with data collectors working on behalf of NGOs, who might be more interested to hear about 'development' decision-making, as opposed to informal justice or conflict management (more likely to be handled by traditional shuras). For example, groups often did not name traditional shuras in answer to the first questions of the FGD (asking about which decision-making spaces are most prominent in their area), but later gave anecdotal examples of traditional shuras in action.

Women’s FGDs most frequently named CDCs as key local public decision-making spaces (in nine FGDs, or 56%), while eight FGDs (50%) specified CDC women’s committees.⁴⁸ Smaller proportions of women’s FGDs mentioned several other groups, with the most common being Community Advocacy Groups (38%), followed by education shuras (25%), and Community Score Card processes (25%). No women’s FGD groups or community level KIIs with women mentioned any governance bodies or processes above the community level. There were five FGDs in the overall sample (16%) in which all members agreed that they do not know the key decision-making spaces in their community. All five of these were female FGDs. This represents nearly a third (31%) of the female FGDs conducted for this study.

All of the male FGDs (16) mentioned CDCs as a key decision-making space, but only two groups (13%) named the CDC women’s committees or women’s shuras specifically. Male groups mentioned education shuras, health shuras, and formal election processes in equal proportion (each were named in eight FGDs, or 50%). All of the cases in which individual traditional leaders or elders were specified as critical decision-making channels (in eight FGDs in total), or in which traditional shuras were named as key decision-making spaces (in seven FGDs in total), occurred in male FGDs (50% and 44% of male FGDs, respectively).

Both female and male FGDs mentioned groups or processes that had been set up related to some specific localized projects. However, they mentioned different ones; there was very little overlap in the local project-specific groups mentioned. For example, male FGDs mentioned shuras that had been set up by a community safety project (in two FGDs), youth shuras (in two FGDs), an environment shura (in one FGD), and an agriculture shura (in one FGD), none of which were mentioned in any female FGDs. Only one male group named the Community Advocacy Group as a significant decision-making body in their community, and no male FGDs mentioned any other advocacy group or women’s group. Women’s FGDs named Community Advocacy Groups in six FGDs and other advocacy groups in two FGDs. Community Score Card processes also registered more strongly as spaces for influence in women’s FGDs; they were mentioned in four FGDs (or 25%), while only mentioned in one male FGD.

While many communities clearly had an array of groups, committees, individual positions and processes that constitute an informal local governance system, participants often described them as performing complementary roles that were well-understood in the community. For example, one male FGD participant from Parwan noted: ‘Shura-related issues will be discussed in shura meetings, and malik⁴⁹-related issues will be discussed with him directly.’ While the speaker did not actually specify which issues would be managed by which council or person, the other FGD participants in his group agreed and reaffirmed his assertion. Similar comments were made by male participants throughout the research, indicating that men often regard the division of labour between local governance actors as obvious and self-evident.

Table I summarizes the local governance and public decision-making spaces and processes identified as significant in FGDs in the study, listed in descending order of frequency.

Table I: Summary of Key Local Decision-making Spaces/Mechanisms

	Female FGDs	Male FGDs	All FGDs
Most frequent	• CDCs	• CDCs	• CDCs

⁴⁸ While not mentioning CDC women’s committees could be an indication that one does not exist in the community, or is not seen as a space for influence, it could also mean that women participate alongside men in a joint CDC in that community (so there is no need for a separate women’s committee). However, in rural areas, this is most often possible in Hazara communities, in which social norms around gender segregated meetings are often less strong.

⁴⁹ A malik is an individual traditional community leader or head of community, common in some areas of the country.

(mentioned in ≥ 50% of FGDs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDC women’s committees/CDC women members/women’s shuras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education shuras • Health shuras • Formal elections • Individual traditional leaders 	
Less frequent (mentioned in ≥ 20% of FGDs, but ≤ 49% of FGDs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No information about local decision-making spaces or processes • Community Advocacy Groups • Education shuras 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional shuras • District Development Assemblies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education shuras • Health shuras • Formal elections • CDC women’s committees/CDC women members/women’s shuras • Individual traditional leaders • Traditional shuras
Rare (mentioned in ≤ 19% of FGDs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health shuras • Various conflict resolution mechanisms • Formal elections • Community Score Card processes • Other advocacy or women’s groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various conflict resolution mechanisms • CDC women’s committees/CDC women members/women’s shuras • Community Advocacy Groups • Community Score Card processes • Community safety project shuras • Youth shuras • Environment shura • Agriculture shura 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Development Assemblies • Various conflict resolution mechanisms • Community Advocacy Groups • CDC women’s committees/CDC women members/women’s shuras • Community Score Card processes • Other advocacy/women’s groups

Participation in Key Decision-making Spaces

Among the 32 FGDs in the study, 11 groups included only participants who characterized themselves as active in at least some of the named local decision-making spaces. On the other hand, in eight groups no participants self-identified as active in any community decision-making processes. For the remainder (13 groups), participants were mixed, with some saying they had never been involved in any community decision-making processes, but others self-identifying as active in some of the mentioned groups. Of the 24 groups that included at least some self-identifying active participants, 10 were female FGDs, while 14 were male FGDs.

Overall, of the 202 individual FGD participants in the study, 148 (73%) had personally participated in at least one of the named decision-making mechanisms in some way. This group was close to evenly split by sex – 47% were women and 52% were men. This group represents a spectrum of participation, including people who are regular members or leaders of one of the named groups, along with those who had participated by attending meetings organized by one of these groups, or had been active in a timebound process.

Among these active community members, 82 individuals (representing 41% of all FGD participants) identified as key leaders or regularly active group members at the time of data collection. Among these, there were 33 men and 49 women, demonstrating the concerted effort made to seek out women who are active participants in community public life. Overall, four heads of shuras, two maliks, and six mullahs participated in FGDs. Notably, only three of the female FGD participants across the four women’s FGDs in Khost province (which included 23 participants in total) self-identified as regular group members in existing community groups. So,

although 25% of the study's FGDs were conducted in Khost, only 6% of all women leaders or regularly active group members who participated in the study's FGDs came from there. This likely indicates that the task of identifying publicly active women is more challenging in Khost.

Of the 24 FGDs which included people who self-identified as active in a public decision-making group or process, 16 of them (67%) included participants who had been involved in some way in their local CDC. Additionally, 10 (42%) of these FGDs included individuals who had participated in their local education shura, while seven (29%) included those who had participated in their local health shura. In nine (38%) of these FGDs, at least some people had participated in formal elections. Again, participation represents a wide variation of intensity, from formal and regular group members to those who participated in a single event.

For female FGDs in particular, CDC women's committees were the most common local governance groups that participants had personally been part of, mentioned in nine of the 10 women's FGDs (90%) that included self-identifying active participants in local governance. The other most common spaces that women FGD members had actually participated in were Community Advocacy Groups (named in nine FGDs), education shuras (named in five FGDs), and Community Score Card processes (also named in five FGDs). Small numbers of women also mentioned personally participating in conflict resolution processes (named in three FGDs), other advocacy groups or shuras (named in two FGDs), elections, and health shuras (each named in two FGDs).

For male FGDs, CDCs were the most common form of personal participation, mentioned in 93% of the 14 groups that included people who self-identify as active in local governance. Male participants also mentioned taking part in formal elections (named in seven FGDs), and education and health shuras (each named in five FGDs). Small numbers of men also mentioned personally participating in conflict resolution processes (named in two FGDs), and other shuras, a DDA, and a Community Score Card process, each named in one FGD.

Both female and male FGD participants were also asked to name the spaces or channels that they believe women *are most likely to use* when they want to influence a local decision, regardless of whether they view this space to be among the most significant, or whether or not it was a mechanism they had personally tried to use. Firstly, four of the male FGDs (25%) disagreed among themselves about whether women participate in public decision-making in their communities at all. Among those that believed women do participate, men said that women were most likely to use the education and health shuras (named by 100% and 88% of male FGDs, respectively). In third place, men named the CDC women's committees or female CDC members in 10 FGDs (63%) as a group that women are likely to turn to when they want to influence public decision-making.

Female FGD participants named the CDC women's committees or women CDC members most frequently (in eleven FGDs, or 69%), as the channel they are most likely to use when they want to influence a public decision. Secondly, they named education shuras and Community Advocacy Groups (each in seven FGDs, or 44%). Female FGDs only named health shuras in three cases (19%), as compared with 88% of male FGDs. Overall, male FGD members significantly over-estimated the degree which women view both the education and health shuras as a likely space for their influence, most notably related to the health shuras.

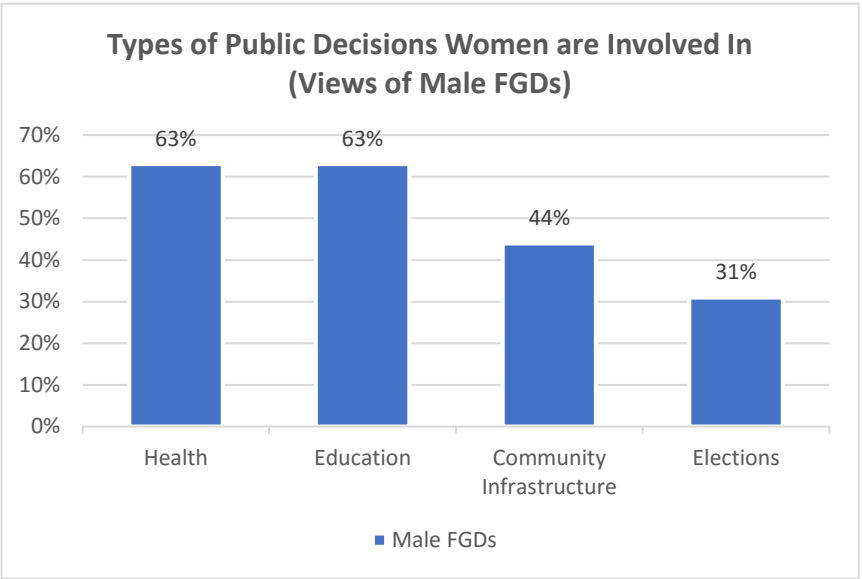
No FGD participants mentioned women approaching elders or religious leaders directly (or through their wives) when they want to influence a community decision. However, in 25% of FGDs (one female FGD and three male FGDs) participants described women influencing community decision-making indirectly, through their own male relatives (as one of the most likely mechanisms for their influence).

Furthermore, no FGDs named any group, person, or process above the community level, as a channel for influence that women are likely to use. One community level key informant from Kabul province explicitly

stated that any decisions or local governance processes outside of the community would be *unlikely* to have the involvement of women from the community level. However, in responses to later questions, FGDs often talked about local CSOs (which are based outside of individual communities) as critical enablers of women’s influence generally, and as a support to the ability of FGD participants to achieve their own goals in influencing local governance decision-making. CSO key informants described concrete examples of facilitating community-based women’s groups to interface with district and provincial level service delivery bureaucrats, to discuss service access challenges. For a further discussion on the role of CSOs, see the sub-section on ‘Enabling Factors’ below.

Types of Decisions Women are Involved In

Beyond groups and processes, FGDs were asked about which *topics* and *types of decisions* women are most involved in. Men named health and education issues as the most likely areas for women’s involvement (each mentioned in 10 male FGDs, or 63%). Male key informants from communities reaffirmed this view, where 18 key informants (of 27, representing 67%) said that women are involved in decisions around education service



delivery, while 15 (representing 56%) said women are involved in decisions in the health sector. To a lesser extent, men felt that women are involved in infrastructure projects (mentioned in 44% of male FGDs, but just 7% of male community level KIIs) and development project selection processes (mentioned in 38% of male FGDs and 30% of male community level KIIs), along with decision-making via formal elections (mentioned in 31% of male FGDs, but just 7% of male KIIs).

Figure 2: Types of Public Decisions Women are Involved In (Views of Male FGDs)

Throughout the study, men also frequently referred generically to women being involved in decision-making around ‘women’s issues’, rather than ‘men’s issues’. For example, one male key informant from Khost province noted, ‘Those activities that belong to men, we do not give those to women.’ While much less frequently, some women also articulated this sense that gendered divisions of public decision-making were self-evident. For example, a woman from a Balkh women’s FGD stated that women are involved in ‘those issues that belong to women.’ This kind of response was difficult to analyze, as it obscures the details of what might be included in ‘women’s issues’.

In some cases, it appeared that men simply did not know, or were not concerned with, what ‘women’s issues’ might entail. For example, in one case, when asked which topics women make decisions about, a male FGD participant who was also a member of one of the local shuras said, ‘I don’t know – it relates to women. We are not among them to know.’ Another participant in the same FGD stated, ‘We have never sat with women to ask about their goals – this is not our goal. We never had meetings with women.’ These remarks indicate that some men simply do not have information about the kinds of topics discussed in women’s meetings/groups, and also often do not believe it to be relevant to them. This is particularly notable from the male shura member quoted above, as it indicates that shuras or committees that are gender-segregated may not have effective modes of sharing information between them. In fact, in some areas it may even be

considered *inappropriate* for men to take an interest in the issues women discuss in segregated local associative spaces.

Like men, women also named education issues as the most common topic for women’s involvement in decision-making (mentioned by 13 female FGDs, representing 81%). One female FGD participant from Balkh elaborated by saying, ‘If students do not go to school, we discuss their absence in our meetings and find out the sources of the problem. Then we discuss this issue with the family and school.’ Secondly, 11 female FGDs (69%) named decisions around community infrastructure as an area for women’s involvement in decision-making. In one FGD in Kabul province, a woman stated that women are most involved in ‘decisions related to building and cleaning streets, building canals and bridges....and bringing clean water systems.’ Both healthcare issues and project selection processes were highlighted by female FGDs as well (each mentioned in 50% of female FGDs). As with the above discussion of women’s likelihood of using education and health shuras to influence decision-making, women indicated a greater likelihood of being involved in education decisions over health decisions.

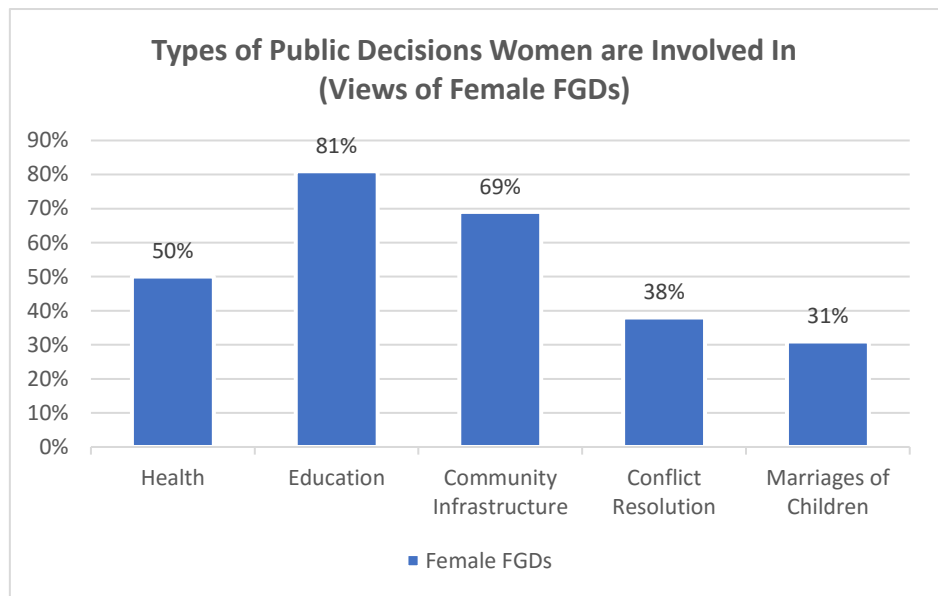


Figure 3: Types of Public Decisions Women are Involved In (Views of Female FGDs)

Five female FGDs (representing 31% of the female FGD sample) noted that decisions about the marriages of children (and

sometimes their divorces) were critical areas for the involvement of women. However, one female key informant from a community in Khost stated, ‘for the marriages of girls, all the decisions will be taken by men, and this is because women do not know about their rights.’ No male groups mentioned decisions related to the marriages or divorces of children at any point in the study.

Interestingly, 38% of female FGDs (six groups) emphasized women’s involvement in conflict resolution, mostly providing examples of intra- and inter-family conflicts they had been involved in resolving. One head of a women’s shura, participating in an FGD, noted, ‘If there is a conflict in the village, we sit together and solve the problem. If there is any problem inside families, women share it with the women’s shura and we solve it.’ One women’s FGD also mentioned women’s involvement in inter-communal or inter-ethnic conflict mediation. Notably however, Khost was the only province in which no female FGDs mentioned women having a role in conflict resolution.

By contrast, only one male FGD mentioned women being involved in conflict management of any kind. In this case, a male FGD member stated that ‘In some conflict resolution between two villages, women are participating.’ In fact, male groups were likely to say that women specifically *cannot* be involved in conflict management. Male FGDs were asked whether there are any specific types of issues that they believe women *cannot* be involved in, and the single most common answer was that women cannot be involved in conflict resolution (mentioned by 12 male FGDs, or 75%). For example, one male FGD participant said that women

cannot be involved in 'peace and dispute settlement', while another stated that when it comes to '...conflicts in the villages, only men sit with each other and solve the problem. There are no women influencing in such issues.' All 12 of these FGDs talked about the impossibility of women's involvement in inter-communal conflict, but 10 of them also named inter-household or intra-household conflict as issues in which women cannot be involved.

It appears that some of the discrepancy between the opinions of women and men regarding women's involvement in conflict resolution relates to what constitutes a 'conflict', from their respective points of view. While few specific examples were given, several men listed conflicts such as murder cases and land disputes. When asked why women cannot participate in conflict resolution, one male FGD group described it as 'too dangerous'. This may indicate that they are at times referring to armed or violent conflicts or those involving major parties to Afghanistan's wider war.

However, this does not appear to be a full explanation, particularly since so many men's groups also referred to the impossibility of women's involvement in inter-household and intra-household conflicts. One male participant in an FGD in Khost province stated that, 'Women cannot and are not capable of solving such issues', while a male FGD participant in Balkh said that, 'In conflict resolution, women do not participate because they do not have the knowledge.' A woman from an FGD in Balkh agreed, by saying that women do not participate in conflict resolution, '...because they do not have the knowledge for these sorts of issues. Women do not have information and feel themselves weak for such cases.' It appears that perceptions of gendered skills and capacities play a role in views about women's involvement in conflict resolution.

Another contributing factor to limitations placed on women's participation in conflict resolution (and the *perception* that they do not participate) could be that discussions related to major violent conflict often take place in decision-making *spaces* that are traditionally attended only by male community elders. For example, in some areas it would be typical to call a *jirga* to resolve a significant local conflict. Regardless of which issues are on the agenda for a given *jirga*, or what kind of conflict might be discussed, the *jirga* is traditionally a male-only space. One male key informant affirmed this by directly stating: 'Women are not involved in *jirgas*.' Similarly, when asked about what kinds of decision-making women *cannot* participate in, a key informant from the government in Khost said, 'For example, meetings in mosques include decisions that women do not influence.' In these statements, the focus is less on whether women are involved in decision-making around certain *issues*, and more about whether women can be present in certain *spaces*.

However, despite research participants asserting that *jirgas* and mosques are spaces in which women do not participate, examples emerged from the research which indicate this is not always true. A woman in an FGD in Kabul province stated that some women do attend 'ethnic' *jirgas* in her area,⁵⁰ and a female key informant in Balkh (a community leader), gave extensive examples of her own role in holding community meetings inside of her local mosque and attending regional *jirgas* as one of a group of female delegates.⁵¹

Other research participants indicated that women's participation is also linked to *who* is present in a decision-making space. For example, one male FGD participant stated that, 'when there is a conflict in which men get together with the *malik* and district authorities also participate, then women do not participate.' However, as

⁵⁰ In a dedicated focus group discussion, EVC CSO partners discussed this issue and concluded that, while traditional *jirgas* typically have very little participation of women, women do sometimes attend but sit to the side and cannot speak. However, as noted in the introduction section, there is a precedent of women attending and actively participating in contemporary (government organized) *Loya Jirgas*.

⁵¹ This woman was the head of her local CDC in a primarily Hazara neighbourhood in Mazar-i-Sharif (though she herself was Pashtun).

with decision-making spaces, there may be more flexibility in practice than these kinds of statements suggest. For example, CSO interviewees provided concrete examples of facilitating meetings between women from Community Advocacy Groups and district and provincial authorities, to discuss service delivery problems.

Despite the likely contribution of gendered segregation norms to restricting women's involvement in conflict resolution, more than one third of women's FGDs in the study still gave concrete examples of resolving conflicts (as individuals and in groups). One female key informant (the head of a CDC) gave extensive examples of leading dispute resolution between groups of men in her community, successfully resolving tensions related to tax collection corruption, how road repair funds were being used, and theft of community-owned infrastructure supplies. She conducted dispute resolution meetings both outside (in the street/public space) and in the mosque, and demonstrated photos of herself doing this. However conflict is defined, the study data indicates that men under-recognize (or under-acknowledge) women's contributions to conflict management.

In smaller numbers of groups, men also mentioned decisions related to infrastructure projects (in three FGDs), and security and justice issues (in three FGDs), as types of decisions that women *cannot* be involved in. In several cases, men generalized that women cannot be involved in the 'village's important decisions.' By contrast, a woman in a Balkh FGD stated, 'Women should participate in those issues that are most important, and those that are most complicated, and men cannot solve alone – issues at the village or district levels.'

Perception of Effectiveness

Among the ten women's FGDs that included women who had participated in local public decision-making mechanisms, seven FGDs (70%) agreed they had been able to achieve their goals through these processes. There was disagreement among participants in the other three female FGDs (30%) as to whether it had actually been possible to achieve their goals. For those women who felt it had been possible to achieve their goals, they said they had been able to do so primarily within CDCs/CDC women's committees, Community Advocacy Groups, and education shuras.

Some female FGD participants elaborated on why they believe they were able to be successful. Several women credited having a group of other women to work with. For example, one female FGD participant from Balkh explained, '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.' One male member of civil society in Khost reaffirmed this by noting, 'First, only one woman cannot raise her voice. If a woman wants to raise her voice – for example, if a school is going to be constructed and a woman wants it to be constructed in a certain place – she must form a group to go ahead and raise their voices.' Another woman explained the value of a women-only space: 'We can raise our voices there (in the women's group) because the members are all women.'

Among men who had participated in any of the public decision-making mechanisms, only five of 14 FGDs (36%) agreed that they had been able to achieve their goals, while there was disagreement within a further eight FGDs (57%). One male FGD stated unanimously that they had not been able to achieve their goals through their participation. For those who felt it had been possible to achieve their goals, similar to the female FGDs, the men most often named the CDCs as the space where this was possible. The second most frequent space named was the education shuras.

Male groups also demonstrated a strong value for collective decision-making and group-based local governance. Six male members of a Balkh FGD described why they felt they had been successful in achieving their goals in their local CDC. In turn, they mentioned 'discussions and meetings', 'consulting and group work', 'collective work and voting', 'meeting and sharing ideas with others', 'collective decisions', and 'teamwork.'

One specified, ‘When I participated in the Citizen Charter programme, consulting and group decision-making helped us to achieve our goals.’ While it appears that there is some sense that collective action might be *essential* for women (at least in some areas), because they may not be heard *without* a group, men also demonstrated a strong social value for deliberative, non-individualized decision-making. This shared value of group-based influencing could be a useful social norm building block to gain men’s support for women’s roles in local governance.

Motivations for Participation

When asked about why they participated in local governance spaces and processes, the most common response among men, discussed in fifteen FGDs (94%), was a desire to change their communities and the country. Participants in male FGDs also frequently mentioned participating out of a sense of duty (discussed in 11 FGDs, or 69%), participating to achieve a specific development goal (discussed in nine FGDs, or 56%), and participating in order to learn or access information (discussed in eight FGDs, or 50%).

Participants in female FGDs spoke most frequently about wanting to learn and access information (in eight FGDs, or 50%), along with a sense of duty, a desire to change their communities, and a desire to learn about women’s rights (each mentioned in seven groups, or 44%). Some female FGD members also mentioned participating in order to improve for their children, and to stand up for their daughters in particular (discussed in six groups, or 38%). Five groups (31%) mentioned participating in order to gain enhanced voice and influence in their communities. Other less frequent reasons included the desire to model positive behaviour in the community, a desire to seek greater independence, and a desire to avoid negative social practices. One young woman described wanting to help other women: ‘Because I was an educated girl, that is why they allowed me to share my ideas and participate in meetings. Women motivated me – I used to collect their ideas and share them with men.’

For those women who *had not* participated in any community decision-making spaces, the two most common reasons given (for not participating) were that: participants had a lack of information or were not invited to participate, or that they were not allowed to participate by their family members (each reason was mentioned in five FGDs, or 31%). Very few male participants gave any reason for not participating, and there were no clear patterns in the few reasons given.

Attitudes toward Women’s Participation and Influence

Men at community level were asked about whether they felt that women *should* participate in public decision-making, and if yes, whether they felt women should participate *as much as* men and in the *same or different roles*. In 11 FGDs, at least some men affirmed that women should participate in local governance processes, with no caveats (69%). Only one of these eleven FGDs was located in Khost province.

That said, only in two of these FGDs (13%) was there consensus on this point. In nine FGDs (56%), at least some men added qualifiers to their responses. For example, one of the most common responses was that women should participate, but only in sectors or related to issues considered relevant to women (mentioned in eight male FGDs, or 50%). As discussed above, precisely which issues are considered to be ‘women’s issues’ or relevant for women’s participation was often unclear. For example, one FGD participant said that, ‘If there is an issue for which women’s presence is required, then women’s participation is a must.’ Similarly, another FGD participant stated, ‘If there are meetings about the village where women’s participation is needed, then women participate.’ These kinds of responses were frequent, indicating that many men believe it to be self-evident which issues are relevant to women, or that they are reluctant to speak in greater detail about this.

While most men did not give specific examples, in one FGD a participant named health and education issues as being related to women. In another FGD a participant named health and security issues as related to women; however, in the same group, another participant directly disagreed and said that women *should not* be involved in security issues. This demonstrates that, while umbrella terms like ‘women’s issues’ were frequently used, there may not be consensus even among those using these terms as to exactly what they include.

Equally common, another response was that women should participate, but only if or after they have been properly informed and educated on relevant subjects (mentioned in eight male FGDs, or 50%). The threshold of education or information perceived to be sufficient to qualify women for participation was also unclear. A man from an FGD in Kabul province noted that women should participate but, ‘we need to develop women’s capacity and educate them first, because this will lead them to have successful participation.’ Another man from the same focus group elaborated by saying, ‘At the moment (women’s participation) is 50-50, but I believe that women should participate up to 35%, because they are not educated enough.’

The next most common response was that women should participate, but only insofar as it is in accordance with social norms (mentioned in four FGDs, or 25%). Three of the FGDs that gave this response were in Khost. Finally, men in three FGDs (19%) felt that women should only influence community decisions *indirectly*, through male family members.

When considering whether women should be involved in public decision-making *as much as* men, responses were more polarized. In eleven FGDs (69%), at least some men said that women should participate in public decision-making as much as men. However, in nine groups (56%), at least some men said that women should not participate in public decision-making as much as men. In five groups (31%), at least some men said that it simply was not possible for women to participate as much as men under current conditions. Even among those who said that women should participate as much as men, it at times appeared as if they may not be wholly supportive of their own statements, in practice. For example, in one FGD, a male participant said a woman’s voice should be equal to that of a man’s, but ‘if she cannot be heard directly, let her be heard indirectly through her male relatives.’ This may indicate that some male participants may consider women to be participating as much as men, even if they are not personally attending meetings or speaking for themselves, but are rather being represented by male family members.

In a similarly polarizing response, at least some men in eleven FGDs (69%) said that women should have the same roles as men in community decision-making, while some men in ten FGDs (63%) said that women should have different roles than men. A participant in a men’s FGD in Balkh province noted that, ‘women are involved in house work and men are involved in outside work,’ and another participant in the same group reinforced this by saying, ‘...some jobs are those that women can do and some are those that women cannot do.’ In another two groups, men said it simply was not possible for women to play the same roles as men in community decision-making under current circumstances.

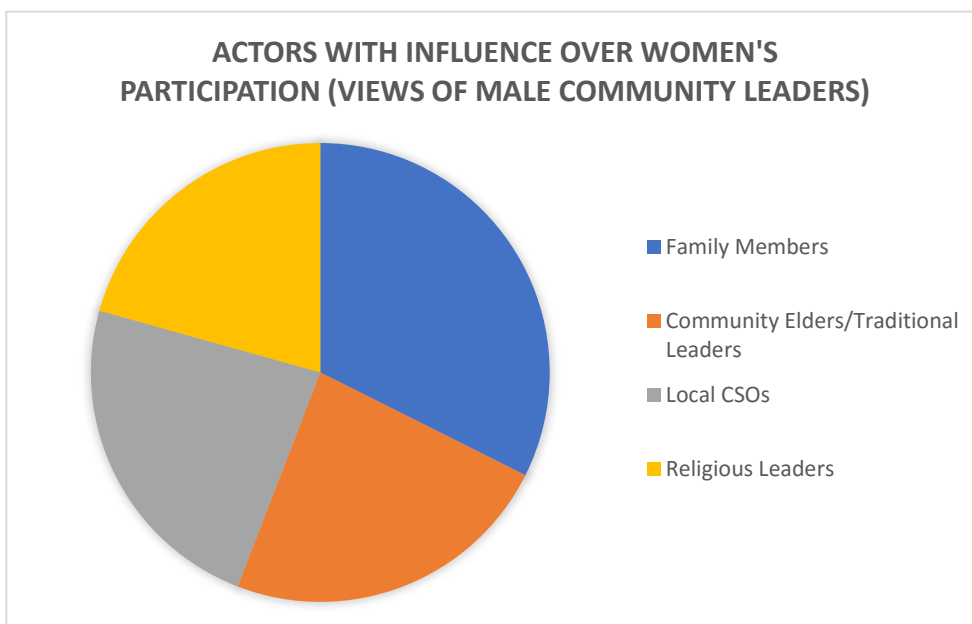
Three women in a women’s FGD in Khost province discussed these attitudes in greater depth. The first noted, ‘Our men do not allow us to participate.’ A second speaker stated, ‘It is a shame for women to participate’, while a third said, ‘Our families will say that it is a shame for women to participate.’ These responses demonstrate nuanced differences between women in their own views on this subject. Some appear to understand gendered public participation norms as being something that others claim to be true, while some appear to have internalized those norms as their own views.

Despite this, when male community leader key informants were asked what they view to be the benefits of women’s participation in public decision-making in their communities, more than half (nine key informants, or 56%) said they believed that development outcomes would be stronger with women’s participation. Another two community leader key informants said that women’s participation is positive because it fulfills their rights and creates role models for other women.

Interestingly, while male (and sometimes female) research participants often expressed critical or negative views about the capacities of women to engage in local governance and public decision-making, a smaller contingent (made up of both men and women) actually embraced positive stereotypes about women’s capacities relevant to public affairs. For example, one male FGD participant stated, ‘Women are more responsible by nature. They must be more involved.’ These kinds of views were heard more frequently from government staff than from other research participants – this trend will be discussed further in the next section on key findings from government stakeholders.

Actors with Influence over Women’s Participation in Local Governance

Male community leader key informants were asked about which actors in communities have most influence over whether women can participate in public decision-making. This is both a question about *authority* (over this particular issue), as well as about *thought leadership* or the ability to influence community attitudes. The most frequent response was that the family members of women are the most influential (mentioned by 11 of



the 16 male community leader key informants, or 69%). Community elders or traditional leaders, as well as CSOs active in the area, were each mentioned by eight community leader key informants (50%). Religious leaders were identified as influential over this issue by seven community leaders (44%), all of which were from Parwan and Khost provinces. As discussed above, while religious leaders may be considered influential

Figure 4: Actors with Influence over Women's Participation (Views of Male Community Leaders)

over this issue in some places, the degree to which this is true appears to vary considerably by location, and some other actors are viewed as equally or more influential over this issue.

Barriers and Challenges

For female FGD participants who were *already participating* in some form of community decision-making process, they felt that the most common barrier was their own family members⁵² who opposed their participation (mentioned in nine women’s FGDs, or 56%). The second most common barrier mentioned by

⁵² While some women did not specify which family members they referred to, others variably mentioned fathers, brothers, husbands, and in-laws.

women already participating, was wider community attitudes and negative social norms (mentioned in five FGDs, or 31%). Two groups mentioned insecurity as a critical barrier, and one group each mentioned their workload, the gender segregation of public meetings (and key decisions being made in male-only groups), and their lack of access to critical information related to community decision-making. In a key informant interview with a woman head of a CDC, she reflected on facing gossip and reputational risk by taking up her leadership role in her community, remarking that, 'In Afghanistan, (a woman) will lose something to stand in front of people, but (she) will gain something as well.'

Among women FGD participants who *had not participated* in any community decision-making spaces, the most frequently mentioned barriers remained nearly consistent with the previous group: in five FGDs, family opposition was mentioned as a key barrier, and in four FGDs women mentioned wider community attitudes and social norms as a critical barrier. For example, one female FGD participant explained that she was not able to participate because her 'family did not allow – they said it would be a shame for them.' Another FGD participant asserted, 'Everything is in the hands of men. Men are powerful in our area. If they want, we can participate.' In two groups, women noted that they did not have enough information about how public decision-making works in their community or how to participate, and in other groups, women mentioned their workload, security concerns, and damaging gossip about women who go out of their homes too much (each mentioned in one FGD).

The study asked a deliberate question about women's *access to information* about public decisions and local governance processes in communities. Despite women not naming access to information as a key barrier that rises to the level of some other barriers (like family restrictions), a large majority (88%) of women's FGDs stated that their primary source of information about public affairs in their community is male family members (mentioned in 14 female FGDs). Women named husbands, brothers, fathers, and uncles as key sources of information. Some women specified that this can be problematic for them; for example, one female FGD participant from Parwan said women get information 'via our men, but they just say they had a meeting. They do not share the details.' While receiving information from male family members may help bridge the information gap for women, the research also demonstrates that access to public information is often highly mediated for women, and depends on male family members and what information they view as relevant to women and therefore choose to share. Given men's variable attitudes to women's participation in public decision-making, and their views on which issues might be relevant for women to know about (discussed in the sections above), they are likely to be selective about the information relayed to women in their households.

Women also named other women as key sources of information (discussed in 12 FGDs, or 75%), along with women CDC members specifically (mentioned in six FGDs, or 38%). In a few cases, women named mullahs as key sources of information about community decision-making (mentioned in two groups), and other community elders (mentioned in one group). These relatively low numbers for male community leaders indicate that women have little direct access to these people. Women in two FGDs said they simply do not get any information about public affairs in their communities.

When asked about what barriers to participation in community decision-making women face, the majority of male FGD participants also first emphasized the barriers presented to women by their own family members (mentioned in thirteen men's FGDs, or 81%). Also similar to women, men believed that wider community attitudes and social norms were a substantial barrier (mentioned in ten FGDs, or 63%). However, men's groups appeared to believe that insecurity was a much larger impediment to women's participation than women did; men mentioned insecurity as a critical barrier in eleven FGDs (69%). One male FGD participant stated that 'For

women it is difficult to participate because in some parts, it is dangerous for them.’ However, women only mentioned insecurity as a key barrier in a total of three groups (19%).

Seeing as discussions were mostly focused on community level participation in public decision-making (i.e. cases when travel and exposure to ‘outsiders’ would not be a significant factor), the focus of male FGD members on security issues may indicate that men tend to either a) *under-estimate* other drivers of restrictions on women; or b) cite insecurity as a *discursive tactic*, as a means of justifying women’s relatively low participation rates or downplaying the social norms that limit women’s participation.

However, given men’s willingness to also acknowledge family restrictions and the role of social norms as significant barriers, there may be other contributing explanations. For example, in some of the discussions, it appeared that when men talked about ‘insecurity’, they were referencing the risk of sexual harassment and negative male behaviour toward women, including the associated reputational risk to women and their families. Some men referred to sexual harassment and violence as an infringement on a woman’s ‘honour’ (a concept often closely linked to the protection of reputation), and indicated that women should only participate in public affairs when the conditions to fully ensure the ‘protection of their honour’ were in place. For example, one community elder stated that, ‘We will only prevent women from participating if it is not safe for them and their honour is in danger.’ One representative from a CSO added that when women participate in public decision-making, ‘Men will look at them and say some bad words about them in meetings.’ Conceptualized this way, men may be placing a stronger emphasis on security barriers for women due to their concerns about the behaviour of other men even in their own communities, which is closely intertwined with their concern for the reputations of women in their households and by extension their own standing in communities.

In terms of other barriers mentioned by men’s groups, three believed that women’s workloads prevent them from participating (a factor only cited by one female group). For example, one male FGD participant stated, ‘In our society, it is a tradition to marry our children when they are 19 years old. When they are 25, they already have four or five children. Now the mother cannot even monitor her children. How do you expect me to have a project monitored by her?’ Three groups also believed that women’s generally lower education levels prevent them from participating (a point not mentioned in any women’s groups).

As key informants, male community leaders were also asked about the barriers to participation in community decision-making they believe women experience. Largely in keeping with FGDs, male key informants agreed that wider community attitudes (named by eight male leader key informants, or 50%) and family members (named by seven key informants, or 44%) were the most significant barriers to women’s participation. Four (25%) believed that women’s education levels prevent them from participating. The workload of women, sexual harassment, a lack of time/opportunity due to the poor economy, and insecurity, were each named by one key informant.

Beyond these points, male community leader key informants added a further set of potential barriers to the conversation, which were not raised in FGDs. For example, one noted that when women are allowed to participate, it is done only symbolically, and when they get into positions where they believe they can influence decisions, they are then actively side-lined by men. A male community leader from Parwan gave the example that, ‘in the development shura (the CDC), women were supposed to be the clerk or deputy. They were appointed, but they do not participate because we live in a traditional society. They choose men to ‘work for’ the women, and then all the decisions are made by the men and the women are not involved.’

Furthermore, a male key informant in Khost identified the gender segregation of public meetings as a key barrier to women's meaningful participation in public decision-making. A male community leader from Kabul province noted that gossip and the resultant reputational damage experienced by women and their families is a key barrier to their participation in public affairs. This key informant explained that 'when women are going out, people are talking about them.' In a conversation with national CSOs, civil society representatives explained further that, 'In some cases, if a woman comes out from the community, the male community members harass her husband and pressure him to control her. People complain about women who are active.' Another CSO representative confirmed this, noting that, 'If women speak up, people are laughing at her brother and her father and embarrass them. Men are shamed regularly for this.'

Somewhat contradictorily, when male community leaders were asked whether they believe there are specific risks associated with women's greater participation in local governance, 75% of them (12 of 16 key informants) said they believe there are no risks. However, three community leaders acknowledged physical security risks (for women) and the risk of backlash from their families. For a consolidated comparison of key barriers by actor, see Section IV below.

Enabling Factors

Not surprisingly, women who were already participating in local governance processes most commonly named the support of key family members as a critical enabler of their public participation (mentioned in ten women's FGDs, or 63%). Key family members clearly have the power to both obstruct and support women in ways that strongly determine their participation. Five women's FGDs (31%) mentioned that the support of female leaders in the community, such as teachers or the head of the CDC women's committee, was instrumental in their ability to participate in community decision-making. While not all women in leadership positions work to facilitate the participation of other women or to address women's priorities, anecdotes from the research showed women doing exactly this. For example, one woman head of a CDC campaigned against the sexual harassment of schoolgirls during their walks to school and worked with the local school and community to combat this problem. She also focused on increasing the percentage of women who voted in elections in her area. Both of these activities were beyond the bounds of her official job description as the head of a CDC, demonstrating personal initiative to address the challenges of women and girls and encourage women's public participation.

Four women's FGDs (25%) said that local CSOs had been enablers of their participation. In interviews with several national CSOs, interviewees further explained that CSOs bring women's groups together and negotiate influencing opportunities for them, by identifying existing spaces or at times even setting up new spaces, at district, provincial and national levels. For example, CSO members described setting up district and provincial level advocacy networks for community-based women's groups to come together and lobby subnational authorities. CSOs had also facilitated sector-specific Community Score Card processes that were used to communicate women's needs in a structured way to these authorities.

Being supported by women's groups and the collective action of other women was mentioned as a key enabling factor in three FGDs (19%). A few women's FGDs also credited male community leadership, their own personal traits, observing individual female role models that inspired them to participate, and support from God (each mentioned in two FGDs), along with their education and their particular family composition⁵³

⁵³ Family composition might entail details like having no brothers (or only brothers who are much younger), having male family members with disabilities, or having lost a father in childhood. These realities, while potentially tragic, at times influenced a woman's need or ability to take active roles in public life. While family composition only came up in one FGD, it was a clear factor in a KII with a woman CDC head as well.

(each mentioned in one FGD). For example, one woman head of a CDC described being able to take on her community leadership role at a young age partly because her father had passed away during her childhood, and her brothers were either living abroad, or were considerably younger than her.

When men were asked about what they think enables women's participation in local decision-making, the majority of FGDs also mentioned the importance of family support (12 FGDs, or 75%). However, male FGD members spoke equally as frequently about the importance of women's education (also mentioned in 12 FGDs), whereas education as a key enabling factor was only mentioned in one female FGD. A significant number of male FGD groups also mentioned the importance of knowledge and access to information (beyond formal education) and the role of support from male community leadership (discussed in 50% and 44% of men's FGDs, respectively). A smaller number of men's FGDs mentioned the enabling role of women's groups and women's collective action, along with local CSOs (each discussed in five FGDs, or 31%), and four male FGDs mentioned the importance of having security.

Male community leader key informants were also asked about what enables women's participation in local decision-making. In line with responses from male FGDs, key informants emphasized literacy and formal education (mentioned by seven male leader key informants, or 44%), along with rights awareness and relevant knowledge about key decision-making processes and topics (mentioned by six male leader key informants, or 38%). Three key informants mentioned the support of male community leadership (19%), two mentioned family support (13%), and one each mentioned security and the role of women's groups and women's collective action.

As with the discussion on key barriers, the key informant interviews also appear to have provided male leaders with the opportunity to inject a wider set of factors into the discussion, as compared with what was discussed in FGDs. Other key enablers mentioned in interviews with individual male leaders include the importance of financial independence, having professional experience or qualifications, and awareness training for men (each mentioned by two key informants), while one key informant cited the role of quotas or legal participation requirements in enabling women's participation.

The study also asked women's FGDs to identify the *skills* and *capacities* they consider to be critical for their effective participation in public decision-making processes. Women most often emphasized personal character traits, such as courage, confidence, and honesty (mentioned in eight women's groups, or 50%). Six groups emphasized literacy or formal education levels (38%), and five discussed the importance of public-speaking skills (31%). Of note here is that women's emphasis on literacy and formal education increased when asked a specific question about important personal skills and capacities. This may be because they view other enablers (outside of formal education) to be more critical overall, but within the narrower realm of personal capacities, they do view literacy and formal education as important.

Male community leaders were similarly asked about the skills and capacities they consider to be critical for women's effective participation in public decision-making. In line with earlier findings, the majority said that formal education was the most important (10 key informants, or 65%), while another four (25%) said that access to relevant information about decision-making processes and topics was critical. Small proportions of key informants said that personal traits, public-speaking skills, and professional experience and qualifications were important (each mentioned by two key informants). While more women named formal education as a critical enabler in response to this question (in comparison to their responses to previous questions), all male respondent groups (FGDs and individual key informants) still demonstrated a much stronger belief that women's formal education is decisive in their ability to have a voice in public decision-making. For a consolidated comparison of key enablers by actor, see Section IV below.

b. Women's participation in local governance: Government representatives

Box III: Women's participation in local governance – Perspectives from government representatives

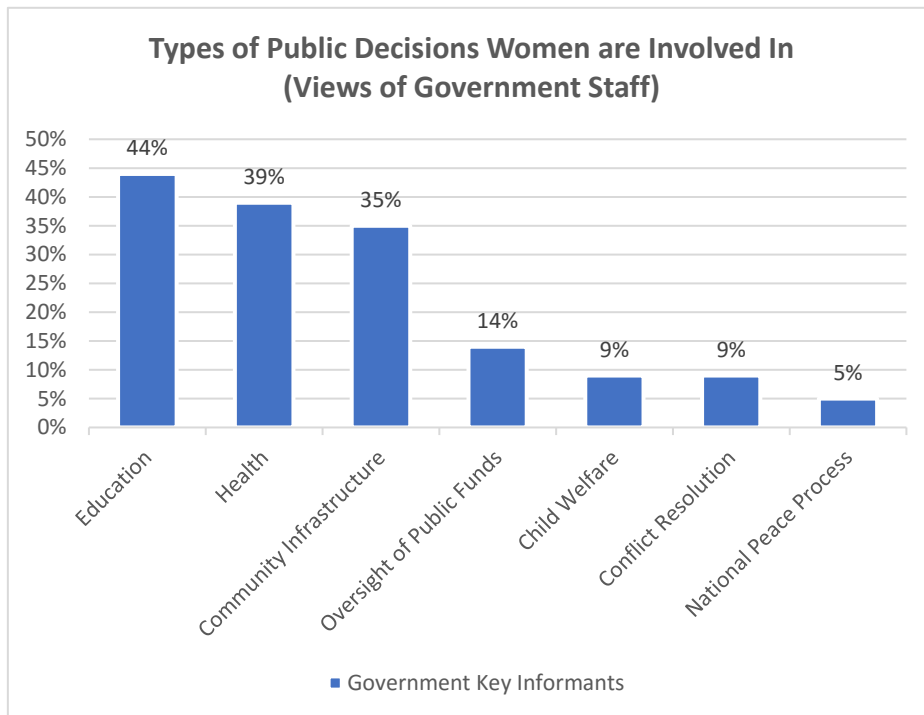
- A larger proportion of government staff **gave an unqualified affirmative response** when asked whether they believe women should participate in local governance/public decision-making, as compared with men in community level FGDs (82% of interviewees compared with 69% of FGDs).
- However, this proportion **dropped significantly** when government staff were asked whether women should participate *as much as men, or in the same roles* (only 45% agreed with each). Ultimately, **a majority of interviewed government officials qualified their support** for women's participation in public decision-making in some way.
- Government staff viewed **religious leaders to have significant influence** over women's participation in public decision-making at community levels, **more than community leaders did** (stated by 55% of government interviewees, as compared with 44% of community leaders).
- The government staff who viewed religious leaders as influential were spread across all provinces and the national level, while the community leaders who viewed religious leaders as influential were **only in Parwan and Khost**.
- More than a quarter of government actors named **formal government positions or agencies** as among the most important actors for women's participation in public decision-making, while no community members named government actors among the most important.
- Government staff gave a variety of specific anecdotes that point to the importance of **a localized approach to identifying influential actors and key allies** for enhancing support for women's participation in public decision-making. Which actors have influence over women's participation in public life appears to be **highly contingent on local factors**.
- As with men at the community level, male government staff members emphasized **insecurity and women's relatively low levels of formal education** as two of the most prominent barriers to women's participation in local governance – factors not heavily emphasized by women in communities.
- Some government interviewees expressed views that women are *better* at certain aspects of public decision-making. However, in some cases it appeared that men view women's participation to be **conditional** on them being nicer, more honest, and more accountable than men. Women in public influencing roles may be **held to higher behavioural standards than men**.

Types of Decisions Women are Involved In

The study interviewed 23 government key informants at the district, provincial and national levels. Due to challenges faced in identifying women government staff members at subnational levels, this section will look primarily at the views of male government staff members, who make up a large majority of government staff members at all levels in most departments/agencies.

When asked about what types of public decisions women are most likely to be involved in, the most common response from male government representatives was that women are involved in education-related decisions (named by 10 government key informants, or 44%), health-related decisions (named by nine key informants, or 39%), and the selection of infrastructure projects in community development programmes (mentioned by eight key informants, or 35%). This is largely in line with the views of men who participated at the community

level. However, small numbers of government staff members mentioned other types of public decision-making that women are involved in, including the oversight of public funds (in three interviews), decision-making about child welfare (in two interviews), the resolution of inter-communal and intra-household



conflicts (each mentioned in one interview), and participation in the national peace process (in one interview).

Four male government staff members (from across provinces) said that women *cannot* be involved in inter-communal conflict resolution, with one saying that women cannot be involved in *any* kind of conflict resolution, including intra-household conflicts. Closely related, two government representatives asserted that women cannot be involved in decision-making around security issues. Likewise, two said that

Figure 5: Types of Public Decisions Women are Involved In (Views of Government Staff)

women cannot be involved in local justice cases. Other types of decision-making that government staff said women *could not* be involved in included health issues, the oversight of public funds, the selection of community development projects and their locations, electoral decisions, and religious issues (each mentioned by one interviewee). A doctor and government staff member in Parwan province stated, 'In some meetings, like when we have a health shura meeting which is held among doctors and heads of villages, women's participation is not needed.' A national government staff member said that during election campaigns, 'men are going to these meetings and usually men are the decision-makers about who the family will vote for – he will enforce everyone in the family to vote for the same person.'

Three government staff members (in three different provinces) said that women are simply not involved in *most or any* public decisions, while one stated that women cannot be involved in public decision-making that takes place below the district level. This stands in contrast to male community level FGD members, who asserted that women cannot participate in public decision-making with actors from outside of the village, including district level authorities. This kind of apparent contradiction surfaced on several occasions in the research. Some actors at the community level considered participation in higher level decision-making outside of the community to be beyond the scope of women's participation. However, government officials at higher levels considered it possible for women to have roles in public decision-making at the provincial and district levels, but not below.

This discrepancy can be partly explained by limitations on women's mobility; women are most able to participate in public decision-making processes happening close to them, whether they are in a rural village or a district or provincial centre, but traveling to participate is less likely. However, it still points to a

rural/urban divide, where actors on either side of the divide have limited understanding of women's participation on the other side and tend to assume it is more limited than where they are.

Similar to other research participants, government key informants explained women's inability to participate in some types of decisions by saying that it is against social norms (cited by four key informants), that it is not safe for women to participate under current conditions (stated by three key informants), and that these decisions take place in male-only spaces that women do not attend (also stated by three key informants). For example, one health sector employee from Khost said 'women are not allowed to participate in outdoor decision-making.' The same key informant specified that he believes Khost may be somewhat unique in this regard: 'In other provinces maybe they (women) can participate, but here no; women should not participate and have influence in public or community planning, decision-making, and overseeing local services.' Another government key informant from Khost noted, 'In jirgas, their (women's) participation is not necessary and people are not ready to have women in their jirgas.'

Attitudes toward Women's Participation and Influence

Government key informants were also asked whether they felt that women *should* participate in public decision-making, and if yes, whether they felt women should participate *as much as* men and in the *same or different roles*. A large majority of government key informants answered with an unqualified yes (18 responses, or 82%), affirming that they do in fact believe women should participate in local governance. This is a significantly larger proportion of unqualified affirmative responses than came from male community level FGDs. However, three government staff members, all district level staff from Khost province, said that women should either not participate in public decision-making (stated by two key informants), or that women should 'participate' only indirectly, by being represented by male family members (mentioned by one person).

When asked if women should participate in public decision-making *as much as* men, the proportion of government key informants who gave a clear yes dropped to 45% (10 key informants). However, one district level staff member from Balkh explained that 'women's and men's participation levels do not differ, but their *influence* is different. Men have more influence in decision-making than women.' Two key informants said that women should not participate as much as men, while one said it is not possible under current conditions, and another said women can participate as much as men once they have reached adequate education levels.

Another 10 government key informants (45%) said that women and men should play the same roles in public decision-making. Five government staff (23%) said that it is not possible under current conditions, and two said that women and men should play different roles in public decision-making. For example, one government staff member asserted that the roles of women and men should be according to Islamic principles, whilst another said that men should manage 'men's issues' and women should manage 'women's issues.' As with other research participants, it was unclear what exactly would constitute men's and women's issues.

Half of male government officials said they believe women's participation in public decision-making brings better development outcomes. Five officials (23%) said that women in public decision-making roles have a positive influence because they serve as role models for girls and other women. A Balkh district governor explained it this way: 'If we consider the government, women should participate because a woman can better understand women and realize their true situation. If we see the role of women in public affairs, women are more involved, and when other women see their representatives are working in government administration, they see themselves in the government.'

As with community level research participants, a proportion of male government officials (six key informants, or 27%) expressed views that women may actually be *better* in some ways in leading in public affairs. For

example, five government officials said that women are 'cleaner' or more accountable than men. Four said women work harder than men, while two said women are kinder. For example, the head of a district council in Balkh province said, 'There are works that women can do better. Women are honest, patient, and kind. They will always do their responsibilities with honesty.' One national level male official said women are better at conflict resolution and their involvement in public decision-making enhances social cohesion and peace outcomes. A national level staff member with experience monitoring CDCs explained, 'Women are very committed, and the overall CDC functionality is higher (when women are actively participating) than when men are dominating....The higher the women's participation, the better the CDC....Women have more time and participating feels 'fresh' to them – they often do not see it as a burden.' This is an interesting counter-narrative to the view that women have too much work and are unable to prioritize participating in community public decision-making (as expressed in some male FGDs).

These views can be difficult to reconcile with the majorities of government officials who believe that women should participate in public decision-making less than men, or who believe that women should have distinctly different roles to men in public affairs. They may represent entry points for gaining greater support for women's participation. One woman head of a CDC asserted that she is in fact more honest and accountable than the male CDC members, and for this reason, her community has come to appreciate the way she has fought corruption and been transparent with the use of the local community development budget.

However, these views also indicate that men may believe women's participation should be conditional in ways that men's participation is not. While positive stereotypes of women could be used to make a case for women's increased participation in governance, these ideas may also present risks that women in public influencing roles will be held to higher behavioural standards than men, and therefore easily viewed as disqualified if they do not consistently demonstrate these additional behaviours. One national level interviewee noted that, 'Women take a lot of scrutiny and people think because you are a woman you should be kind and 'clean'. The expectations are higher for women.' The same interviewee went on to explain that when a woman is in a leadership role in public decision-making, 'people will be nice to her, but she cannot confront problems or make changes,' or else people will start to criticize her. In this sense, the additional behavioural expectations may limit a woman's ability to lead.

Finally, 'positive' character traits associated with women may actually be used to disqualify them for certain roles in another sense. A member of a prominent national CSO described interviewing presidential candidates in the run up to the 2019 national elections, on their views on women's rights and roles. One presidential candidate explained that '...a woman cannot be president or cannot be a lawyer, as she would not be able to handle this duty in a good manner because she is too kind.'

Throughout the research, two notable patterns were observed during interviews with government staff, particularly at subnational (provincial and district) levels. Firstly, at times the general view of rural life, especially as articulated by provincial level government staff members, seemed almost speculative, especially related to the understanding of how women might participate in public life in their communities. Several exceptions were apparent (notably the knowledge of several staff members at the Departments of Rural Reconstruction and Development). However, beyond this, many government officials in provincial offices (including in line departments, governors' offices, and municipal offices) tended to assume that women have little to no opportunities to participate in public decision-making in rural communities. The only concrete example of women's community-based leadership provided by a subnational government staff member was from a female provincial government bureaucrat, about women's collective action in education shuras.

Secondly, and perhaps a related point, in conversations with government staff members, there was often a strong drift from talking about women as *decision-makers* and *active participants in local governance*, toward talking about women a *labourers* or *beneficiaries* of services or social security provisions. Questions about how women participate in public decision-making and governance issues were often answered with examples of women starting businesses or needing help from government due to their poverty. Male subnational government staff often struggled to identify opportunities for supporting women’s public voice and participation, especially opportunities that would involve government action.

Actors with Influence over Women’s Participation in Local Governance

In keeping with interviewees at community level, male government staff believed that family members are the most influential actors who have power over women’s participation in public decisions (stated by 16 key informants, or 73% of male government staff interviewees). However, government interviewees appeared to view religious leaders as more influential than community level research participants did, with 12 government interviewees (55%), spread across all provinces, stating that religious leaders are among the most influential community actors when it comes to women’s participation in community decision-making. By contrast, religious leaders were only named among the most influential actors in seven community leader interviews (representing 44%). None of these leaders were in Kabul or Balkh provinces, indicating that religious leaders are viewed as more influential at the community level in Parwan and Khost.

Government staff also named community leaders (in nine interviews, or 41%), CSOs (in seven interviews, or 32%), formal government bodies or actors (in six interviews, or 27%), and educated people (in three interviews, or 14%), as influential over women’s public participation. Notably, more than a quarter of

government actors named formal government positions or agencies as among the most important actors for influencing women’s participation, while no community members named any government actors.

Government key informants also gave several examples of the unique importance of key individuals in specific localities, which did not amount to wider trends elsewhere. In one interview, a specific local commander in Parwan (who also acts as the leader of a council governing

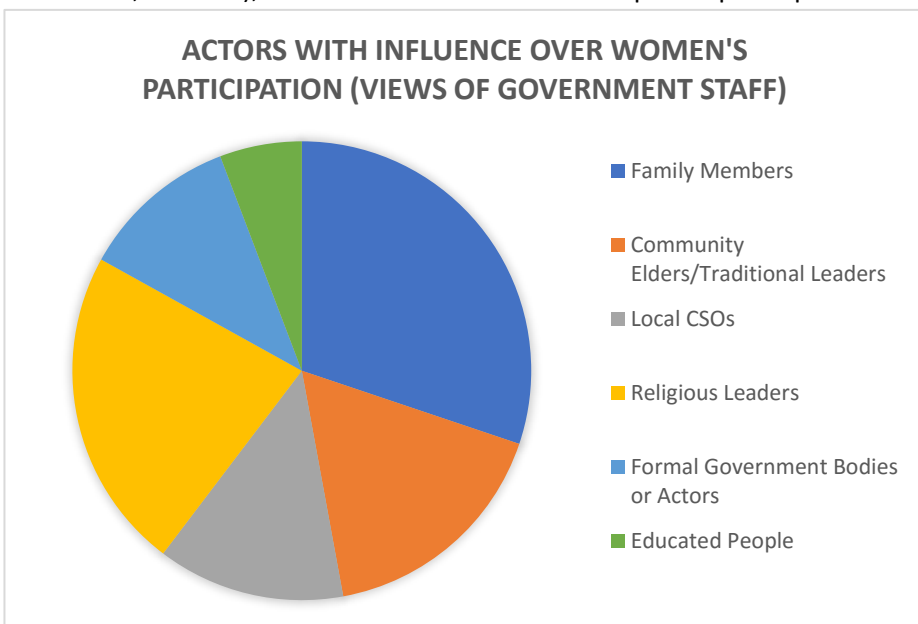


Figure 6: Actors with Influence over Women's Participation (Views of Government Staff)

a particular valley or cluster of communities) was cited as having significant influence over women’s participation across the valley. In another interview, a key informant explained that a district governor (also in Parwan) has been influential in convincing communities to accept women’s leadership roles in CDCs. In still another case (in Balkh), a government staff member explained that he solicited the help of an influential member of parliament to convince a district governor to allow women to participate in local governance processes.

In a counter example, a government staff member described a case in which his department asked a religious leader to help them convince a local community to allow women to participate in a local governance process. However, when the religious leader tried to do this, the community did not listen to him. The government interviewee explained, 'religious scholars are not always that influential – it depends on the area. Even if something is not against Islam, it might be against a tradition, and this is important to people.'

One national level government official with a role in working with CDCs described cases in which there are two CDCs in neighbouring villages, one which allows women to hold active leadership roles in the local CDC, while the next one does not (though the villages have ostensibly the same key social norms). He explained this by pointing to the critical roles of individual community leaders, and even discussed the possible differences in the efforts of social mobilisers and other civil society actors, explaining that 'some people work hard to convince others...while (others) may not believe themselves in women's participation, so they do not emphasize on these things.'

These cases point strongly to the importance of a localized approach to identifying influential actors and key allies for enhancing support for women's participation in public decision-making. One representative of a CSO gave an example of working in a district in Kabul province and facing a challenge due to a community elder who was against their work with women in the community. When they sat down to discuss his opposition with him directly, they learned that he felt he had been bypassed by the CSO's staff when they set up the project, because they did not recognize his informal leadership role. Once they better understood his informal influential role in the community and began collaborating with him, he became more supportive and dropped his opposition to the project.

While there is a strong consensus around the critical role of family members, these examples demonstrate that the influence of other actors is highly contingent on specificities within the local or regional political settlement, as well as on the individual characteristics and beliefs of key people. These examples also caution against an assumption that 'culture' or social norms will automatically prevent or limit the participation of women.

Barriers and Challenges

When male government key informants were asked about the barriers and challenges to women's participation in public decision-making, the most common responses were security (named by 12 key informants, or 55%), and family permissions (mentioned by 11 key informants, or 50%). Nearly a third of government key informants (seven, or 32%) said that women's education levels were a key barrier to their participation. An equal proportion said that wider community attitudes and social norms were a key barrier.

Both women and men at community level (in FGDs and as key informants), and male government stakeholders, all viewed the family members of women and wider social norms and community attitudes to be among the most significant barriers to women's participation. However, beyond these, men emphasized that insecurity, women's generally lower education levels, and at the community level, women's workloads, were substantial barriers as well. None of these factors figured significantly in women's perspectives on their key barriers.

As in community level discussions, the way in which male government staff members tended to use the term 'insecurity' often appeared to include the risk of sexual harassment (or even just the risk of women being openly seen by men). Closely related, it also appeared to refer to risk to women's 'honour', including risk to her reputation and that of her family members. For example, one government key informant from Khost explained that women often cannot participate in public decision-making because 'there is no safe place for

women to sit and do the discussion and make jirga....Mostly, rural area men are sitting under a tree to discuss issues, but these places are not safe for women.’ One government staff member specifically articulated a sense that social norms were not serious barriers, as compared with insecurity: ‘The security poses the biggest challenge. The cultural and traditional issues will go away on their own – they will not be a big challenge because people will change their minds. It will just take time.’

Small numbers of government stakeholders named other key barriers, not mentioned at the community level. Three government key informants noted that political interference often prevents the participation of women in public decision-making. Examples referred to the politicized way in which public sector positions are allocated, including political appointments in provincial and district governments. Respondents blamed political parties for dominating subnational political appointment processes, demanding posts for their prominent male party members. One provincial government staff member explained, ‘There are some empowered women, but we cannot even use their capacities and talents. They cannot get a job because they are not recommended by influential people. Then less capacitated people might have the jobs because powerful people recommend them and helped them get the job.’ This again underscores the importance of understanding local and subnational political settlements, and the way that inclusion policies or initiatives may be thwarted by specific political economies.

Two government key informants, both working in the Balkh provincial government, also discussed at length the practice of appointing women to deputy roles in government offices, and then actively side-lining them from decision-making. Several government staff (both male and female) acknowledged entrenched and systematic practices of tokenism. A key informant from Parwan noted that, ‘Women are given the chance, but not the authority. When they are given responsibility, they must also be given authority.’ One national level key informant (a member of the international community) explained that ‘men just ‘work around’ women who are placed in key leadership positions – they will not bother to confront them. The woman will not have real power or support, and people will circumvent her. She will be in pictures on facebook pages and will go to ribbon-cutting ceremonies, but it will be really difficult to get included in real substantive issues.’

One key informant noted that women are also affected by wider barriers to citizen’s participation at the local level. When participatory decision-making processes are established, it is not uncommon for higher level power-holders to override citizen-driven decision-making processes, and seek to control the use of community development funds. Examples were given of members of parliament directing community development funds away from community-selected priorities, often in order to impose the implementation of highly visible road construction projects that they can claim as successes of their tenure in office. These kinds of examples situate women’s participation in public decision-making processes within the context of broader challenges to citizen participation and voice.

Interestingly, two government key informants also mentioned the social norm, prevalent among some Afghan communities, that a woman’s name or identity should not be known widely, particularly by men outside of her immediate family. For example, one government key informant explained, ‘Even in our society, if you take the name of someone’s wife in front of others, he will break your teeth, because it is very sensitive among our society.’ These two key informants both pointed out that it is difficult for a woman to hold a key public role without sharing her name widely. It is likewise difficult to monitor women’s participation if there are limits around the degree to which the roles of individual women can be verified (at least by male monitors). For example, another government key informant talked about performing a programme monitoring visit (outside of the research sample area) and asking about which women held officer positions in the local CDC. He was told in multiple communities that it was impolite to ask about who the women officers in the community were, limiting his ability to monitor the programme set-up and operations of the CDC.

A few other barriers for women were only raised by one government key informant each, but still represent some insights into barriers women might face. These included barriers posed by stricter participation norms in opposition-held territories, sexual harassment in the public sphere, women's financial dependence on men, gossip and reputational risk, laws or policies intended to support women's participation not being implemented properly, a lack of work experience or professional qualifications among women, women's lack of access to information about how decisions are made, and men's often low view of women's capacities.

While no key informant specifically articulated believing that men under-recognize women's *existing contributions* in local governance, a pattern of doing so emerged within the research findings. Throughout the research, men often asserted that women cannot do x, y, or z, whilst women separately gave examples of doing those things. Several explanations may contribute to this observed pattern. Firstly, people in rural communities may be unaware of how things work in neighbouring communities and beyond, and therefore the variation in women's public roles from one place to another may be unclear to individual respondents. Secondly, women and men are often planning, discussing, and working in separate spaces, with limited interaction or means of communication between their groups. Consequently, they may remain relatively poorly informed about each other's work. And finally, the tendency to under-recognize women's contributions may also be informed by entrenched social attitudes about women's capacities and possible public roles, which withstand evidence to the contrary.

Government key informants were asked specifically about whether there are any specific risks associated with women's increased public participation. Five government key informants stated that there was a real risk of backlash from families or communities, and various respondents elaborated that this might translate into security risks for women, or social isolation. Several also pointed out that public participation might damage women's reputations, a risk that can drive real-life consequences like the above. One government staff member in Khost explained, 'the first risk would be the excommunication of the woman. People will say she has become an infidel and that her beliefs have changed.' For a consolidated comparison of key barriers by actor, see Section IV below.

Enabling Factors

When asked what factors support women to participate in public decision-making, government key informants most frequently said that women need formal education (mentioned in nine interviews, or 41%), family support (mentioned in eight interviews, or 36%), and access to relevant information about sectoral issues and about how decision-making processes work (also mentioned in eight interviews). Other enabling factors named by government staff included awareness training for men (noted by three interviewees), individual personality traits such as courage, support from male community leadership or influential men, financial independence, and professional experience and qualifications (each mentioned by two interviewees). One interviewee each mentioned the value of female role models, security, a history of community volunteer work, supportive policies, and having a network of women or established women's groups.

While some of these factors were not mentioned in either women's or men's FGDs at community level, some anecdotal evidence supports several of these points from government staff. One government interviewee told a story about a woman who had been selected as her local CDC chairperson, on the basis of her reputation for volunteerism and community service. After serving as the CDC chairperson, she is now a district governor. One woman key informant at community level said that she is allowed to speak more in community meetings than other women because she is a teacher and people respect that she is educated. In these examples,

volunteer work, community-based leadership, and professional qualifications supported women to gain greater influence and take on higher roles.

However, while male government interviewees tended to have relatively similar views as male community members did about the enabling factors for women's participation, of note here is the degree to which their views differed from those of community level women. While all groups recognized the importance of family support, very few male government respondents mentioned three of the common enabling factors discussed by women's FGDs: the importance of individual female community leaders (such as teachers or CDC members) as role models and voices of public support for women participation, the role of local CSOs, and the importance of women-only spaces for solidarity and collective action.

As with the community level male research participants, male government staff also emphasized the importance of formal education for women much more than women community members did.⁵⁴ Several theories could explain this persistent difference of opinion. Men's generally higher education levels might underpin a greater value placed on education and the importance of educated decision-makers. However, other findings challenge this assumption, including the earlier finding that both women's and men's focus groups believed education issues at the community level are among the most common for women to be involved in. Furthermore, the importance of women's formal education was at times asserted by men who themselves did not have high formal education levels.⁵⁵

Another explanation may be that there are other sources of authority and legitimacy for men in local governance processes. Elements of social capital including their gender in and of itself, along with their relationships and networks, their personal wealth (land ownership or otherwise), experience contributing to community security, roles in wider resistance movements or political struggles, and professional or social experience outside of the community, may all be sources of legitimacy that bolster their status in local governance processes. Since these alternative sources of social capital are likely to be more limited for women, formal education may become more critical for their voice in public affairs to gain the acceptance and respect of men.

Government officials were also asked about which skills or specific capacities were essential for women to enhance their participation in public decision-making. By far the most common response was again formal education (mentioned by nine interviewees, or 41%). Less frequent responses included knowledge of how decision-making processes work and public-speaking skills (each mentioned by four key informants, or 18%), and professional experience or qualifications (mentioned by three key informants, or 14%). Unsurprisingly, male government officials tended to focus on more formal skills and capacities than community level women. For a consolidated comparison of key enablers by actor, see Section IV below.

c. The overall trajectory of women's participation in local public decision-making

⁵⁴ As noted in Sub-section A, when women were asked a separate question related to what personal *skills* or *capacities* are helpful for women to gain influence in community decision-making spaces, a larger proportion cited literacy and formal education as important (six groups, or 38% of women's FGDs). As stated above, this likely indicates that when asked broadly about enabling factors (literally, 'What *supports* or *helps* women to participate and have influence?'), women see other factors beyond formal education as *comparatively* more critical. But when asked more narrowly about skills and capacities, formal education surfaces as somewhat more important.

⁵⁵ Systematic data on the education levels of each speaker, especially in FGDs, was not always captured. It is therefore not possible to assess the degree to which each man that asserted the importance of women's formal education was himself formally educated. However, instances were documented in which men discussing the importance of formal education for women did not themselves have high education levels.

FGD participants overwhelmingly agreed that women's participation in community level public affairs is increasing (stated in 31 of 32 FGDs, or 97%). While FGDs were asked specifically about the trajectory of women's participation in the *past five years*, at times it appeared that participants were referring to a longer timeframe. For example, some respondents referred back to the late 1990s or early 2000s, in their comparison with contemporary women's participation in public affairs in their community. Both female and male FGDs believed this increase is due to changing social norms (cited by seven women's FGDs, or 44%, and 10 men's FGDs, or 63%). They also credited greater community awareness of women's rights and the benefits women can bring to community governance processes (cited by eight women's FGDs, or 50%, and 13 men's FGDs, or 81%). However, in line with earlier findings, men's FGDs were far more likely to credit women's increased education levels as a key reason that women's participation in public life has increased (cited in 13 men's FGDs, or 81%). Only two women's FGDs (13%) mentioned women's increased education levels as a reason for increased participation in public affairs.

Key informants, including community level male leaders and male subnational government authorities, were also asked the same question about the trajectory of women's participation over the past five years. Overall, they also strongly agreed that women's participation has increased (stated by 31 of 39 individuals, or 80%). Those key informants that believed women's participation is increasing tended to echo male FGDs that this is due to women's increased education levels.

However, eight key informants disagreed (21%), demonstrating greater disagreement than surfaced in the FGDs. Of those who disagreed, three said that women's participation in public decision-making has *decreased* in the past five years, three said it had *stayed about the same*, and two 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.

Several key informants suggested that a lack of progress is due to there not having been enough targeted actions taken to support women (mentioned by two key informants), and a reliance on tokenism or symbolic inclusion (mentioned by one key informant). Others noted that declining security makes it harder for women to take up roles that had been previously open to them, such as teachers or community health workers, both of which often require travel. This may mean that, 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. For example, one government staff member from Balkh explained, 'The social contribution of women has increased in politics and even in negotiations at the political level, but in the education and health departments in remote areas, due to threats, they cannot do as much as they used to.' He gave examples of midwives and doctors, who were previously traveling every day from Mazar to remote places in the province, who have now left their jobs due to insecurity.

Being a teacher or a health worker may also have served as a steppingstone for women, from community-based positions to higher levels, by allowing them to gain professional experience that can support their public influence in other ways. 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 at different levels.

IV. Analyzing Barriers and Enablers

This section further analyzes the key barriers and enablers identified by research participants, as discussed in Section III above. Firstly, these barriers and enablers are assessed against CARE’s Gender Equality Framework, demonstrating the domains in which these factors fall (in Tables II and III below). This also provides a further comparison of women’s perceptions of their barriers and enablers against men’s perceptions, along with the perceptions of non-state actors as compared with state actors. For reference to CARE’s Gender Equality Framework, see Figure I above in Section II.

Secondly, the section discusses these barriers and enablers in terms of their relationship to the participation spectrum adopted as part of the framework of this research, providing an overall assessment of where the forms of women’s participation discussed in this paper sit on that spectrum. For an explanation of the participation spectrum used for this research, see Section II above.

a. Agency, Relations, and Structures

This section compiles the barriers and enablers detailed in Section III and categorizes them according to whether they exist in the domains of agency, relations, or structures, referencing CARE’s Gender Equality Framework. ‘Agency’ refers to the capacities of women, including for example, specific skills, personal traits, formal education, and awareness of rights. ‘Relations’ refers to the ways in which personal and group bonds and interactions with others can limit or support gender equality aims. ‘Structures’ relates to both formal laws, rules, and policies, along with informal customs, beliefs, and norms that impact gender equality outcomes.

Table II analyzes the barriers discussed in the research, while Table III analyzes the enabling factors. Factors in bold were named by approximately a third of FGDs or more (for the community level), and a third or more of key informants (for government actors). Unbolded factors were named by smaller minorities of respondents. All factors are listed in diminishing order of frequency in their categories. At the community level, factors with an asterisk were mentioned only by key informants (and not in FGDs). A final category – ‘researcher observations’ – adds several additional barriers and enablers not explicitly named by any community or government research participants, but apparent in the patterns of responses or revealed through anecdotes at various points in the research.

Table II: Barriers to Women’s Participation in Local Public Decision-making

	Agency	Relations	Structures
Women			
Community Level		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family restrictions/ permissions • access to information about rights, community governance processes and issues (which mostly comes from male family members) • gossip/reputational risk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social attitudes and norms • insecurity • women’s workload/ gendered division of labour • gendered segregation of decision-making spaces
Men			
Community Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low formal education levels of women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family restrictions/ permissions • access to information about rights, community governance processes and issues (which mostly comes from male family members) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social attitudes and norms • insecurity • women’s workload/ gendered division of labour • poor economy/lack of opportunity

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • men’s poor opinion of women’s capacities • sexual harassment • gossip/reputational risk • tokenism/side-lining* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gendered segregation of decision-making spaces
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low formal education levels of women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family restrictions/permissions • tokenism/side-lining • sexual harassment • men’s poor opinion of women’s capacities • financial dependence • gossip/reputational risk • access to information about rights, community governance processes and issues (which mostly comes from male family members) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insecurity • social attitudes and norms • women’s workload/ gendered division of labour • political interference • wider limited citizen participation norms • norms that prohibit revealing women’s names • more limited social norms in opposition-held territories • laws and policies that support women’s participation not being implemented properly
Researcher Observations			
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • men’s under-recognition of women’s existing contributions to local governance issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive stereotypes used to disqualify women from certain roles (e.g. ‘too kind’) • urban/rural divide • tendency to view women as economic actors or beneficiaries of social services (not leaders or political actors)

Table II demonstrates that all actors understand the primary barriers to women’s participation in local governance processes to be strongly related to women’s *relationships* (particularly within their families), along with the wider social structures in which those relationships take place. Very few barriers were associated with agency, although male actors (of all categories) emphasized 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 of all types 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.

Table III: Enablers of Women’s Participation in Local Public Decision-making

	Agency	Relations	Structures
Women			
Community Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal traits like courage, confidence, honesty • literacy/formal education • public-speaking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family support • information from other women, female community leaders • support of influential women (teachers, CDC/CDC 	

		women’s committee members) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSO support/programming • women’s groups/collective action • support of male community leadership and influential men • inspiration from female role models • support from God • family composition 	
Men			
Community Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • literacy/formal education • financial independence* • professional experience/qualifications* • personal traits* • public-speaking skills* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family support • access to information about rights, community governance processes and issues (which mostly comes from male family members) • support of male community leadership and influential men • women’s groups/collective action • women’s rights awareness training for men* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • security • quotas/legal or policy-based requirements for women’s participation*
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • literacy/formal education • financial independence • professional experience/qualifications* • history of volunteerism • public-speaking skills* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family support • access to information about rights, community governance processes and issues (which mostly comes from male family members) • women’s rights awareness training for men • inspiration from female role models • women’s groups/collective action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • security • quotas/legal or policy-based requirements for women’s participation*
Researcher Observations			
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive stereotypes leveraged by women to make a case for the benefit of their leadership (e.g. being more trust-worthy) • shared social values of consultative and consensus-based decision-making

In Table III, ‘relations’ remains the central domain, with most of the identified enabling factors relating to women’s primary relationships and interactions with others. However, relations are situated within the wider environment, so structural enablers (like broad social norms change) would inevitably have a significant

impact on women's relationships. 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.

The domain of 'agency' became more important related to perceptions of the enabling factors for women's participation (as compared with how research participants framed the barriers). 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. Given the dearth of enablers identified at the level of structural factors, it may be that people tend to focus on what they have some influence over (their own behaviour or women's access to a local service, like education), as systemic change is beyond their power. While this is understandable in the context, it may point to the need for civil society to help to articulate pathways toward systemic change, working against the individualizing of the vision of women's equal roles in governance.

b. Women's Participation Spectrum

This section discusses the barriers identified in the research in terms of their relationship to the participation spectrum adopted in the framework for this research series. The participation spectrum outlines three stages of women's participation in public decision-making, including 'access', 'presence', and 'influence'. Based on this spectrum, this section will briefly assess the degree to which the identified barriers tend to obstruct women's participation at the level of access, presence, or influence.

1. **'Access'** focuses on opening arenas of influence to socially-excluded groups, ensuring that they are technically allowed to participate. More robust forms of access might invest in expanding social permission and resources to support participation. 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 subnational 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. All participants agreed that the single most significant barrier to women's participation is the lack of permission from their family members, and the next most mentioned barrier was wider social norms and community attitudes toward women's participation.
2. **'Presence'** entails the physical or numerical occupation of a decision-making space or process, and may range from a small minority presence to a critical mass or a majority. It may also entail institutionalizing presence provisions, as in the case of legally enshrined quotas. A few of the barriers identified in the research may exist more at the level of 'presence'. For example, the failure to properly implement existing affirmative quotas or policies intended to support women's participation, along with political interference in appointments for women, are barriers that keep numbers of women in leadership roles low. The understanding by some that tokenistic inclusion of women is sufficient likely impedes reaching a critical mass of participation in some areas. Furthermore, gossip, security threats, and reputational risk experienced by women who participate in public life can push active women out of their roles, as well as acting as a deterrent to others.
3. **'Influence'** requires that those present also have power, including substantive opportunities for voice. Due to being unable to triangulate perceptions, it is difficult to assess specific claims of women's influence mentioned by research participants. Certainly, concrete examples were provided of individual women and women's groups achieving particular goals through influence efforts. However, given the limiting

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. Some research participants directly backed this up, like the district level staff member from Balkh who explained that 'women's and men's participation levels do not differ, but their *influence* is different. Men have more influence in decision-making than women.' Furthermore, when women provided examples of their influence, these examples were often under-recognized by men (such as the examples of women's influence in conflict resolution processes), further under-scoring the views of some men that women do not and cannot have substantial influence in public decision-making.

V. 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 development⁵⁶ 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

⁵⁶ Mansuri, Ghazala and Vijayendra Rao. 'Localizing Development – Does Participation Work?' Washington DC: World Bank, 2013.

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 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.

Pathways for Further Consideration

In addition to the previously identified pathways, this research points to four further approaches that do not fit easily into the above pathways. This may call for additional pathways to be considered, or for a reframing of some of the above identified pathways:

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.

VI. 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.

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Annex I: Key Research Question and Sub-questions

Main research question: What are the pathways and factors that enable women to participate in and influence subnational governance processes?

Related Sub-questions:

Agency

'Agency' refers to the individual and collective capacities of women, including for example, specific skills, personal traits, formal education, and awareness of rights.

- What local governance processes and spaces do women take part in?
- Why do women take part in these local governance processes? What do women appreciate about participating in these processes? What are their expectations when participating?
- What types of skills, facilitation, and other support do women and youth need to be able to participate in formal and informal local governance processes?
- Are there any barriers that prevent women from participating in local governance processes (both formal and informal)? What are they?
- Are there any key enablers that support women to participate in local governance processes (both formal and informal)? What are they?
- Do women leaders or women-led associations support or enable the participation of women in local governance processes. What role do they play? Do they face any challenges or barriers?
- Do women and youth who have participated in local governance processes feel they have been able to influence these processes and achieve their goals? If so, how and what enabled them to do so? If not, what was it that prevented them from having influence?

Relations

'Relations' refers to the ways in which personal and group bonds and interactions with others can limit or support gender equality aims.

- What are the perceptions of local authorities about the participation of women in public decision-making processes? What are their interests to stimulate this form of participation? What external factors effectively incentivize them (e.g. specific programmes/policies/procedures)?
- What roles have families, local authorities, and civil society actors played in enabling (or preventing) women to participate in local governance processes?
- What are the factors that enable local authorities to create and/or maintain spaces for citizen voice that are directly or indirectly linked with public decision-making?
- What types of skills, facilitation, and other support do women and youth need to be able to participate in formal and informal processes?
- What role does external support (e.g. skills training, facilitation, advocacy) have in enabling women to participate in local governance processes?
- Are there any risks associated with advancing the voice and influence of women in local governance processes in fragile contexts? Are women vulnerable to any forms of backlash from within their families, communities, etc. when they are empowered in this way?
- What are the benefits that women's participation and influence result in (both actual and perceived)?

Structures

'Structures' relate to both formal laws, rules, and policies, along with informal customs, beliefs, and norms that impact gender equality outcomes.

- How do the beliefs held by men and other power-holders affect the ability of women to engage in local governance processes?
- To what extent do formal rules and policies influence local authorities and communities to support (or restrict) the participation and voice of women?
- What kinds of norms, beliefs and attitudes affect the participation of women and youth in local governance processes?
- What do local authorities (both traditional and formal/state) believe are the most appropriate channels for the participation of women and youth in local governance processes?
- Which are currently the most effective spaces (in terms of the voice and influence of women), and which spaces could be promising entry points to target for future work? Why?

Annex II: Key Terms

The following text was used to orient the research team and prepare them to explain key concepts to research participants.

Public/Community Decisions: Decisions made that impact communities (rather than individual households).

‘Public decision-making’ could include decisions about:

- which local development projects are prioritized,
- where and how new infrastructure (like water points, schools, and roads) are built,
- how public money (like CDC budgets or other shared resources) is used in the community, and who manages it,
- how schools or clinics are managed and what happens when there are problems with the quality of education and health services,
- how local conflicts are resolved or how solutions to disputes between community members in a single community or between communities are negotiated,
- the selection of community leaders (like CDC, cluster, or District Development Assembly members),
- the election of higher-level officials (like provincial councilors, members of parliament, or the president), or
- other public or group decisions that affect community members.

Decision-making Groups and Processes: The places where the above public/community decisions happen, and the ways that they happen.

Groups and Processes for Women’s Influence: Any group or activity that women take part in that helps them have a greater role in influencing key community issues or decisions. Ideally, this goes beyond ways that women are *present* in a given process, toward an understanding of when and how women’s participation *actually succeeds in making changes or advancing women’s priorities* in their communities. This is less about documenting that women attend certain community meetings or are part of specific groups and more about understanding *how* their attendance in those meetings or membership in those groups helps their voices/opinions/priorities be heard and taken seriously.

Annex III: Research Sample

Data collection occurred at community, district, provincial, and national levels. In each of the **four provinces** of EVC’s programme coverage (Kabul, Parwan, Balkh, and Khost), data collection took place in two districts (totaling **eight districts**). Data collection took place in one community/district, with the exception of Bagrami and Bagram, both of which had data collection occur in two communities (bringing the **overall total of data collection communities to ten**).⁵⁷ Data was also collected in each of the **eight district centres**, as well as in all **four provincial centres**, and with selected individuals at the **national level**.

Communities in each district were selected due to their potential to contribute to the diversity of the overall sample, in terms of majority ethnicity, relative proximity to the district centre, relative education levels, relative access to services, existence (or non-existence) of an active CDC/CDC women’s committee, and security conditions. In other words, every effort was made to include a diverse mix of community profiles among the eight selected communities in the data collection sample. The full research sample was as follows:

Community Level								
Province	District	Community	FGDs		KIIs			
			Female	Male	Adult Female	Adult Male	Youth Female	Youth Male
Kabul	Bagrami	Wolayati	2 (13 ppl)		2	4		1
		Bagh-i-Koti		2 (13 ppl)				
	Mir Bacha Kot	Sarai Khwaja	2 (13 ppl)	2 (13 ppl)	2	4		1
Parwan	Bagram	Bene Wasek	2 (16 ppl)		1	3	1	
		Parche 8, Sharak Mhajereen		2 (11 ppl)				
	Jabul Saraj	Borikhail	2 (13 ppl)	2 (10 ppl)	2	3		
Balkh	Char Kint	Nanwayee	2 (17 ppl)	2 (11 ppl)	2	2		
	Khulm	Hayatqulby	2 (14 ppl)	2 (13 ppl)	2	2		
Khost	Mandozai	Shash-i-Kalai	2 (13 ppl)	2 (11 ppl)	1	4		
	Matoon	Darkot-i-Kalai	2 (10 ppl)	2 (11 ppl)	1	3	1	
Subtotal			16	16	13	25	2	2
			(109 ppl)	(93 ppl)	244			

⁵⁷ Additional communities were added in Bagrami and Bagram districts due to problems with some of the interviews that took place in the originally-selected communities in these districts. ASK Consulting returned to these two districts and conducted new interviews (in new communities), in order to correct these problems. The research team chose new communities to conduct further interviews in based on the desire not to over-burden communities who had already given time to the research process.

District Level			
Province	District	KIs	
		Local Authority (formal/state)	Local Civil Society
Kabul	Bagrami	1	
	Mir Bacha Kot	1	
Parwan	Bagram	1	
	Jabul Saraj	1	
Balkh	Char Kint	2	1
	Khulm	1	1
Khost	Mandozai	1	1
	Matoon	3	1
Subtotal		11	4
		15 ppl	

Provincial Level				
Province	City	KIs		
		Local Authority (formal/state)	Local Civil Society	International Practitioners/Global Civil Society
Kabul	Kabul City	1		
Parwan	Charikar	3	2	2
Balkh	Mazar-i-Sharif	5	3	2
Khost	Khost City			
Subtotal		9	5	4
		18 ppl		

National Level			
City/Province	KIIs		
	National Authority (formal/state)	National Civil Society	International Practitioners/ Global Civil Society
Kabul	4	3	2
Subtotal	9 ppl		

In total, 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 KIIs** at provincial level, and **9 KIIs** 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**.