

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

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

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Key Research Findings

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Every Voice Counts Programme



The Every Voice Counts (EVC) programme is an inclusive governance programme implemented in 6 countries.

In Afghanistan, EVC is led by CARE Afghanistan, in partnership with the Afghan Women's Resource Centre (AWRC), the Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium (HRRAC), and the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation (WCLRF).

EVC's focus is on enhancing the social inclusion and empowerment of women and youth. The programme aims to support **inclusive community-based and subnational public decision-making**.

Research Focus



The thematic focus of the research was on spaces and mechanisms for women's **voice, influence, and leadership** in **public decision-making**, with a focus on subnational and community levels.

The research seeks to:

- identify which **groups, positions, mechanisms, and sectors** are currently providing opportunities for women's participation and influence in subnational public decision-making;
- how women's participation and influence may be changing, and the key **obstructing and enabling factors** that impact that process;
- point to a set of **promising pathways** that have potential for enabling women's increased voice in local public affairs in Afghanistan;
- offers a set of **recommendations** for donors, practitioners, civil society and government.

For the purposes of the research, the following definitions were used:

Public Decision-making: Decisions that impact communities (rather than individual households).

Decision-making Groups and Processes: The places where the above public/community decisions happen (whether formal or informal spaces), and the ways that they happen.

Participation Spectrum: Access, Presence and Influence: The research used a spectrum of modes of participation, from access, to presence, to influence. Being able to help make decisions or change decisions is having 'influence'. If nothing changes due to participation, it means that the *participation* did not result in any *influence*.

Understanding of Thematic Focus



However, we did still struggle with this focus in the research:

- Respondents very often talked about the **access** or **presence** of women more than their **influence**;
- Respondents often drifted from talking about women as leaders or decision – makers in public life (at any level), to talking about women in **household decision-making** or women as **workers/labourers and earners of household income**;
- When asked about supporting women’s decision-making roles, government staff sometimes resorted to talking about:
 - employing women in **public sector positions**, or
 - **service delivery to women**, including how they provide support to vulnerable women

Methodology



The methodology was entirely qualitative and planned around a set of focus groups discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) (in communities, in district and provincial centres, and in Kabul).

Altogether, the study conducted 32 FGDs and 84 KIIs, resulting in 116 separate data collection events, attended by over 280 individuals.

Research Geographies



Kabul

District 1: Mir Bacha Kot

Community: Sarai Khwaja

District 2: Bagrami

Community: Baghe Koti

Balkh

District 1: Charkent

Community: Nanwayee

District 2: Khulm

Community: Hitqulby

Parwan

District 1: Jabulseraj

Community: Borikhail

District 2: Bagram

Community: Benevorsok 2

Khost

District 1: Matoon

Community: Darkoti Kalai

District 2: Mandozai

Community: Shashy Kalai

Total

8 communities (in 8 districts, across 4 provinces)

Key Decision-making Spaces and Mechanisms (General)



| | Female FGDs | Male FGDs | All FGDs |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Most frequent (mentioned in \geq 50% of FGDs) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDCs • CDC women's committees/CDC women members/women's shuras | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDCs • Education shuras • Health shuras • Formal elections • Individual traditional leaders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDCs |
| Less frequent (mentioned in \geq 20% of FGDs, but \leq 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 \leq 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 |

Key Decision-making Spaces and Mechanisms (Women's Views)



- Women's FGDs (56%) **mostly frequently mentioned CDCs**, while 50% specified CDC Women's Committees;
- 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.

Key Decision-making Spaces and Mechanisms (Men's Views)



- 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).

Key Decision-making Spaces and Mechanisms

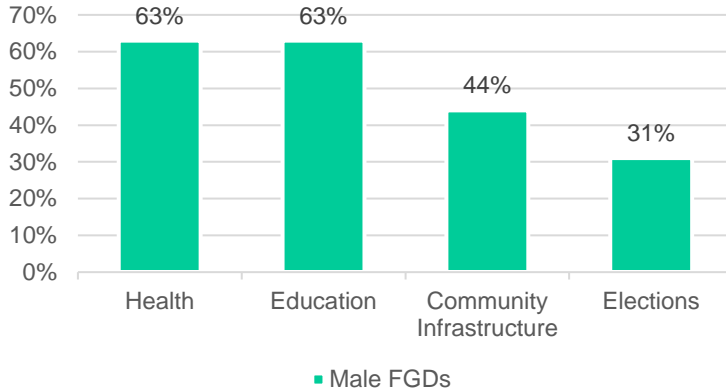


- **Religious leaders were not explicitly identified** as key channels for public decision-making by any FGD groups. However, nearly half (44%) of individual male community leaders (in KIIs) believed that religious leaders are among the most influential actors in determining the degree to which women 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**;
- 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.

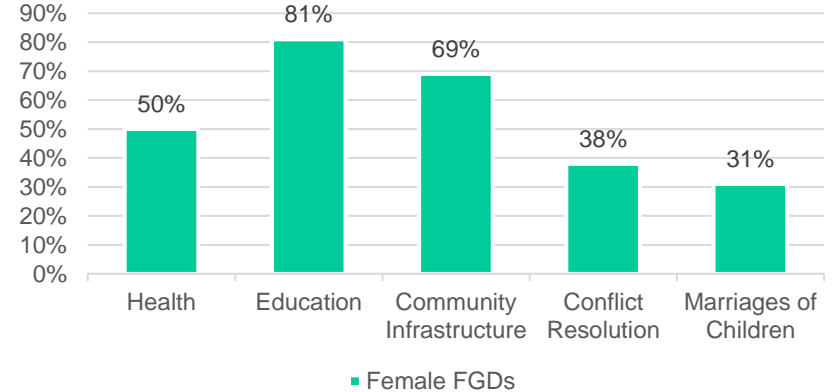
Key Avenues for Women's Influence: Actual Participation



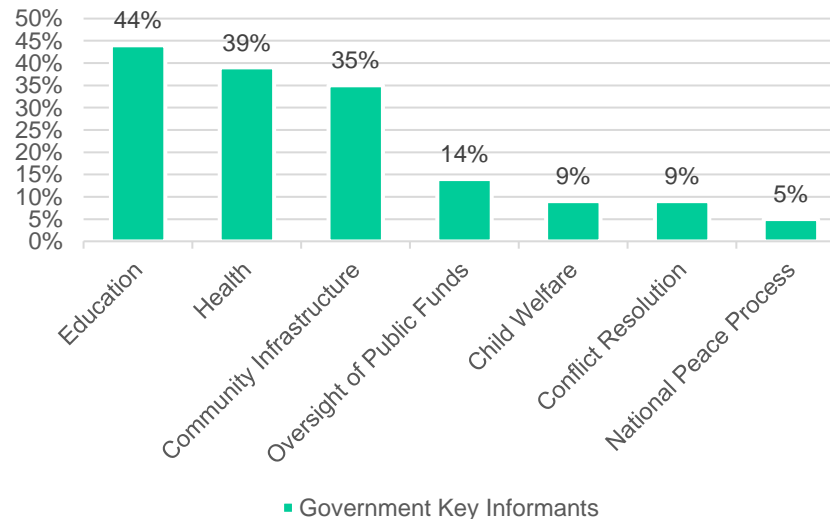
Types of Public Decisions Women are Involved In (Views of Male FGDs)



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



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



- Difference in perception of women's decision-making on health issues, conflict resolution
- No men mentioned decisions around the marriages of children

- But not always about the type of issue – often about the space and who else is present

Key Avenues for Women's Influence: Perceptions of Women's Interests



When asked what kinds of decisions-making women ***are interested to be*** involved in:

Men:

- Health and education issues (mentioned especially by gov't and community level men);
- 'Women's issues' (not necessarily clear what it means, and varied by person (in one group, this concept included 'security'))
- One said: *'But how can we really know? These might simply be the fields it is most acceptable for women to involve themselves in';*

Women:

- Security and justice issues/ conflict resolution;
- Health and education issues;
- Community level women emphasized decisions about the marriages of family members and decisions related to the education of children

Key Avenues for Women's Influence: The Rural/Urban & Gov't/Community Divides



- Government staff tended to give examples from **urban environments**;
- Government staff (provincial level and above) often described women's public participation and decision-making as **'tending to drop off' at the district level and below**;
- However, women's focus groups at community levels in rural areas provided **many examples of women's initiatives**, active groups, and community volunteerism/service, etc.;
- Civil society actors tended to have **a stronger sense of detail** about women's roles in rural areas (talked about women's roles in sectoral shuras, service delivery oversight, child protection initiatives, emergency response teams, advocacy groups, volunteer projects, etc.);
- But all types of research participants made **frequent reference to CDCs and the Citizen Charter programme** (urban and rural, gov't, civil society, and community respondents).

Key Avenues for Women's Influence: The Security and Justice Debate



Research respondents **diverged most strongly** related to both **women's interest** to be involved in **security** and **justice issues**, as well their **actual roles** related to these topics at the local level.

- Community level men tended to say that women are not involved in conflict resolution or security issues (though they recognized the importance of security for women);
- Likewise, government staff recognized the importance of security for women, but made no mention of women having roles in conflict resolution;
- Civil society actors argued that women should be more involved in security and justice issues and the peace process, but did not mention women's existing local conflict resolution roles;
- However, community level women's FGDs talked about **concrete roles in conflict resolution**, especially related to **social disputes between and within families**, in some areas even describing a fairly structured process for addressing family conflicts via a women's committee, but also some examples of inter-group/inter-community mediation

Key Avenues for Women's Influence: The **Security** and **Justice** Debate



It is possible that one explanation is that, when asked about conflict management, men focused on **inter-community conflict**, while women focused on **family level and inter-household conflict**.

However, given that inter-family conflict often fuels or underpins much larger conflicts, women's roles in conflict management appear to be under-recognized.

Reasons for Community Participation/Leadership



When asked **why** they participate in community decision-making/leadership:

Community level **men** tended to describe their participation/leadership as inspired by a **sense of duty**, and something they do to **better their communities**.

Women also talked about **bettering their communities**, but also described wanting to **learn, craving information**, wanting to **create better environments for their families** (especially their **daughters**), and the desire to seek **financial independence**.

Attitudes Toward Women's Public Decision-making 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;
- However, in 56% of male FGDs, **at least some men qualified their support**:
 - Yes, but – women should participate in **public roles related to 'women's issues'** (50% of male FGDs);
 - Yes, but – only if or **after women have been properly educated** (50% of male FGDs);
 - Yes, but – only in **accordance with social norms** (25% of male FGDs);
 - Yes, but – **only indirectly**, through male family members (19% of FGDs)

Portrait of 'Female Leadership'



When asked **why** there should be women in public decision-making roles, people tended to say:

- Women are proactive in community/committed to **volunteerism** and public service;
- Women are 'cleaner'/more **accountable/transparent**/can curb corruption;
- Women 'do everything with **kindness**';
- Women are committed and **work hard**

These ideas might be sometimes **true**, and could also be ideas that women can **use strategically** to argue for greater decision-making roles, however:

- They are not **rights-based** arguments (i.e. women have a right to share power with men, as half of society);
- They hold women in leadership to a **higher standard**/create more reasons to disqualify women from leadership positions;
- They may make it difficult for women to be **assertive**;
- For women who do not have the **time or resources** to do a lot of volunteer work, they may not be able to establish themselves as fit for local office;
- They may lend support to a notion that women do not need to be **compensated for their work equally to men**

Key Influential Actors



Government Respondents: often assessed the role of gov't as most influential (over women's social roles, ability to have influence); tended to see social change as a process of setting rules/making laws and enforcing them; however, believe religious leaders to be universally influential in rural areas

Civil Society Respondents: often talked about the role of the media and emphasized the role of mass media approaches to social norms change (with some gov't actors agreeing with this as well)

Gov't/Civil Society: viewed donors as influential because they were credited with driving provisions for women's roles in major programming (quotas in programmes or programmes specifically focused on women)

Community Respondents: perceived family, including men and older household women as most important

Most Respondent Groups: mentioned the importance of religious and traditional leaders (mullahs/madrassa teachers); however, this varied by province (more in Parwan and Khost), and some emphasized the need to assess the influence of individual mullahs before investing in them as key leaders/influencers – some mullahs were deemed non-influential, a situation which is context-specific

Key Barriers



| | 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) • men's poor opinion of women's capacities • sexual harassment • gossip/reputational risk • tokenism/side-lining* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social attitudes and norms • insecurity • women's workload/gendered division of labour • poor economy/lack of opportunity • gendered segregation of decision-making spaces |

Key Barriers



| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Government</p> | <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 |
| <p>Researcher Observations</p> | | | |
| | | <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) |

The Role of **Security** and **Education**

- Frequent barriers mentioned by men were **insecurity** and lack of **education**;
- This makes sense in the current context; however, this also at times appeared to be over-stated/over-simplified, especially by male interviewees:
 - 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**;
 - Some asserted that **all other cultural barriers or harmful social norms would 'disappear'** as soon as there is security;
 - Others asserted that the only thing that is needed to solve women's problems is the formal education system.

While insecurity and low education levels are significant barriers, these assertions could be read as:

- a possible **under-estimation** of other social or political barriers to women's participation and leadership;
- an effort to **de-politicize** the women's rights/gender equality agenda – security and education tend to be less controversial than other rights issues like GBV or an increase of women in major leadership positions in society;
- a **lack of responsibility** taken by individual men

Barriers: **Political Environment** for Women's Voice and Influence



Respondents discussed a range of examples that point to challenges in the **political economy** (political environment). These examples fell into the following categories:

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Local Level/ CDC Politics</p> | <p>Example of attempts to cancel CDC/Guzar Chairperson elections when a woman was selected (organized by male candidates who lost); example of mullah not supporting women to participate in Citizen Charter, but perception that his creation of barriers was linked to him not getting the Chairperson position, so acting as a spoiler.</p> |
| <p>Patronage Politics/ Role of Political Parties</p> | <p>Political parties lobbying for key appointed posts going to men in the party or male relatives (over-riding attempts to appoint women to key posts, even by the central government). Political party internal politics (and lack of equality policies) seen as a barrier to women's advancement.</p> |
| <p>Tokenism at Higher Levels</p> | <p>Many respondents described the gov't as taking a symbolic approach to women's influence and leadership, avoiding transferring real power, putting women in positions that are easily sidelined (always deputies, for example), pledging to appoint women during election seasons but not delivering. Various respondents said: <i>'They (women) are used like tools'</i> <i>'They (the gov't) see women 'as a useful photo'</i> <i>'We (women) have the position but not the authority of the position'</i></p> |

Key Enablers



| | 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) • 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* |

Key Enablers



| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Government</p> | <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* |
| <p>Researcher Observations</p> | | | |
| | | | <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 |

Trajectory for Women's Public Voice and Leadership



When asked, ‘**Over the last 5 years, has women’s public participation and influence increased, decreased, or stayed the same?**’ ...

- The majority of stakeholder groups argued that women’s public participation and influence has **clearly increased** (97% of FGDs and 80% of KIIs)
- However, a few said that women’s participation in public decision-making **has decreased** in the past five years, a few said it had **stayed about the same**, and a couple said there had been **an increase in urban or secure areas but a decrease in rural or insecure areas**.
- Some argued that women are more **prominent in higher level positions** and in the media – tends to refer to **elite women in professional positions in urban spaces – while increased** and more **dispersed insecurity** has curtailed the role of women as **frontline workers** in the health and education sectors – a relatively socially acceptable role for rural women with some access to education;
- For those that believe women’s roles in public life have decreased or stagnated, they all agree this is related to **insecurity** (*‘women’s field of life is shrinking’*)

Women's Participation Spectrum



Access:

- Most identified barriers at this level – lack of family support and prevailing social norms and attitudes
- Gossip, reputational risks, sexual harassment and security threats can deter women out of roles (as well as pushing women out of actual roles they have taken)

Presence:

- A few barriers may exist at this level – the failure to properly implement participation provisions, political interference, tokenism;
- Gossip, reputational risks, sexual harassment and security threats can push women out of roles (as well as deter taking them to begin with)

Influence:

- Limited evidence, though some concrete local examples
- Under-recognized when they exist

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



1. Women-led Movements and Associations
2. Government Policy and Legislation
3. The Underlying Political Settlement
4. Social Accountability Spaces and Tools
5. Social Norms and Gender Relations
6. International Norms and Agendas
7. Experience through Community-based Leadership/Local Professional Roles
8. Community Service/Volunteerism
9. Subnational Government-led Initiatives
10. Making Visible Existing Women's Contributions to Local Governance

‘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