



# SOLIDARITY, STRENGTH AND SUBSTANCE:



## Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan

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Anna Larson, Noah Coburn  
October 2020





**Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit**

**Issues paper**

**Solidarity, Strength and  
Substance:**

**Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan**

Anna Larson  
Noah Coburn

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## About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul that was established in 2002 by the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy relevant, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results and promote a culture of research and learning. Since 2020, AREU organization is registered with Ministry of Economy (MoEc) as a non-profit NGO. As the top think-tank in Afghanistan and number three in Central Asia according to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report at the University of Pennsylvania, AREU achieves its mission by engaging with policy makers, civil society, researchers and academics to promote their use of AREU's research-based publications and its library, strengthening their research capacity and creating opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate. AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organizations, embassies, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, Afghan civil society and independent experts.

AREU's core donor is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Specific projects in 2020 are being funded by the European Union (EU), Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Institute (CAREC), The Foundation to Promote Open Society (FPOS), The French Medical Institute for mother and children (FMIC), The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT), and UN Women.

AREU holds memberships in multiple international development consortiums including the RESOLVE Network, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC), A Conflict Sensitive Unpacking of The EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanism (EUNPACK), ADB- Asian Think Tanks Network (ATTN) and The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC). For more information visit [www.areu.org.af](http://www.areu.org.af)

In 2018, AREU was awarded Best International Social Think Tank by Prospect Magazine.



## About UN Women

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

## About the Authors

### Anna Larson

Dr Anna Larson is an independent researcher and has been writing on politics, democratisation and peace in Afghanistan since 2005. She is co-author with Noah Coburn of *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (Columbia, 2014), and holds a PhD in post-war recovery from the University of York.

### Noah Coburn

Noah Coburn is a political anthropologist at Bennington College who focuses on Afghanistan and South Asia, studying violence, governance, and how people negotiate the overlap of politics, power, and culture. In Kabul, he has worked for the United States Institute of Peace and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. At AREU he has conducted research on multiple election cycles, and, with Anna Larson, authored *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (Columbia 2013). Additionally, he is the author of *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford 2011) and, most recently, *Under Contract: The Invisible Workers of America's Global Wars* (Stanford 2018).

## Foreword

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is pleased to present its esteemed audience with a highly informative research paper: *Solidarity, Strength and Substance: Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan*, that was funded by the United Nations Women (UN WOMEN). The paper contributes to better understanding on how Afghan women strategise around institutional barriers, and with ascertaining certain effective tools to promote women's participation and substantive influence, with special focus on policy and service provision in the public domain. The paper is based on over 80 interviews and focus group discussions that took place in four Afghan provinces.

The paper analyses three formal mechanisms used for promoting women's involvement in the public domain such as elections, affirmative action in the public sector and education. All these have enticed substantial attention of the government and international community in the last decade.

The research findings indicate that formal mechanisms are fairly limited as a means to promote women's influence without supporting informal strategies, including building professional relationships and networks of trust, surrounding oneself with supportive men and women at home and work and negotiating in a way that strengthens relationships between men and women. The paper suggests that all of these will help with enhancing the transformative power of the formal institutions of suffrage, affirmative action and education.

AREU would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their significant contributions to further enriching this paper and the authors and the researchers for their painstaking work.



Dr Orzala Nemat,  
AREU Director

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper, based on research funded by UN Women, attempts to understand further how Afghan women strategise around institutional barriers, and to identify which tools in particular are most effective in promoting women’s participation and substantive influence, particularly over policy and service provision, in the public sphere. Findings are based on the perspectives of women and men gathered in over 80 interviews and focus group discussions across four provinces.

In Afghanistan, men make decisions; women are typically absent from decision-making processes. This commonly heard and felt public-sphere narrative is reflected in stories that women tell of being excluded from policy meetings, overlooked for promotion, harassed at work, told whom to vote for, and sidelined from the gatherings at home where critical family issues are discussed. And yet this is only part of the picture. Afghan women encounter and navigate around these barriers daily, both at home and in the workplace, developing and relying on sophisticated sets of strategies—levers to prise open space for influence. This paper seeks to understand further how they do this, and what tools are most effective in promoting their participation and substantive influence, particularly over policy and service provision. It analyses three formal mechanisms for promoting women’s involvement in the public sphere: elections, affirmative action in the public sector, and education—all of which have received significant government and international attention over the last decade—and finds that they can promote women’s influence in unexpected ways. In addition, formal mechanisms remain fairly limited as a means to promote women’s influence without supporting informal strategies, including building professional relationships and networks of trust, surrounding oneself with supportive men and women at home and work, and negotiating in a way that strengthens relationships between men and women. All of these serve to provide ways to enhance the transformative power of the formal institutions of suffrage, affirmative action and education.

The paper uses the terms “formal” and “informal” throughout, and separates these for analytical clarity, with “formal” denoting a written, public strategy or component of government policy, and “informal” referring to networks, relationships and social norms. However, the dichotomy between the two is largely false: indeed, it is the intersection of the two that constitutes a primary concern of this paper. Evidence collected in this research suggests that strengthening women’s decision-making and decision-making power in Afghanistan is about holding on to and enhancing formal institutions while simultaneously building professional relationships of trust, mobilising family support and negotiating with patriarchy in ways that emphasise and strengthen community. This is particularly important in the Afghan context, where women have been structurally excluded from the formal political sphere to such an extent that it is critical to consider unconventional ways in which women influence decision-making.

## Justification and objectives

To better understand how women in Afghanistan participate in politics and other forms of decision-making, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and UN Women have partnered on a series of research projects. In 2018, following the Afghan parliamentary elections, they designed a research project focused on violence against women in elections, its impact and the ways in which this violence is understood conceptually. This research included 28 interviews, a series of focus group discussions and a quantitative survey with over 500 respondents in the provinces of Kabul and Nangarhar. The results of this study suggested that more research was needed, looking broadly at women’s participation in politics at a range of levels, from local to participation in the on-again, off-again peace negotiations with the Taliban.

In response, a second project was designed to examine women’s participation in policy matters at various levels, both during elections and outside of them, to grasp how different political environments influence their participation levels and to identify how women’s agency might be strengthened. This paper thus attempts to balance concern about potential future Taliban influence in government with a recognition of the ways in which Afghan women have, historically and today, negotiated with and navigated around established and extreme patriarchal norms.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### *Women's participation globally*

Over the last 30 years, women's political participation and decision-making have become a central subject of enquiry within feminist and development studies globally. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action called for a gender balance in national legislatures worldwide and prompted temporary special measures such as electoral quotas for women in many countries.<sup>1</sup> As a result of a surge of efforts to redress the gender imbalance, numbers of women in parliaments globally have shifted from 11.7 percent in 1997 to 24.5 percent in 2019.<sup>2</sup> This change, while statistically important, has led to questions about the value of numbers alone, and whether diverse groups of women with intersectional identities could be represented by other women, purely *because* they were women.<sup>3</sup>

These questions coincided with the interrogation of “participation” and what it had come to mean in development studies and practice. Following the trends towards participatory approaches to development set by Robert Chambers and others in the early 1980s, by the late 1990s participation had become a buzzword employed by practitioners to attract donor funding but lacking in substance or outcome.<sup>4</sup> Since then, questions about what it means to participate meaningfully in development and political processes have been (rightfully) abundant in the literature and, to a lesser extent, in development practice.

Answers to these questions include the need to create “spaces for change” whereby marginalised groups forge new physical space for participation (for example, within a local council) and are then able to effect change from within.<sup>5</sup> This then is not simply about access to decision-making, but the capability to influence discussion and policy outcomes within decision-making arenas, i.e., decision-making *power*.<sup>6</sup> Answers also include looking beyond what have become standard, global constructions of formal participation and identifying means and spaces of wielding influence that are indigenous to local norms and politics. These could include negotiation and compromise, for example, as opposed to outright contestation and loud demand for change,<sup>7</sup> as well as corridors, tea rooms, public baths, guesthouses and mosques, as opposed to (or alongside) the election, the legislative plenary or the policy department meeting. It should also involve questioning who defines what is “meaningful”, and for whom participation is meaningful. This means setting aside (temporarily) normative judgements about the outcomes that women's political participation and influential decision-making should have: while political space and decision-making power *might* facilitate the promotion of “women's

1 The Beijing Platform also prompted global measures to be taken in support of women's human right to participate in political processes, decision-making and public affairs, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 25; Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Articles 7 and 8 (Beijing) ; and, more recently, Target 5.5 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

2 InterParliamentary Union, “Women in National Parliaments,” <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010197.htm> (accessed 18 February 2020).

3 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Julie Ballington and Azza Karam, *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2005); Drude Dahlerup, *Women, Quotas and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Francheschet, Mona Lena Krook and Jennifer M. Piscopo (eds.), *The Impact of Gender Quotas* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4 Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (New York; Longman, 1983); Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, “What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at ‘Participation’, ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Poverty Reduction’,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005):1043-1060; Pablo Alejandro Leal, “Participation: The Ascendency of a Buzzword in the Neo-Liberal Era,” *Development in Practice* 17, No. 4/5 (2007): 539-548; Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001).

5 Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan Coelho, *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas* (New York: Zed Books, 2006).

6 O'Neill and Domingo (2016), p14

7 Obioma Nnaemeka, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way,” *Signs* 29, No. 2 (2004): 357-385; Anna Larson, *Women and Power: Mobilising around Afghanistan's Elimination of Violence Against Women Law* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016).

interests” and benefit “women in general”, it should not be assumed that this is the case or that all influential women will necessarily see the need to align with liberal feminist principles. In essence, meaningful participation is always a product of context, i.e., inseparable from, but continually adapting with, the local political-economic landscape in which it takes place.

*Women’s participation in Afghanistan: history at national and local levels*

**Table 1: Women’s Participation in Afghanistan, in percent, 2018**

Women’s participation in government and independent agencies	21.5 percent
Lower house of parliament	27 percent
Upper house of parliament	25 percent
Provincial Councils	20 percent

Sources: National Statistic and Information Authority, [www.nsia.gov.af](http://www.nsia.gov.af); International IDEA, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35>.

The story of women’s formal participation in Afghan politics and public life begins in the early twentieth century. Girls’ education is largely credited to Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929) and some women were politically active in the youth movements of the 1950s and 1960s. After women were given the vote in 1964, four women were elected to the 1965 parliament in open competition with men, but neither of the two women who stood in the next round of parliamentary polling in 1969 won a seat.<sup>8</sup> A commonly cited narrative of women’s public activity in Afghanistan describes successive conservative backlashes after progressive gains; however, this perspective oversimplifies the political economy of change in the country.<sup>9</sup> Like a narrow focus on women’s formal political participation, it obscures and sidelines the substantive influence that women have wielded informally, underneath and at the periphery of public life. The repressive civil war, along with the mujahiddin and Taliban regimes that followed the relative freedom to participate publicly that women experienced under Zahir Shah, Daoud Khan and the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan from the 1960s to the 1980s, represented a regression in state-dictated attitudes toward women’s education and capabilities. Yet they did not quash underground women’s movements, clandestine community girls’ schools, radical publications and local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) overseeing aid delivery in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Indeed, at the time of the US intervention in 2001, there was no shortage of women who were ready to speak out in front of a global audience to advocate for change. Clearly, even though women’s public participation had been all but eliminated for 15 years, women had both access to and influence over decision-making across numerous unconventional spaces during this time.

This is not to say that women’s formal participation in politics is not important, nor that it is separate from informal or peripheral spaces for change. The relationship between the two is critical and forms a key component of enquiry in this research.<sup>10</sup> What it does imply, however, is that, as regimes shift, and

8 Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan Continues Its Experiment in Democracy: The Thirteenth Parliament Is Elected,” *American Universities Fieldstaff Reports* 15, no. 3 (1971): 6; Jelena Bjelica and Rohullah Soroush, “Elections Conundrum (20): Women Candidates Going Against the Grain” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 19 October 2018, available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghanistan-elections-conundrum-19-women-candidates-going-against-the-grain/>. As these authors describe, women were handpicked to serve in parliaments in the 1980s, but elections during these years under the Soviet regime were largely symbolic.

9 Deniz Kandiyoti, *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan* (Geneva: UNRISD, 2005) available at <http://www.unrisd.org/publications/opgp4>.

10 This relationship can be understood as the connection between symbolic and substantive representation, with symbolic representation encapsulating, in Afghanistan in particular, the great significance of women’s constitutionally guaranteed 68 seats in parliament to aspiring young female politicians and the message it sends about women’s place in the legislature. Substantive representation asks what they are able to do with those seats once they have them—the decision-making power discussed above.

dominant political attitudes towards women's public participation change (for women's public participation is always political, not least in Afghanistan), informal spaces for change may be more resilient and can be more reliable indicators of substantive influence and decision-making power in Afghanistan.

At the village level and within families, women have historically held influential roles in managing local conflict, monitoring and maintaining household economies, making decisions about child-rearing and navigating (as brides) and overseeing (as mothers-in-law and older relatives) the political economy of marriage. In the past and today, these negotiations have often had significant ramifications on local politics, the management of land and other crucial issues.<sup>11</sup> As one more recent ethnographic study of an Afghan town pointed out, men often make broad claims about the relative lack of political influence by women, but then will privately follow up with accounts of how women in their own families have played important roles in economic decision-making and other important family decisions.<sup>12</sup>

Women also appear more often in Afghan history and cultural narratives than one might assume given common narratives about Afghan patriarchal structures. The most notable of these is probably Malalai of Maiwand, who is said to have spurred on Afghan troops in their resistance to the British during the second Anglo-Afghan War. Her bravery when male troops were retreating has become embedded in Afghan nationalism through schoolbooks and other nationalistic material, and highlights the ways in which Afghan women are expected to defend Afghan honour and the nation itself, often through politically symbolic acts. As David B. Edwards points out:

*Malalai is more than simply an Afghan version of Marianne, the French icon of liberty. She has a particular symbolic resonance because of the dynamics of honour and shame that underlie her gesture. Attaching her veil to a spear shows a willingness to sacrifice everything, including her own feminine honour, to defend her homeland.<sup>13</sup>*

Although the extent to which women are involved in and have control over decision making in both the home and beyond varies greatly from one family to another, they are nevertheless often negotiated spaces where women's involvement is common and accepted, particularly as they get older. As one AREU paper noted in 2006 regarding decision-making about school enrolment,

*within households, often extended in structure and containing members of differing ages and gender and, correspondingly, statuses and roles, are exceedingly complex; much variation exists between families. In general, although decision-making power may primarily be possessed by the male head-of-household, as is often stereotypically thought, women are also active participants in the decision-making process and, in some cases, wield considerable power themselves.<sup>14</sup>*

As will be demonstrated in this paper, the importance of women in decision-making within families, often lays the groundwork for participation in formal political processes, such as elections.

11 Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

12 Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

13 David B. Edwards, *Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017): 40.

14 Pamela Hunte, *Looking Beyond the School Walls: Household Decision-Making and School Enrolment in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit [AREU], 2006): 3.

Box 1: Laws and Treaties Pertaining to the Treatment of Women in Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>

The Afghan state is committed to the following laws and conventions regarding the treatment of women and women's political rights:

- Afghanistan's international legal obligations under Article 9, 10 and 14 of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** entail a right of all persons to a fair trial and equality of treatment before the law. Article 25 details the right of all citizens to participate in public affairs, vote and be voted for and contribute to public service.
- Afghanistan is party to the **Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**. Articles 2 (c), 3, 5 (a) and 15 of the Convention relate to access to justice. Articles 15 and 17 establish obligations for ensuring women's equality before the law and preventing all forms of discrimination against women regarding education, social and economic life and equality of women's rights in the family. Furthermore, the Convention establishes that the marriage of a child would render the marriage null. Articles 7 and 8 commit signatories to eliminate discrimination against women in the public and political life of their country.
- Afghanistan is committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Target 5.5 of which stipulates a commitment to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life."
- Article 22 of the **Constitution of Afghanistan** states that any kind of discrimination and distinction between the citizens of Afghanistan is prohibited and that the citizens of Afghanistan—whether men or women— have equal rights and duties before the law.
- UNSCR 1325: The UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security on 31 October 2000. This resolution reaffirms the critical role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in post-conflict reconstruction and emphasises that the peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts.
- Afghanistan National Action Plan (NAP) 1325: The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan launched its first UNSCR1325 NAP in July 2015 and its second in August 2019 to mainstream a gender perspective to address the challenges that women face in the aftermath of war and conflict in the country.
- The 2007-2017 **National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)** was published as part of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy and provides a comprehensive list of provisions for women that the government is nominally committed to. Pillar 2 on Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights includes affirmative action targets, protection against violence and sexual harassment and political participation. As an older document it is quite widely known among politically active women.
- The **Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law** was enacted by presidential decree in 2009 and remains the key law governing issues of violence against women in Afghanistan.
- The **Anti-Women's Harassment Law** was passed in 2016 and, in 14 articles, details some punitive measures for perpetrators of sexual harassment

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women* (Kabul: UNAMA, 2018): 14-18.

### **Respondents' views on the Taliban**

Afghan and international analysts alike often consider the prospect of the Afghan government needing to somehow accommodate Taliban ideology to be one of the biggest potential hurdles for women's participation in the public sphere. One representative of civil society in Bamiyan echoed the concerns of many women interviewed:

*I can't trust the Taliban. How can I trust them, when one of their main rules is the prevention of women from leaving their homes? The Taliban's basic rule is that women should not go to the bazaar or work outside the home. They have no belief in civil rights. How could the Taliban, who are opposed to women participating in politics or society come to peace with a government that has women in it? I don't think it's possible to have peace with the Taliban.<sup>16</sup>*

Another NGO official in Kabul was even more candid: "Women want a peace in which women's rights are respected and protected. If it is going to lose all the achievements made in the past over one and a half decades, we don't want such a peace deal."<sup>17</sup> These interviews were conducted in the summer and early fall of 2019, when talks between the US and the Taliban were taking place and the prospects of a deal were either imminent or very recent. Debates in Kabul in particular at this time reflected a sense of apprehension and lack of control, given that the Afghan government had not been included in talks and, as the summer progressed, it became clear that the terms of the deal were being stripped down to a bare minimum that did not demand a ceasefire or enforced talks on a political settlement with the Afghan government.<sup>18</sup> This was reflected in the polarisation of opinion on the topic across interviews: either that a deal was imperative at any cost to stop the violence, or, like the views cited above, that the deal on the table was too risky and did not protect the Afghan constitution (more common among NGO workers and respondents in general in Kabul and Bamiyan provinces).

While these external forces and the threat of interference by the Taliban wielding more power over policy affected respondents' concerns about women's participation in political processes, on a day-to-day basis, many of these women were *already* dealing either with Taliban influence over their districts or other ostensibly more mundane forms of patriarchy that form significant barriers to their influence in decision-making at home and at work, as discussed in section 4.1. Indeed, strategies to overcome these barriers can be well developed, although they vary from family to family. They can support the formal means to promote women's influence that have been introduced the last decade—the gains that people talk about losing if a deal were to be made with the Taliban.

### **Elections: where formal meets informal**

Elections in Afghanistan have become an interesting meeting point of formal and informal participation and influence for both women and men. Reintroduced in 2004 after a 30-year hiatus, on the surface, (and notwithstanding increasingly debilitating technical and political problems with their implementation), elections have constituted an exercise of nationwide, formal political participation, where votes are recorded publicly and contribute toward the choosing of elected officials on a regular basis. In addition, they have provided a stage on which local feuds and loyalties have been tested and exacerbated, deals made, reputations destroyed (by very public campaign slurs, for example) and violence used.<sup>19</sup> They have been harbingers of social change in some areas, promising a new kind of state-citizen relationship and the need to accept women's appearance in public, and vehicles of gender-based violence against women in

16 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019.

17 Interview, Kabul, 24 September 2019.

18 Thomas Ruttig and Martine Van Bijlert, "US-Taliban Talks: An Imminent Agreement Without Peace?," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 30 August 2019.

19 Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Anna Larson, "More Legitimate, Less Fragile, Less Liberal? The Adoption and Adaptation of Elections in Afghanistan," in *Governance and Political Adaptation in Fragile States*, (eds.) J. Lahai, K. Von Strokirch, H. Brasted, and H. Ware (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

politics in others, where female candidates and voters have been sexually harassed.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far, Afghanistan has experienced four rounds of elections since 2004: presidential polls in that year and parliamentary and provincial council elections in 2005 (round 1), presidential and provincial council elections in 2009 and parliamentary elections in 2010 (round 2), presidential and provincial council elections in 2014 (round 3) and parliamentary elections in 2018 and presidential polls in 2019 (round 4). These have been progressively marred with fraud, electoral violence and great difficulties and delays in verifying numbers of participating voters and votes cast. Women’s participation as voters has been difficult to quantify as a result: while some areas have seen surprising and relatively consistent numbers of women turning out to vote in each round, others have varied greatly and been open to charges of sponsored ghost-voting, where extra cards have been gathered by men in the name of fictional women family members. Allowed to forgo having a picture attached to a voter identity card, women voters are prime targets of fraud, particularly in insecure or conservative areas where there is neither the ability nor the will to verify women’s identities.<sup>21</sup>

Tables 2 and 3: Number of Women Candidates in Afghanistan’s Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections (after vetting)

Parliamentary Election	Women candidates	Male candidates	Total	Percentage women
2005	344	2,491	2,835	12%
2010	406	2,150	2,556	15%
2018	417	2,148	2,565	16%

Provincial Council Election	Women candidates	Male candidates	Total	Percentage women
2005	285	2,916	3,201	9%
2009	342	2,982	3,324	10%
2014	308	2,405	2,713	11%

Source: National Democratic Institute reports accessed at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org)

As candidates, the number of women running in the parliamentary and provincial council elections has been relatively consistent over the four rounds (with notable exceptions in some provinces). This demonstrates the extent to which space for women in parliament and in provincial councils has become—very quickly—an accepted feature of the political system in Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that women are able to run campaigns in the same way or have equal influence over decision-making in parliament, nor that they are as able as men to stand as independents without the support of a party or influential patron. Indeed, one of the reasons *why* women’s presence in parliament has not been contested *more* is that it has been less of a threat to parties and influential individuals and rather a useful tool to exert influence by proxy.

Additionally, women candidates face challenges in campaigning and in serving in office that men do not face. Women interviewed for this study and others, point to the need for additional security, as well as the presence of male family members during campaign events. As discussed below, women are also vulnerable to gendered attacks on their reputations, which can circumscribe their ability to appear at, for instance, public events.<sup>23</sup>

20 Noah Coburn, *Violence against Women in Afghan Elections* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, forthcoming).

21 Matthieu Atkins and Anand Gopal, “Postcard: The Ghost Polls of Afghanistan: Election Day in Afghanistan’s Hinterlands,” *Harpers*, 7 April 2014 available at: <https://harpers.org/blog/2014/04/the-ghost-polls-of-afghanistan/>

22 One attempt was made to reduce the number of reserved seats in Afghanistan’s provincial councils in 2013; see Abubakar Siddique and Qadir Habib, “Protection for Women under Threat in Afghanistan,” Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 24 June 2013, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-women-gender-legislature-quota/25026221.html>

23 Coburn, “Violence against Women in Afghan Elections”.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Several factors influenced how the research was designed. The research team of two international and five Afghan researchers jointly put together a concept note responding to AREU and UN Women’s first study and the gaps it outlined. First, in order to get a sense of how different women across Afghanistan were encountering and overcoming boundaries to participation, it was important to consider a multi-site project that could look at both central and provincial offices. Second, while government offices were a primary focus, the researchers decided to keep definitions of “participation” broad to include NGOs and other public places of work in order to see whether trends in government offices were matched elsewhere. Third, researchers felt it was important to include questions about women’s participation in the home and to assess whether respondents made connections between home and family life.

#### Methods and tools

Individual semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection tool for this project due to the way in which, once researchers have established a relationship of trust with the respondent, they allow for in-depth, personal conversations conducive to the discussion of potentially sensitive topics such as sexual harassment in the workplace. It was felt that quantitative methods such as surveys would not be able to capture adequately the nuance of women’s stories and experiences. Researchers guided conversations with respondents according to a set of open-ended questions and probes, but the aim was to ensure as far as possible that these conversations were respondent-led and reflective of respondents’ own priorities. In addition to the individual interviews, focus group discussions were conducted with small groups of women as a means of stimulating group discussion and to see whether any consensus or disagreement might be found. Another key reason for choosing these methods was the skillset of the research team, all of whom have had extensive training and experience using qualitative methods.

#### Sampling

AREU researchers conducted a total of 78 semi-structured interviews and eight focus group discussions across four provinces between May and September 2019. Interviewees selected were generally female and active in politics at some level. This included government officials, civil society representatives and local women activists. While the project was not designed to represent the views of “ordinary” Afghan women, an effort was made to ensure that these were not simply national figures, but also represented political activity at the district and provincial levels.

The provinces of Balkh, Bamiyan, Kabul and Nangarhar were selected because they were fairly secure, allowing for researcher access, but still, particularly in the case of Nangarhar, were subject to security issues. They were also provinces that researchers had conducted research in previously, including for AREU and UN Women, allowing comparing shifting trends. Interviewees were also selected to represent rural and urban perspectives, and families who were traditionally considered elite, as well as those who were more marginalised. Women in positions of leadership at both the district and city/village level were particularly targeted.

Interviews were broken down as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Number of Interviews by Province and District

Province	Districts	Number of interviews
Bamiyan	Bamiyan City, Yakolang	20
Balkh	Mazar-i-Sharif City, Balkh and Dehdadi	22
Kabul	Kabul City	16
Nangarhar	Jalalabad City, Behsud	20

### Data analysis

Data were coded carefully and themes for the issues paper derived directly from the transcripts themselves, with researchers ensuring that respondents' own thoughts, priorities and analyses were central to the findings presented in the paper. While the primary data analysis was conducted initially by one of the international researchers, the whole team were involved in reading through and making suggestions for changes and correcting any inaccuracies.

### Ethical considerations

Great care was taken to ensure that pseudonyms were assigned to all transcripts and that core principles of confidentiality were respected. The research, its funding and its purpose were explained to all respondents before interviews commenced. Security for the respondents and the research team was of utmost concern, with routes and locations of interviews changing each day and flexible planning based on the latest security updates available.

### Limitations

Several challenges were experienced by the team during data collection. In Kabul province in particular, it was difficult to find senior respondents who were willing to participate in the project in the run up to the 2019 Presidential elections. This necessitated an extension into September 2019. Security problems caused delays to fieldwork in Nangarhar and some areas of Balkh, and had some impact on the districts selected for study.

Handwritten notes were taken during each interview by the two researchers present and compared against one another afterwards. There is always some risk, however, that some data will be lost this way. Several probes were asked to the respondents after each answer to try to ensure that their meaning was fully grasped by the researchers.

## 4. FINDINGS

Respondents interviewed throughout this project reflected on and emphasised the abilities of women to participate in and shape political processes in Afghanistan. This was often embedded in their narratives of their own struggles to secure access to education or certain political positions. At the same time, however, respondents were also forthcoming in their descriptions of the many barriers to participation in political processes. This report first summarises some of the key hindrances to women's participation that emerged from research.

### 4.1. Key hindrances to women's participation in decision-making at home and work

The following eight themes constitute general barriers against women's participation in public and/or political decision-making arenas that were discussed by respondents from all provinces: reputation; men's zero-sum mentality of power relations; women's self-perception and/or perception of other women; *rawabit* (or patronage-type relationships); financial dependence; gendered socialisation within the household/family; lack of centre-ground politics; and gender-based violence.

#### REPUTATION

Preserving reputation, as an individual woman and as a representative of wider family, is a priority for many women working outside the home in particular and, across the dataset, constitutes a primary barrier against participation in public or political decision making. Two factors combine to make this a particularly difficult barrier to break down: first, the importance assigned across Afghanistan to women's "honour" (sexual propriety) and their responsibility for protecting the honour of their families, and second, the increasingly predatory and sexualised work environments in which there are often few provisions for female employees (separate offices or bathrooms, for example). The following quotations highlight the way in which these two factors combine to limit women's willingness a) to work outside the home, and b) to interject their opinions in decision-making processes:

*The most important thing is that women do not want to face physical harassment, which is a culture among Afghan men - when women work in the same office as men then the men think that they can request to have physical relations with them. This is why women do not want to work under the supervision of men.<sup>24</sup>*

*I am happy that I did not win [the election], despite the fact that I know the IEC changed the results. Most of the winning candidates paid large amounts of money to win, some had power, and some had relationships with IEC staff...Today, after the election result most people think that women who won or are working in high ranks in the government and NGOs are harlots and whores. I know it's not true, but it's people's perception and what they understood from the media.<sup>25</sup>*

*Women were harassed [in this government department], but they did not file their complaints against the harassment because they thought the complaints system might not work and their respect would be affected.<sup>26</sup>*

24 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-24062019

25 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-16062019

26 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-28072019

*Because of these dirty men, most intelligent women are not working outside their homes, these men make tight and dark our society which is otherwise safe for women... In most organisations, men abuse women. But women cannot open their mouths - if women talk about men's abuse, for sure people will claim that they are not good women...if they were good women then they would never work in a man's position.<sup>27</sup>*

*Culturally, a female is not allowed to work, so females who do work do not want to take the lead in their organisations. The reason is that if they face any problems in their working environment, these problems might affect their families and cause problems for the women at the family level. Thus, they avoid taking the lead.<sup>28</sup>*

*We have a meeting once a week, and all the departments should be represented. The gender and human rights manager is a man. He didn't like us to participate in the weekly meetings. I complained to my commander and asked why I couldn't participate in the meetings - I just see you in the same way as I see my women colleagues, so why do you only see me as a woman and not as a police officer and colleague? When he couldn't stop me attending the meetings, he made up rumours about me, because he knows that a woman's weakness is her honour.<sup>29</sup>*

With women's reputation so closely tied to perceived sexual propriety, they are not only vulnerable to physical sexual harassment but also the threat of rumours about sexual activity. This includes, for instance, the common assumption that a woman in a position of status must have used sex to advance herself, therefore making herself more open to the sexual advances of other men. As one woman in Bamiyan suggested about such harassment in her organisation, not only could she and the other women not take their complaints about the director of their organisation to the courts, but also exposing them to others in society would also damage the ability of women to participate in politics, since if "the public knew about such harassment in our organisation, they would not allow women to work there anymore," ultimately harming the woman more than the man accused of harassment.<sup>30</sup> Thus, deterrents against complaining and having the men responsible punished for their actions are threefold: they concern women's reputation as individuals, the reputations of their families, and the reputations of their offices as places suitable for women's employment. Complaining could cost other women colleagues their jobs if their families considered their work environment unfit for women. As the last two respondent quotations also imply, the threat of rumours against reputation can prevent women from even attending meetings, let alone speaking out or putting their ideas forward. Drawing attention to oneself in this way carries serious reputational risks.

This problem appears to have worsened and/or become more widespread for women over time since working environments became more available to them after the initial fall of the Taliban in 2001. This is likely the result of numerous factors, including having more women in offices more generally, but also more widespread internet and social media access. What this indicates is the extent to which dangers for women and threats to their opportunities to take part in public life are increasing, even now under Ashraf Ghani's ostensibly progressive administration—dangers and threats that provide the Taliban and other conservative groups even more leverage with which to curtail women's political participation.

27 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-01082019

28 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-02072019.

29 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-24062019

30 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-29072019.

## ZERO-SUM MENTALITY OF POWER

Related to (and perhaps responsible for) the propensity for vocal women to be shamed or threatened into silence is the way in which men see women's advancement as a threat to their own. As one female MP stated in Kabul, "even if a male candidate cannot gather votes for himself, he can still destroy a female candidate's vote bank,"<sup>31</sup> a problem that is related both to the nature of Afghanistan's Single Non-Transferable Vote system and to the perceived shame in getting fewer votes than a female candidate. Respondents across all four provinces described how men were not willing to submit to women's authority in offices or accept them in high positions:

*Our [patriarchal] system and traditions are also causing problems for women. Most of the time men are against the decisions of women and this puts extra pressure on women, as a result they prefer to keep themselves away from decision-making gatherings.<sup>32</sup>*

*If a woman works in an office in a high position, male staff under her supervision think that they are better and more successful than her because they are men. They give themselves the right to talk and make decisions because they are men. When a man and a woman have the same position, the man will try to keep the more interesting parts of the job description for himself and marginalise the woman. When there is a question and answer session, the man will answer even if the question is asked of the woman. They interfere in everything, they say they know better...<sup>33</sup>*

*Men are power seekers; they don't allow women to be more powerful than them. They just identify what women's weaknesses are in society and then use those weaknesses to make the working environment difficult for them. In such a situation and in our society, women then leave their jobs or they become isolated and don't interfere in anyone else's work anymore.<sup>34</sup>*

*Men feel shame and disgrace if they ask their wives about decisions or for advice.<sup>35</sup>*

As several women pointed out, men are, at times, simply unwilling to listen to women, even when they are in positions of authority. There is the assumption that men know more than women, even when this is clearly not true, as pointed out by the Secretariat of the Governor's office in one of the districts studied.<sup>36</sup> This is directly linked to the widely held perception that any decision-making power that women have is an indication of men's weakness or inability to take the lead, either at home or at work. This zero-sum approach to the power dynamics between women and men has been inadvertently (and perhaps at times, intentionally) exacerbated by international assistance programmes that focus exclusively on women and whose main concern is to ensure continued attention and funding.

31 Interview, Kabul, UNW-WPPD-28052019

32 Interview, Balkh-UNW-WPPD-10072019

33 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-15062019

34 Interview, Nangarhar-UNW-WPPD-23062019

35 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-25072019

36 Interview, Bamiyan-UNW-WPPD-04082019

## WOMEN'S SELF-PERCEPTION/PERCEPTION OF OTHER WOMEN

In addition to the commonplace assumption held by men that women's decision-making undermines men's own authority, women's perception of themselves and other women also constitutes a critical barrier to their meaningful participation. As one respondent from Kabul described it, women "don't participate as citizens";<sup>37</sup> in other words, women do not attribute the same value to their own participation as they do to men's political involvement. Respondents suggested different reasons for this, with one woman activist in Balkh suggesting that this was the result of a sense of pragmatism where women were resigned to men making the decisions anyway: "they believe everything will be decided by men whether they participate or not."<sup>38</sup> Many others believed it was a lack of self-confidence in their ability to participate, which stemmed from attitudes toward them at home:

*It is one of the main problems for women in our society—women are marginal and kept away from decision-making. Even when there is a small boy at home, his elder sister is not able to say a word in front of her younger brothers....<sup>39</sup>*

*Women should start decision-making practice in their families about small issues to build their confidence.<sup>40</sup>*

*Women need more confidence in themselves, they work harder than men, and they should trust themselves that they can make good decisions. Women always try to be good wives and mothers, and bring good kids into society.<sup>41</sup>*

The extent to which women are involved in decision-making at home varies greatly from house to house, and, as stated above, women can wield considerable informal influence over family affairs. However, this influence is quite often kept in the background, or on the sidelines of family meetings, and does little to demonstrate to young boys in the family, for example, that women are able to participate openly. Neither does it contribute to bolstering confidence in decision-making in front of others. This lack of confidence was generally seen as a factor hindering women's decision-making, yet the last respondent cited here went on to talk about how this was also related to increased caution in decision-making, with women being more risk-averse, as discussed above, in order to ensure that the decisions they did actually make were well-founded:

*One point which makes it difficult for women to influence decisions is the low potential for women to take risks. Naturally, women don't take risks to make big decisions. There are exceptions, but [generally]...a woman only takes a decision when she is sure that she has the ability to do this and to implement the decision. Women are not like men who start any work and say "no problem, it can be done." Women decide and go ahead with a clearer calculation based on facts...Men just make decisions based on fake pride and they don't take responsibility when something goes wrong.<sup>42</sup>*

Whether or not the respondent here is making an essentialist argument about innate differences between men and women, this statement is indicative of the perception that the pressure placed on women with public roles to perform well is disproportionate. There is a lot more at stake in terms of their own reputation, that of their family and their female co-workers, if they do not.

37 Interview-Kabul-UNW-WPPD-28052019

38 Interview UNW-WPPD-Balkh-03072019

39 Interview UNW-WPPD-Balkh-10072019

40 Interview UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

41 Interview UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-28072019

42 Interview UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

Some of the most critical judges of women's performance are not men but other women, which can greatly affect self-confidence. Across the entire dataset, respondents talked about the need for women to work together and support each other to offset a culture of suspicion and competition between women:

*One thing I want to emphasise is the need for women to support each other. Until we support one another, we will never become successful at the decision-making level. Unfortunately, sometimes we see that men support women, but women don't... Maybe it is because of a negative competition between women.<sup>43</sup>*

*Women should have political communication with each other, and they should use their rights. Their rights are their power. Women's unity can make women powerful. For example, in parliament, to reject [a particular male politician] as the chairman, all women came together and had one position... I felt women's unity there. When women have connections and communication with each other as men have, then they can have an active participation in the decision-making process.<sup>44</sup>*

The issue of collective action among women is important but complicated. An AREU study of the impact of reserved seats for women in the 2005 parliamentary elections noted that assumptions should not be made about women's propensity to work together simply on account of their being women, while demonstrating that some women MPs were going out of their way to separate themselves from other women MPs due to differences in political or religious beliefs, ethnicity, the need to protect their own reputations against associations with outspoken women, and personal feuds, among other reasons.<sup>45</sup> As such, it became clear that women were navigating the political landscape in parliament just as their male colleagues were doing, making alliances strategically (and often with perhaps unlikely political allies). This is not to say, however, that women MPs do not recognise the value of collective action as women, nor that the political environment in parliament is static. Indeed, parliament in 2019—just as in Afghanistan in 2019—is very different from parliament in 2006, and stakes for women are much higher given the possibility of future negotiations with the Taliban. Women may work together more in parliament now than they did in its earlier sittings, reflecting their being amenable to collective action when they consider it to align with their interests both as politicians and as women.

#### RAWABIT/PATRONAGE

In the AREU study mentioned above, one of the key hindrances to women's collective action in parliament was the nature of individual women MPs' connections to influential figures and groups outside the legislature. These connections, or relationships, referred to in Dari as *rawabit*, meant that the decisions women made as legislators were influenced by others. Issues of *rawabit* were discussed at length by respondents, with some (particularly in Balkh) seeing them in some cases as the only way to get positions in the first place, but also with very real consequences for the kinds of decisions that women were able to make once in a post:

*Women are honest and talented, but they will only be able to make good decisions when they are independent and don't belong to any party. Women who get a position through any of the parties in Afghanistan have to follow the specific party's plan, and these women will not be able to participate in decision-making at any level. They will have lots of responsibility with no authority... There are many talented women that are not related to any party, which is why they do not have key positions in government.<sup>46</sup>*

43 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-10082019

44 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-12062019

45 Anna Wordsworth, *A Matter of Interests: Gender and the Politics of Presence in Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga* (Kabul: AREU, 2007).

46 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

*Whenever [a woman gets] a position based on the help of a particular person, she has a symbolic role and cannot do anything according to her job description.<sup>47</sup>*

*I would like to tell you clearly that here connections are stronger than talents. These connections and corruption are the reasons that women are not in high ranks, because they don't have connections with powerful people and they don't have money to pay a bribe to get a high position.<sup>48</sup>*

*Those provincial council members who were supported by power holders to win the election are threatened by them most of the time. They insult the PC members when they are not able to perform favours for them and remind them of how much it cost them to support the PC member's campaign.<sup>49</sup>*

*In Balkh province [as compared to Nangarhar], in the public and private sector women play a vivid and vibrant part. They are businesswomen, taxi drivers, shopkeepers and teachers. On the other hand, government here is divided among the political parties. The governor is a representative of Jamiyat and his two deputies are from Wahdat-i-Milli and Jumbesh. These people make the decisions.<sup>50</sup>*

Over the last 15 years, the researchers have talked to a number of women who have attempted (sometimes successfully) to navigate relationships of this kind, for example, by accepting money for campaigns from political parties but then refusing to join the party formally afterwards.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, even the rumour of attachments to political parties can have negative consequences in a country where parties are often associated with the violence of the civil war and in which the majority of candidates in elections claim to be independent even when they have longstanding party affiliations. When it comes to decision-making also, *rawabit* proves a key hindrance to substantive political participation.

#### FINANCIAL DEPENDENCE

Linked to *rawabit*, financial dependence on influential individuals, parties, or simply men in one's household has a significant impact on women's ability to participate meaningfully, not least because even small expenses for travel, for example, must be requested and are not necessarily a given:

*There are a lot of women who have a salary but cannot use the money without their husband's permission, and also those who rely on their husband's income need permission before they can spend it. This is because men are the breadwinners in society and women do not need money for anything.<sup>52</sup>*

*At the city level, uneducated women who do not have financial freedom are still under the influence of people who feed them. Therefore, they are not able to make their own decisions. However, educated women in cities are now becoming independent...For instance, when an educated woman joins an organisation and starts working, she gets a salary...and that salary is transferred to her personal bank account. It means that only she has access to her account and money.<sup>53</sup>*

47 Interview, Bamiyan, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-25072019

48 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-03072019

49 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-08072019

50 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-08072019

51 Wordsworth, *A Matter of Interests*, 21.

52 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-24062019

53 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-08072019

*Honestly, most women do not have authority to spend money without their husband's permission...I know a woman who has a salary but she cannot spend it, because the elders in her family got her money and don't allow her to spend it. Her husband says that as he allows her to have a job, this is enough, and the salary has to go towards household expenditures.<sup>54</sup>*

*Financially, women are not independent. They do not own any property. A woman does not have the freedom of spending, and she has to get permission from either her in-laws or her own family.<sup>55</sup>*

Although women can and do hold their own bank accounts, especially in cities, it is quite rare for them to be completely financially independent. Further, while it is legal for women to own and inherit property, it is again uncommon. As another recent AREU study found, access to cash through informal credit, in the form of borrowing locally from shopkeepers, family or other villagers, is also highly gendered, with women having very limited access; even when granted permission by their husbands to take loans, the responsibility to repay them remains with the husband and not the women themselves.<sup>56</sup> This aside, differences within families as to the levels of financial independence that women have vary greatly on the attitudes of family members and on the location of their homes. If homes are located near to a local shop or bazaar, then it is much easier for the family to justify giving the role of procuring food and household goods to daughters and wives, than it would be if these shops were further away (and involved a longer walk on their own, risking unwanted attention from men, for example). One male university professor in Nangarhar explained that it was his job to buy the groceries in his family simply because he worked in town next to the bazaar.<sup>57</sup> With procuring food and other goods comes some responsibility for spending and decision-making, and while it is more likely that urban families would live closer to shops, this is not simply an urban/rural divide and is much more clearly dependent on approaches within families toward the roles of women and girls.

#### GENDERED SOCIALISATION WITHIN THE HOUSEHOLD/FAMILY

Most respondents across the study related women's lack of decision-making power at work to their treatment at home from a young age. The widespread patrilocal practice of sending women away to live with their husband's family when they get married often leads to son preference and the perspective that there is little need to focus resources on daughters. This in turn means that boys' education is prioritised over girls', and that boys are encouraged to become involved in family decisions, whereas girls are taught to be subservient. As one respondent from Nangarhar described,

*From a behavioural perspective, it starts from within families. Families prefer to provide all opportunities and chances to their sons rather than to their daughters. They think that their sons are their own, and daughters are strangers, they are for other families (as they get married). Such kinds of barriers make women backward.<sup>58</sup>*

Similarly, many respondents attributed men's apparently innate sense of self-confidence to the way that young boys are treated at home: "men have guts, and they get this power from the beginning of childhood. In our family it is widespread, we give importance to the boys and try to improve their capacity, but we ignore the girls."<sup>59</sup> Beyond childhood, respondents talked about a huge variety of household-related barriers to women's ability to contribute to decision-making at home and work, including the problem of women having to quit their jobs after marriage if their new family disapproves

54 Interview, Bamiyan, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-01082019

55 Interview, Kabul, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-28052019

56 Tom Shaw and Ihsanullah Ghafoori, *On Borrowed Time: The Limits of Informal Credit for Livelihood Security in Herat, Afghanistan* (Kabul: AREU, 2019): v.

57 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-23062019

58 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

59 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-18062019

of them working; women having to keep their jobs secret from their wider families; women continually being identified only as they related to their family and not as independent people; women not being able to stay out late to attend courses; and wider family members considering husbands to be weak if they let their wives go out to work. Again, however, these barriers within the household vary greatly in intensity and most of the respondents we spoke to considered their own experiences—largely (but not always) of supportive husbands, in-laws and wider families—as exceptions where families had become vehicles propelling them forward rather than barriers to their progression. This is discussed further in section 4.3.

#### LACK OF CENTRE-GROUND POLITICS

Underpinning the barriers discussed above are broader political trends such as a lack of centre-ground politics, and the way in which democracy as a political system and culture is still perceived to be new, and not entirely accepted.<sup>60</sup>

One respondent from Balkh talked about a current trend toward holding extreme political positions where talking about potentially controversial topics, such as women’s involvement in decision-making, in a rational, moderate manner was unfamiliar and uncommon: “In a society like Afghanistan where most things head towards the extremes, moderation is something undefined for most people. To discuss women’s participation in society in this situation is difficult.”<sup>61</sup> Here the respondent is referring to the lack of centre-ground politics in Afghanistan in general, and women’s rights either being seen as related to the Communist regime in the 1970s-80s or to western liberal values seen as imposed since 2001, but either way, as opposed to Afghanistan’s Islamic culture. A different respondent from Balkh talked about the gap between civil society and politics as contributing to this lack of middle ground.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the recent rise of social media and the more extreme positions held by people posting who can retain anonymity and do not have to support arguments with evidence could be contributing to the lack of moderate space for discussion.

#### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: NARRATIVES OF INSECURITY, RESTRICTED MOVEMENTS AND PHYSICAL THREATS

A pervasive narrative that appeared in almost every interview in the dataset was that of insecurity inhibiting women’s movements outside the home:

*There are people who discourage women before they apply for a job, mostly by threatening them with insecurity—they are told that if they get the job they will have to travel to insecure places. But this is not true—if a place is insecure then a man would not have to go there either.*<sup>63</sup>

*The deputies of the Education Department should be women, but some people, pretending to be friendly, told women who applied for these positions that they would be difficult for women to handle, as they have to travel to all the districts, secure and insecure. Somehow these people frightened the women and discouraged them from applying. Now we see that the deputy is a man and he hasn’t gone to any of the districts yet.*<sup>64</sup>

60 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-20062019

61 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

62 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-07072019

63 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

64 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-18062019

*Issues of security and suicide attacks make the situation difficult for women, and from the other side, the government doesn't support women well. Look at those women candidates who staged a protest in Kabul, but the government removed them from the area by making up a story that a suicide bomber had entered the area. They were there for about 9 months and none of the high-ranking officials dealt with their cases.<sup>65</sup>*

It is clear that insecurity in Afghanistan affects men and women differently, but this again has more to do with the lack of rule of law, a culture of impunity for rape and other forms of violence against women combined with a widespread social emphasis on women's sexual propriety than with actual physical danger from suicide bombs and other kinds of insurgent attacks, which target men and women indiscriminately. What is also clear from these interviews is that, just as insecurity is used strategically by power-holders as a narrative to prevent the monitoring of elections, so too is it used strategically by families, supervisors and even the government to prevent women from progressing as decision-makers and leaders in society. As such, it constitutes gender-based violence against women.

This is connected to the way in which physical violence against women is still commonplace across Afghanistan in public and private spaces, and, for the most part, is treated with impunity, constituting a significant deterrent from participation in public life:

*There is violence that still happens. Farkhunda was burnt and killed, women have been raped - and who did it? The Taliban? No, it was done by people of this society. Until we solve these issues, we will never have peace.<sup>66</sup>*

Respondents in Bamiyan talked about female candidates for the election getting beaten up in public and about widespread sexual harassment and intimidation in the workplace with very little recourse available,<sup>67</sup> and even less for cases of domestic abuse where the risks of reporting it (social ostracising, and loss of home and/or custody of children, for example) are often perceived by women as far greater than the physical suffering experienced in an abusive home.<sup>68</sup>

It goes without saying that these kinds of experiences can severely hinder if not obliterate women's ability and willingness to get involved in decision-making of any kind. It is worth remembering, however, that even after having experienced extreme violence, and even with the threat of that violence continuing, women are involved in public life in Afghanistan, now more than at any point in history, and defying those who would threaten them into silence. Indeed, characterising all women as suffering at the hands of all Afghan men does these women and men a great disservice and overlooks the way in which after decades of abuse under mujahiddin and Taliban rule, women were willing and able to participate in the Bonn Process in 2001 and stand for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005.

## 4.2. Impact of formal mechanisms on women's decision-making

Following section 4.1's summary of the barriers to women's participation as identified and described by respondents themselves, the paper now turns to mechanisms, both formal and informal, that women described as having helped them overcome these barriers. This section covers three critical aspects of women's formal participation in the public sphere, all of which have received significant government and international attention and funding over the last 15 years: elections, public sector jobs and education.

65 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-07072019

66 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-10082019

67 Interview, Bamiyan, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-25072019; Interview, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-4082019; UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-27072019

68 UNAMA, *Injustice and Impunity: Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women* (Kabul: UNAMA, 2018).

## ELECTIONS

This section examines what the formal mechanism of electoral participation for women (or even just the possibility of it) does, if anything, to affect their decision-making influence in both elections and in other areas of life, as well as whether these effects continue in the spaces between elections.

Over the last 15 years, elections have again become a regular and recognisable feature of the political landscape in Afghanistan, drawing men and women to the polls across rural and urban areas, although increasing insecurity, disillusionment and fraud have discentivised turnout. Women's participation in these has been a subject of interest to different actors for a number of reasons; for some observers, it is viewed as a proxy for Afghanistan's progress towards international democratic best practice, while for others, it is a sign of potential electoral fraud in places where the apparently high female voter turnout does not match the conservative norms that generally keep women away from the polls. Nevertheless, it is clear that the emphasis placed on women's participation in elections has had some effect on their status as Afghan citizens.

Respondents for this study across the four provinces all talked about the symbolic benefits of women's suffrage, with many referring to the way in which voting was a woman's right now, according to the Afghan Constitution. Most respondents, however, clearly qualified these opening statements with caveats, discussing, for example, how women voters, in general, have very little de facto choice over the candidate they voted for in elections. Whilst ballots are secret in theory, women are scared that people will find out if they vote for a different person than the candidate selected by their male relatives:

*In the election, it is not women's decision who to vote for, it is their men's decisions. Women need more awareness that it is their own right to vote for whom they choose, and that in the polling centre, no one can see them. They feel fear and think that men will become aware of it if they vote for someone else. I have talked a lot with women about this, and I understood just how scared they were.<sup>69</sup>*

*It is the fundamental right of a woman to take part in an election and cast her vote. However, the situation in our society is different. We have many restrictions on women in the elections. For example, when a woman wants to cast her vote, she needs to get permission from her husband, brother and father. She cannot make this decision alone. There are some number of households where women do not need permission but in general, they are very restricted in rural and urban areas...many times my colleagues face the same situation, they wanted to vote in favour of one candidate but their families wanted them to vote for someone else. The situation for educated and uneducated women is the same in this regard, and it is not only for elections but for other social issues as well.<sup>70</sup>*

*Women are not able to make their own decisions. As we have seen in the previous election, many, many women took part, however, they were not independent while casting their vote.<sup>71</sup>*

*Women's participation as voters was very visible but patriarchy still has its effects...for example, about 52 percent of women participated as voters but they voted for men's [preferred, usually male] candidates...because men have more power and authority and dictated that women should vote for their candidates, and women do accept their men's words. I think women need more awareness about women candidates....Did you hear about the woman voter who voted for a woman candidate?...Before election day her husband told her to vote for the man he chose, and she agreed but when she reached the ballot box she decided to vote for a woman. When the couple came out of*

69 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

70 UNW-WPPD-Balkh- 10072019

71 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

*the polling centre the man asked his wife who she had voted for and she told him she had voted for a woman, he beat her a lot in public and then made her leave home. She had to go to DoWA and get a place at the women's shelter with the help of the human rights commission.<sup>72</sup>*

There are several points being made here and across the data. First, while women's increased participation is an important symbolic claim to space in the public and political arena, it is not an indicator of increased decision-making in choosing a candidate independently—and indeed that permission to vote may be contingent on women voting for a husband or father's chosen candidate, with the threat of violence and even potential loss of home and livelihood awaiting those who disobey. However, choosing a candidate is very rarely, if ever, a truly independent, individual exercise in Afghanistan, with men also choosing whom to vote for after much discussion with family and wider community members, who are primarily but not always only male.<sup>73</sup> The issue then becomes one of women having increased space in collective decision-making arenas—family gatherings, local councils, etc.—just as much as, if not more than, needing greater confidence and de facto ability to choose a candidate independently at the polling booth.

There are also problems with assumptions about the connections between women candidates and women voters. Women candidates lack access to the broad social networks that men have, for example, through their participation in community councils or through work, night school or the local mosque. They also generally have more limited access to funds than their male counterparts, as one parliamentarian described: “when a man wants to run in an election he has all kinds of financial resources, and he can always sell the land he owns for more money. But in our society, women cannot hold land or other financial assets.”<sup>74</sup> This means that women candidates are necessarily selective about to whom and where they target their campaigns, and will often choose to target men because men, in turn, determine who the women vote for anyway. As a result, women candidates' campaigns do not necessarily contribute towards getting more women involved in decision-making processes. As one respondent in Bamiyan pointed out, “there is not any relationship and familiarity among women”;<sup>75</sup> because of the context, women's electoral campaigns have not been transformational for women's decision-making power in the country. Furthermore, if they do get elected, these women candidates have very little connection to the women voters in their constituent communities.

Finally, even if women were to have more influence over family decisions in choosing a candidate or more confidence to defy family decisions at the polling booth, it should not be assumed that they would necessarily vote for a woman. As the following respondents described,

*[Just like men]...women candidates are always promising what they are not able to do. They gather people...and promise them many things, and even some of them distributed scarves to women, but as they win the election, they completely finish their connection with people.<sup>76</sup>*

72 UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-25072019

73 Whether or not men are also subject to the same threats or acts of violence over voting choice was not immediately obvious from the dataset for this study and is an important consideration for further study.

74 Interview, Kabul, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-28052019. According to the 2004 Constitution, women have the same property and inheritance rights as men, but because an estimated 90 percent of land rights are decided through customary or tribal councils in Afghanistan, very few women have access to land and need to cede any property they inherit to male family members as a statement of loyalty and in return for protection. Gayle Tzemach Lemmon and Becky Allen, *Reforming Women's Property Rights in Afghanistan*, Council on Foreign Relations, 5 September 2017. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/reforming-womens-property-rights-afghanistan>

75 Interview, Bamiyan, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-01082019

76 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-06172019

*Voters are women who are just highlighted during the election and on the day of the election, after that, no one will know how they are and how their life is, especially the candidates - those who win the election will never turn back to see how they are.<sup>77</sup>*

*Honestly, women participated in the last election with full interest, but the problem was that women candidates had very limited campaign finance. I have never heard of a rich woman supporting another woman candidate before...Because women candidates did not have any [wealthy] supporters, to support their campaigns and prepare lunches and refreshments, these women did not have good campaigns and most people were not Women candidates typically have little money, little influence and limited security provisions, meaning that their ability and willingness to visit communities once elected are likely even lower than that of male candidates. Unless they have strong family connections to a candidate, then, women voters have few incentives to vote for women candidates.<sup>78</sup>*

In sum, women's suffrage and participation as candidates in elections have a strong, symbolic role in challenging the surface patriarchy in Afghanistan's formal public institutions, a role that should not be underestimated in its ability to forge much-needed space for women in the public sphere. Just as other social structures (decision-making by consensus, and the threat of violence as a campaign tool, for example) influence how elections happen in Afghanistan, however, the patriarchal norms embedded within these structures prevent elections from becoming institutions of radical change for women.

#### GREATER NUMBERS OF WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Across the data, respondents referred to noticeable changes for women in the public sector since the 2014 election and the start of the National Unity Government administration, such as requirements and targets for more women in government offices. Opinions were mixed as to the impact these requirements were having on women's decision-making, with most respondents qualifying their support for these measures with a concern about the way in which women's responsibilities were increasing without the necessary decision-making power or authority. As one respondent from Nangarhar explained, "here, as I see it, women have a lot of responsibilities and tasks to do but they have very little authority to make decisions at any level."<sup>79</sup> Others talked about the disconnect between Kabul and the provinces, with orders issued by line ministries in Kabul for more women employees but provincial offices ignoring these directives.<sup>80</sup> Having said this, two clear trends in the data stand out: first, an overwhelming support by respondents for women holding public sector positions at all levels even simply for the sake of their presence in those offices, in spite of questionable influence over policy; second, a clear emphasis on the importance of supportive supervisors and colleagues to enhance decision-making opportunities and authority for women.

Across the data, women repeatedly emphasised the importance of getting more women to work in public sector offices. One woman working in the education directorate in Nangarhar gave an example from her own experience:

*When I joined this department, there was only one woman and that was me. The male staff did not behave well with me. They made problems for me, for example, if I came to work a little late they would mark me absent in the attendance sheet. I also did not have a separate room even though I worked for a separate department (monitoring and evaluation). I had to share a room with male members of staff and they did not want to share the room with me, they asked me to sit somewhere else. This went on for a long time. Then a new director joined the department and got us this [separate] room, and now we are eight women and eight men in the department in total. I am now the head*

77 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-20062019

78 Interview, Bamiyan, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-25072019

79 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-20062019

80 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-17062019

*of the monitoring department in Jalalabad city... I requested that the new director hire more women, he supported me and based on my decision he allowed me to hire new female staff in this department. All the women here were hired by me.<sup>81</sup>*

While it is important to recognise the limitations of focusing on numbers alone, in this case, more women in an office made for an environment that was more conducive to being able to do one's job well and make a significant career progression that involved the authority to hire other women. In addition, having a separate room—justified by the greater number of female employees using it—made for less opportunity for harassment. Another respondent from Nangarhar emphasised this point, highlighting the importance of practical considerations for women employees:

*For example, when a woman works with men in an office and they are in one room, men don't follow Islamic ethics there and they pull up their shalwar in front of women or they use bad words with each other...In such a situation if any family member of that woman enters the room, they will not allow that woman to continue working in that office... Also, most offices do not provide women with separate toilets...The government offices should note these issues and create a better working environment for women.<sup>82</sup>*

These examples highlight the interconnected nature of getting more women physically present in an office, keeping them there, through the provision of amenable working environments, and their ability to influence decisions within them. In other words, they indicate a correlation between having more women represented in the workplace, productive work and reduced sexual harassment.

The Afghan government has taken steps to both increase the numbers of women working in the civil service (through the 2018 Policy on Increasing Women's Participation in Civil Services),<sup>83</sup> and to combat sexual harassment (through the 2016 Anti-Women's Harassment Law). Combined, these laws attempt to make the working environment safer and more conducive to productive work for female employees. However, this research was conducted in 2019 and none of the respondents across the four provinces mentioned these provisions, suggesting that more needs to be done to raise awareness about them. In addition, the Policy to increase participation offers no concrete mechanisms through which government departments might be judged or penalised for non-compliance, and the Anti-Harassment Law offers some small punishment for perpetrators but arguably not enough to provide serious deterrents.

Clearly important in the first example cited above was the attitude of the new director, who listened to the respondent's requests for change, provided a separate room and gave her the authority to hire new female staff. Again, across the data, respondents emphasised the importance of supportive supervisors, i.e., people who facilitated and defended women's decision-making authority:

*I have not faced any challenges during my decision-making, because my supervisors and the mayor support me. Support from my supervisors is very important.<sup>84</sup>*

*The supervisor should give chances to women to become good decision-makers. Women have the capacity to make decisions but because they are women, their supervisors do not give them the chance. If a woman had a chance at making decisions, they would be brilliant at it.<sup>85</sup>*

*There had been a low number of women in government organisations before the new governor came here. When he arrived here, we went to speak with him and told him that women should be recruited in government offices. We told him that according*

81 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-18062019

82 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-23062019

83 [https://iarpsc.gov.af/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/11/Policy-on-Increasing-Women-Participation-in-Civil-Service-\\_English.pdf](https://iarpsc.gov.af/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/11/Policy-on-Increasing-Women-Participation-in-Civil-Service-_English.pdf)

84 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-07072019

85 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-14072019

*to the National Action Plan [for Women in Afghanistan], 25-35 percent of employees in government offices should be women. After our meeting, he ordered that all the provincial government departments should hire women in their vacancy openings. Now we have women in all of these departments.<sup>86</sup>*

*[Women's ability to make decisions in my workplace] depends mostly on line managers and the organisation's leadership. High ranking managers should encourage their staff, and let them have authority based on their job description and responsibilities. Managers should not limit any of their staff, men or women. If managers don't encourage women and ignore their ideas and opinions during a decision-making process, then women will become silent.<sup>87</sup>*

The last respondent cited here refers to a general tendency within government and other offices in Afghanistan to centralise authority, meaning that most decisions are made at the highest levels and, as women are rarely employed at these levels, they are necessarily left out of decision-making processes. This works two ways, however, and means also that with the support of someone in a position of authority, women could have a significant opportunity to influence these processes. Respondents in Bamiyan, in particular, emphasised the importance of women taking up high positions of authority, often referring to Bamiyan's Habiba Sarabi, Afghanistan's first female provincial governor.

*Since the first woman governor was Governor Sarabi in Bamiyan province, this has opened the way for other women to have active participation in social activities, economic activities, cultural activities and political activities. This experience has encouraged people to allow their daughters to go to school, and now most women in Bamiyan want to have a high position in government or in an NGO.<sup>88</sup>*

While not all women in high office were considered as champions of the interests and needs of women in general, the statement alone of having Sarabi as the first female governor in the country's history was a source of provincial pride and encouraged a role-model effect.

The extent to which women working in the public sector was emphasised in interviews was constant across public sector and NGO-working respondents. This came across in different ways, from one respondent in Bamiyan talking about how it was the government programmes that were changing societal norms (in this case teaching women to drive),<sup>89</sup> to another respondent in Balkh clearly elevating government policy above other mechanisms of social change: "CSOs can [change] the role of women in society but if the government does not change its policy, this will not work."<sup>90</sup> This emphasis on government-led change is indicative of a kind of reverence for the institution of government that still exists, long after the Soviet occupation, and which sets government jobs apart as a different class of occupation than, for example, working for an NGO. While respondents did not gloss over the many problems with government agencies, corruption not least, it was clear that these were considered the organisations with the most potential to deliver substantive change for women.

86 UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-27072019

87 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

88 UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-25072019

89 UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-27072019

90 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-08072019

## EDUCATION

Getting girls in school has been a key priority for the Afghan government and donors alike since the US intervention in 2001. Measuring girls' access to education in Afghanistan, however, is extremely difficult, not least because statistics are contested. According to Human Rights Watch,

*A 2015 Afghan government report stated that more than 8 million children were in school, 39 percent of whom were girls. In December 2016, the minister of education announced that the real number of children in school was 6 million. In April 2017, a Ministry of Education official told Human Rights Watch that there are 9.3 million children in school, 39 percent of whom are girls. All of these figures are inflated by the government's practice of counting a child as attending school until she or he has not attended for up to three years.<sup>91</sup>*

In addition, Human Rights Watch goes on to suggest that donors have their own reasons for inflating statistics and this glosses over the decline in attendance in increasingly insecure areas in recent years.

Whilst difficult to quantify, however, girls' education remains a defining feature of women's formal public participation that respondents considered critical. This was not put across as a magic bullet to success or influence, but was considered a fundamental first step to women having more influence at home and at work, as three different women in a focus group discussion in Nangarhar pointed out:

*Now, the education system at the district level is awful. The government does not prioritise the education system in the districts, so people at the district level understand that there is no proper education system in place. Therefore, they do not send their girls to school. If we had a fully functional educational system in place in the districts this would open doors for girls to go to school.<sup>92</sup>*

*Increase the level of education of women and girls and... [this] can have a direct relationship with them taking part in decision-making.<sup>93</sup>*

*Those families in which women are educated, they have the right livelihood, they have excellent opportunities for improvement, and the status of women in such families is remarkable.<sup>94</sup>*

In a work environment, it is all too easy for men or women adversaries to criticise women and label them as uneducated. In a society that maintains a high level of illiteracy and places a premium on education, this can seriously damage the reputation of an individual in the workplace. As such, having a university degree can function as one of several tools with which women can defend themselves against such charges. Indeed, without a university degree (or a high school diploma at the very least) it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure employment in government offices or NGOs. Expectations for levels of education in these jobs are much higher now than they were a decade ago. In Bamiyan, according to one respondent,<sup>95</sup> masters degrees are required for the best jobs; as no university in the province offers these courses, students need to be able to go to Kabul and stay there for the duration of a postgraduate course. Again, this is usually much easier for men than it is for women.

91 Human Rights Watch, *I Won't Be a Doctor, and One Day You'll Be Sick: Girls Access to Education in Afghanistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017): 7. Available at: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/afghanistan1017\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/afghanistan1017_web.pdf)

92 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

93 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

94 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-15062019

95 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-27072019

Another asset associated with getting an education that respondents described was the ability of educated women to read and/or be schooled in Qur’anic verse and thus be able to use knowledge of religious principles to defend their actions. Interestingly, across the interviews people connected education and Sharia consistently:

*Firstly, women should build their capacity and they should get knowledge. They should read books and get information about other countries of the world to know how other women struggled and fought. Women should know about the law and Sharia. As men have the right to be active in politics and in society, according to the law and Sharia women have the same rights. They should know this and use this knowledge. They should not give men the opportunity to make decisions on their behalf.<sup>96</sup>*

This was also considered a critical means with which to berate, embarrass and put down men who perpetrated sexual harassment at work—again, another potent tool in women’s defence. Providing training and religious education has long been recognised by agencies such as UN Women as an effective means of bolstering women’s ability to have influence and this research suggests that it can indeed have a significant impact.

### 4.3. Impact of informal mechanisms on women’s decision-making

In addition to the formal mechanisms emphasised by respondents as important to women’s decision-making, perhaps of even greater significance were informal mechanisms that allowed women to take full advantage of the formal opportunities available to them. These mechanisms include: building professional relationships and support networks; supportive men (and women) at home and work; and negotiation, particularly as a means to navigate patriarchy.

#### BUILDING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

In interview after interview, respondents talked about the way in which women held the burden of proof in any given situation at work or at home, i.e., suspected of being incompetent/uneducated/immodest until they proved themselves otherwise. For men, they perceived it was the other way around: they could get away with almost anything before someone would call them out for being incapable of performing a task. One woman district governor summed this up when she said that “a woman only takes a decision when she is sure she can implement it...Men just take decisions based on fake pride and they don’t take responsibility when something goes wrong.”<sup>97</sup> This is often the case for subjugated minorities. But it means that women who do prove themselves exceptional in their work, particularly in the public sphere, can have a significant impact on the impression that men and other women have about the competencies and potential of women in general—they can be symbols in the most substantive sense of the word.

Several of the respondents for this study saw themselves in this light and talked about the ways in which they had built professional relationships based on trust (as opposed to nepotism/family connections or bribery) and, critically, service delivery (not technically part of their job), in order to gain influence and respect. In particular, these included a female district governor in Balkh province, an MP in Kabul and a female urban district officer in Mazar-i-Sharif. The urban district officer is one of 12 in the city, each responsible for one of the corresponding 12 urban districts, and she is the only woman among them:

*When I got this job, one of the deputies of the municipality told me to become a [human resources] officer instead, as it would be better for me. I asked him why, and he said that it would be difficult for me as an urban district officer, there might be a flood or another kind of incident at midnight, what would I do? I told him that I have my own family to accompany me at any time, I am not less than you. He laughed at*

96 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Nang-15062019

97 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

*me and said I would not be able to work here. But you know it has been more than one year and all my colleagues are satisfied with my work. The point is that if I go forward consciously with skill and with professionalism, we will become successful and we will pave the way for women in other key positions.<sup>98</sup>*

This respondent went on to describe how she had identified needs in her area and convinced NGOs to help her provide paving for alleyways, vocational courses for boys, computer classes for girls and a football pitch for children. Echoed by other respondents from different provinces, she talked about how effective decision making, respect and the actual delivery of projects depends heavily on a woman's attitude towards the other people she is working with. A respondent from Kabul working for an international NGO was responsible for overseeing the building of a girl's school in a district where the local men were hostile to the idea:

*We went there and I discussed with them and it was easy for them to accept an Afghan [as opposed to a foreign] woman. Luckily my character is more Afghan-style and whenever I have gone to any province I wanted to dress like the local people. In the beginning, my male colleagues were with me and my presence was a strength for them as well. At first, the local people and elders did not want to look at us but we sat with them and discussed for a long time how important it was for their girls to go to school, and that it would be a safe place for them. In the end, Save the Children built four schools for them and supported their children. Also, they were calling me sister and wanted to name one of the schools after me! It means they have changed their views a lot.<sup>99</sup>*

In this instance, adopting the local dress and spending time with people, without condescension, was key to persuading elders to accept schools for girls. In a similar manner, a female district governor in Balkh province has developed a reputation for herself as strongly committed to her constituents, so much so that another, male respondent from the same province brought her up as an example in his own interview:

*The district governor of [x district] is a woman. In the beginning, when she was assigned as DG, people were laughing at her. People thought that a man was not able to work independently in this district so how could a woman do it? She takes her position and service for people very seriously. She serves the people and resolves the problems of people in a perfect way, with perfect manners. Now those people who were laughing at her admire and support her. She stands with the people, she fights for them, she does not differentiate between them and she sees them equally. Now she is one of the most successful DGs in the country.<sup>100</sup>*

This pattern was also noted in case of women building professional relationships as committed and competent service providers in other research,<sup>101</sup> and while this is clearly not a priority for all women in public office, it remains an effective tool to counter critics of women in the workplace and develop strong networks of support. These networks, whether of constituents in a district, colleagues, or civil society, are critical because they counter the isolation that many women in public office experience and can provide some institutional backing to women's attempts to attain positions of authority (as described in two interviews in Balkh, for example).<sup>102</sup> As one respondent from Nangarhar explained, working with a network could accelerate and multiply what an individual can achieve socially:

98 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-07072019

99 Interview, Kabul, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-10072019

100 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-06072019

101 Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy*, 172.

102 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-07072019 and Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-14072019

*Women who are working and have high positions in government or outside government, somehow they need to have connections with each other and with other people. They have to use each other's ideas and information; it will improve their capacity. They should have connections with other women who are not working, they should share their ideas and make them aware of their rights and value.<sup>103</sup>*

As indicated in the section on barriers above, competition between and disunity and distrust among women constitutes a key barrier to women's acquisition of public office, and to their effective decision making therein. Countering this with strong networks of trust that provide support, self-confidence and connections to sources of funds, such as international NGOs, that could enable women to provide services and bolster their community standing, is fundamental to greater influence.

#### SUPPORTIVE MEN (AND WOMEN) AT HOME AND WORK

In Afghanistan, as globally, expectations are made about women bearing the mental load in a household—needing to handle physical, social and emotional household responsibilities in large families on top of their jobs and/or studies outside the home. In this context, a husband, father, brother or mother-in-law, or combination thereof, who facilitates and encourages their wife, sister, mother or daughter-in-law to pursue a professional career, for example, through taking on more of the household duties themselves, is extremely valuable (and quite rare). Across the interviews, respondents made clear that the men they worked and lived with and their attitudes made all the difference to what they were able to achieve at work. One woman from Balkh province was very candid about the role her husband had played in supporting her:

*I studied up to 10th grade and then I got married. After I got married, I was unable to continue my studies and I focused on my children's upbringing and their education. When I saw that my children were doing well in their day-to-day lessons, I decided to resume my education and I went back to school with my children. My husband gave me this idea. He not only gave me the idea, but he supported me when I was studying. There were not enough books in the school, so he bought me them from the bazaar. He also helped me in my lessons. [When I passed my exams] I went to university in the afternoons.... I think I have the best husband. I do not feel that I have a husband; I believe that I have a very close friend under the title of "husband".<sup>104</sup>*

This respondent implies that her experience is so far from the norm that her relationship with her husband cannot be described in standard marital terms, but instead as a close friendship or partnership.

Another successful woman in a position of public authority in Balkh also considered herself lucky to have interacted with supportive men:

*I have been lucky, I have worked with men who were good and open-minded. I worked for a while in a provincial office in Balkh province and my supervisor was a good man who helped me there. It is because of their hard work for me that I have become a district governor. If you are lucky enough to be under the supervision of a good man, you will be successful, but if not, you can be misused...If a woman comes with high confidence and skill and gets a good man beside her to support her, she will have a chance and no one can stop her.<sup>105</sup>*

103 Interview, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-18062019

104 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-11072019

105 UNW-WPPD-Balkh-04072019

Behind the modesty expressed here, the respondent is referring to men’s support as a practical, indispensable tool for gaining positions of influence in a highly patriarchal context. In six different interviews in Nangarhar, women described exactly the same thing: male colleagues who took active steps to support them, or the opposite, i.e., those who went out of their way to make the working environment difficult for their female colleagues.<sup>106</sup> The picture painted by Bamiyan respondents was mixed: some considered the local culture more liberal and accepting of women in the public sphere, on the surface at least (as one woman put it, “one positive point for us here in this province is family and men’s encouragement. Bamiyan men are not anti-women”),<sup>107</sup> and yet the stories of sexual harassment at work were just as common in the Bamiyan transcripts as in the other three provinces.

It is clear that the division of labour and decision-making inside the family and wider household have a critical impact on what women are able to achieve outside it. Family norms vary tremendously from family to family and cannot be generalised across provinces or areas. However, notable in the data were generational trends. Some spanned decades, in which political, educated families whose menfolk had held public office in the 1960s, 70s and 80s were still promoting the education of their girls now. As the intelligentsia, these families often moved with their jobs and had weaker ties to local communities than agricultural or shop keeping neighbours, which in turn meant less to lose by disobeying local social norms. One respondent from Nangarhar directly attributed her own ability to work outside of the home and get an education to the attitudes of her parents, who supported the government of Dr Najibullah: “My parents admired Dr Najib’s government and the way that women were able to work and to get an education. Also, my mother is always talking about the terrible times they had during the mujahiddin and Taliban rule.”<sup>108</sup> Others were starting with the current generation who had made their own, new family norms and passed them on to their children, as one respondent from Balkh explained:

*I have a son and a daughter, and they have both graduated from university. Now my daughter is married, but when she was with me, I was consulting her and many times she made the decisions in the household. Now she is a teacher, and she is making all the decisions in her own household.<sup>109</sup>*

Passing down new examples for children to follow—avoiding exclusive son preference and educating daughters and encouraging them to get involved in decision-making—are clearly powerful, informal mechanisms that promote women’s influence outside the home also.

## NEGOTIATION

Perhaps the most pervasive theme across the data was that of women needing fine-tuned skills in negotiation to overcome patriarchal barriers. Some of these involved the ability to put forward an “efficiency argument” of sorts, presenting their desired outcomes as beneficial to the family or society as a whole. As a respondent from Balkh described,

*Women should be patient. We are living in a traditional patriarchal society; we have to be careful of every step we take. For example, if I had come into this position and replaced a lot of men with women, think what would happen—it would have a bad effect on the men and would give them a bad picture of women in key positions. We have to go slowly and give men the idea that women are able to handle a key position and can make good decisions.<sup>110</sup>*

106 Interviews: UNW-WPPD-Nang-12062019, UNW-WPPD-Nang-17062019, UNW-WPPD-Nang-18062019, UNW-WPPD-Nang-23062019, UNW-WPPD-Nang-24062019, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-24062019

107 UNW-WPPD-Bamiyan-27072019

108 UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-20062019

109 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-11072019

110 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh 07072019

This idea closely correlates with Obioma Nnaemeka's assessment of feminism in Africa:

*[It] challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where and how to detonate patriarchal landmines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal landmines. In other words, it knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts.<sup>111</sup>*

Examples of this kind of approach were given by a number of respondents: some talked about successful women colleagues who were involved in decision-making at work but who were not allowed by their husbands to travel abroad for work.<sup>112</sup> While some talked about ways to defy the established division of labour in their households by, for example, cautiously buying all the family groceries to demonstrate their competence with money,<sup>113</sup> or convincing family members slowly over time of their trustworthiness,<sup>114</sup> others talked about women they knew who would rather give their salaries to their unemployed husbands as a means of avoiding violent fights about money than keep it themselves for the sake of doing so: "When women are not able to be calm at home or help make decisions at the family level, how will they be able to work and be a decision-maker at a political level?"<sup>115</sup> Across the data for this study, women in positions of decision-making authority related their success very specifically to their ability to negotiate and compromise.

These perspectives may not align with western liberal feminism, or necessarily with the African feminism described by Nnaemeka, but they reflect a concern for a tight web of interests that are at once community, family and individual. As with African feminism, this kind of approach to social relations:

*...can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not the 'other', but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself.<sup>116</sup>*

This form of feminism seeks to negotiate with patriarchy in a productive and emancipatory manner, with women and men making compromises and involving one another in decision-making at the community and family level, seeing individual interests as part and parcel of broader family and community needs. These are precisely the ways in which women like the district governor in Balkh, the former Save the Children worker, and the Mazar-i-Sharif urban district officer cited above, have engineered their own success and have carved for themselves not only space in which to be decision-makers, but also decision-making power that is bolstered by community support and respect.

111 Nnaemeka, *Nego-Feminism*, 378

112 Interview, Kabul, UNW-WPPD-Kabul-10072019

113 Interview, Balkh, UNW-WPPD-Balkh-10072019

114 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-24062019

115 Interview, Nangarhar, UNW-WPPD-Nangarhar-03072019

116 Filomena Steady, 1987, cited in Nnaemeka, *Nego-Feminism*, 379-380.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: combining formal and informal for maximum impact

Characterising all women as suffering at the hands of all Afghan men does these women and men a great disservice and overlooks the way in which, after decades of abuse under mujahideen and Taliban rule, women were willing and able to participate in monumental political processes in 2001.

This paper has sought to understand how Afghan women encounter and navigate barriers to participation. In addition, it has identified effective tools and strategies that can be harnessed and enhanced to promote both participation and substantive influence, both now and in the future should Taliban representatives acquire roles in government. Findings and their implications are as follows:

**ELECTIONS:** Participation in elections as voters, for example, appears to have little impact on women’s decision-making in the home and is not a proxy for independent choice at the ballot box. But men also decide collectively who to vote for: if the formal institution of suffrage for women is to be truly transformational, it needs to be accompanied by the negotiating for greater access to decision making arenas at home and in the community where decisions about candidates are made. In addition, without making sustained and concerted efforts to engage women voters, women candidates are reinforcing the status quo of keeping women *out* of these political decision-making circles. Thus, while women’s suffrage and participation as candidates in elections have a strong, symbolic role in challenging the surface patriarchy in Afghanistan’s formal public institutions, other social structures (decision-making by consensus, and the threat of violence as a campaign tool, for example) influence how elections happen in Afghanistan and the patriarchal norms embedded within these structures prevent elections from becoming institutions of radical change for women.

**PUBLIC SECTOR PARTICIPATION:** This research found that getting more women into an office environment was more conducive to being able to do one’s job well. As such, it is important to recognise the interconnected nature of getting more women physically present in an office, keeping them there through the provision of amenable working environments, and their ability to influence decisions within them. High-level champions of women’s decision-making within public sector offices also make a significant difference to the impact that women are able to have, not least because these agencies are traditionally highly centralised and figures of authority wield considerable power. Government agencies, though known for corruption and nepotism, are still held in high regard by many Afghans; for this reason, they could be significant agents of long-term change, particularly with sustained donor support.

**GIRLS’ EDUCATION:** This has been a consistently stated concern of both international development agencies and the Afghan government over the last 15 years, although the proxies used to measure it, such as the number of girls enrolled in a school in any given year, have proven inaccurate and misleading. Nevertheless, education was repeatedly highlighted by respondents who, while recognising that it was not a magic bullet to cure all ills, described it more as one of many tools to bolster their reputation in the workplace and at home, and defend against charges of incompetence. The more education a woman has, the more deftly she is able to counter those colleagues who would see her removed from office on account of her being a woman. In addition, women’s religious education and literacy can be used to build their credibility with men and defend themselves against sexual violence (such as harassment in the workplace) using religious arguments.

**INFORMAL STRATEGIES:** These are tools that women themselves use, consciously or otherwise, or see as vehicles that could be used, to achieve greater influence. These included building professional relationships and networks of trust, surrounding themselves with supportive men and women at home and work, and fine-tuning their negotiation skills. These three informal mechanisms are all based on the principle of strengthening rather than dismissing relationships. All of these serve to provide ways to enhance the transformative power of formal institutions—suffrage, affirmative action and education—and without them, these formal mechanisms remain largely insufficient. While they can facilitate women’s influence in decision-making and represent an important symbolic indication

of what is possible, formal mechanisms constitute a thin veneer covering an interconnected web of informal processes and negotiations. If Taliban representatives do acquire greater influence in government, formal mechanisms to support women's participation may be eroded. Enhancing women's decision-making and decision-making power in Afghanistan is thus crucially about building professional relationships of trust, mobilising family support, and negotiating with patriarchy in ways that emphasise and strengthen the community.

### ***Policy implications and recommendations***

*For the Afghan government:*

1. **On further encouraging more women to work in the public sector:** There is a strong connection between getting more women physically present in an office, keeping them there through the provision of amenable working environments, and their ability to influence decisions within them. The Afghan government already has commendable targets regarding increasing numbers of women in the public sector, as outlined in its 2018 Policy on Increasing Women in Civil Services paper.<sup>117</sup>

**Recommended action:** The evidence in this study suggests that a multi-track strategy could be very beneficial to women's political decision-making in the public sector: combine affirmative action with practical measures such as bathrooms, separate working spaces from men, and childcare. This kind of strategy is already outlined in the 2018 policy, but this document reads more like a shopping list of desired amenities rather than a set of stipulations that ministries must adhere to. It is also unclear whether or how ministries are beholden to implementing its suggestions. As such, mechanisms need to be established that support the implementation of this policy and assess departments based on their compliance with it.

2. **On sexual harassment in the workplace:** Threats to women's opportunities to take part in public life such as sexual harassment are increasing. These threats provide the Taliban and other conservative groups even more leverage with which to curtail women's political participation and as such require urgent action on the part of the Afghan government.

**Recommended action:** The Afghan government must promote and extend its existing 2016 Anti-Women's Harassment Law. The law must be enforced more strongly at provincial and district levels. It must also include and enforce stronger victim protection measures, stipulations for the composition of committees assessing harassment claims, and punitive measures that extend beyond fines for perpetrators.

For example, organising religious education courses as mandatory initial measures for men who perpetrate sexual harassment in the workplace would be a strategic punitive measure that served a preventative purpose: the shame associated with having to learn about Islamic principles (as opposed to knowing and acting upon them already) might well prove a successful deterrent to potential perpetrators if enforced within ministries.

3. **On Narratives of Insecurity:** These constitute a manifestation of violence against women in politics as they are used strategically by men in government offices, elections and simply in day-to-day life and work to prevent women's progression.

**Recommended action:** The Government of Afghanistan should launch a new "Insecurity Affects Us All" campaign, highlighting gender-neutral security concerns and giving women tools and procedures to report claims of discrimination based on narratives of insecurity.

117 [https://iarpsc.gov.af/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/11/Policy-on-Increasing-Women-Participation-in-Civil-Service-\\_English.pdf](https://iarpsc.gov.af/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/11/Policy-on-Increasing-Women-Participation-in-Civil-Service-_English.pdf)

4. **On connections between women MPs and constituents:** Women’s electoral campaigns are rarely transformative because they do not seek to engage women voters or maintain connections with them.

**Recommended action:** This problem could form the basis of targeted programmes aimed at increasing connections between women, such as constituent “clinics” where women MPs host regular walk-in consultations for their constituents to visit, either as families or with separate times for men and women.

5. **On champions for women in the workplace:** Centralised authority in government offices means that most decisions are made at the highest levels and, as women are rarely employed at these levels, they are necessarily left out of decision-making processes. This works two ways, however, and also means that, with the support of someone in a position of authority, women could have a significant opportunity to influence these processes.

**Recommended action:** The careful support and training of senior decision-makers in gender-sensitive programming could see women in less-senior positions encouraged and promoted.

*For Donors:*

*In addition to supporting the Afghan government in its implementation of the above, donors should consider the following:*

1. **On women-only programmes:** Donor-led programmes that focus only on women are important and have a specific role to play, and yet they *can* exacerbate an existing zero-sum approach to the power dynamics between women and men. Communicating benefits of programmes to men (and wider family members) and including them in programme design, even if they are not the main beneficiaries, is critical. This is because supportive husbands, in-laws and wider families can become vehicles propelling women forward rather than barriers to their progression—ALL the women in successful decision-making positions in this research had the support of their families and their communities.

**Recommended action:** When women-only programmes are designed, donors must consider the broader social implications of this narrow recipient base and take active measures to ensure that families and communities are factored into communication efforts from the start. Better still, programmes should include men-only and/or community aspects also.

2. **On long-term programmes supporting government initiatives:** Respondents did not gloss over the many problems with government agencies, but it was clear nevertheless that these were considered the organisations with the most potential to deliver substantive change for women. Long-term programmes supporting government entities can generate significant respect and support and should be key priorities for international donors.

**Recommended action:** Ensure that all programmes designed to support women’s participation are connected to government initiatives and prioritise sustainability beyond the funding cycle of the programme.

*For Afghan NGOs promoting women's participation*

1. **On women's decision-making in elections:** Afghan men make decisions about whom to vote for, but not on their own at the ballot box. They decide as part of collective decision-making processes in the family and community. The issue of women choosing whom to vote for then becomes one of their needing greater space in collective decision-making arenas, i.e., family gatherings, local councils, etc., just as much, if not more than, needing greater confidence and de facto ability to choose a candidate independently at the polling booth.

**Recommended action:** Afghan NGOs promoting women's participation are often in a unique position in that they have access to communities based on trust. They can use this trust to encourage communities to open up space for women in local decision-making arenas, not least by leading by example and having female employees participate in these spaces where possible.

2. **On supporting women to build professional relationships and networks:** Whether these networks are of constituents in a district, colleagues, or civil society, they are particularly important to women because they counter the isolation that many women in public office experience and can provide some institutional backing to women's attempts to attain positions of authority. They can also promote self-confidence, bolstering women's negotiation skills, for example, and connections to sources of funds, such as international NGOs, that could enable women to provide services and elevate their community standing, itself fundamental to greater influence.

**Recommended action:** Afghan NGOs can and do seek out, actively support and hold to account women in elected office and other positions of leadership. Petitioning for the constituent clinics mentioned above would be one way in which NGOs could help serve as a bridge between women leaders and their constituents and provide key support to these leaders at the same time.

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 0093 79 960 8548  
 areu@areu.org.af  
 www.areu.org.af



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 Afghanistan Country Office  
UNOCA Compound, Jalalabad Road  
Postbox n° 949  
Kabul, AFGHANISTAN  
 0093 79 963 3235, 0093 70 773 7690  
 info.afghanistan@unwomen.org  
 afghanistan.unwomen.org  
 @unwomenafghan  
 @unwomenafghanistan

