Women’s Participation in School Management Shuras in Afghanistan: Obstacles and Opportunities for Women’s Involvement in Government Schools in Kabul City

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ABSTRACT

Exponential gains in school enrolment in Afghanistan since 2001 have resulted not only from the efforts of the Ministry of Education, but also from the efforts of communities. Community participation in education in Afghanistan is formalized through school management shuras, parent-teacher councils that have been established and/or strengthened by the MoE through the Education Quality Improvement Program.

This research aimed to determine the level of participation of women in school shuras. Empirical research was conducted at 18 schools in Kabul City, in conjunction with the management councils in each school community. Through structured observations and focus group discussions, the research found that women’s participation in school management shuras is more limited than men’s participation and almost negligible in the boys’ schools sampled. This suggests that women’s voices are not much heard concerning the education of their children. The phenomenon may be attributed to prevailing cultural and traditional norms in patriarchal Afghan society, in which men have an upper hand over women in the decisions about schooling, among others.

The major recommendation to the Ministry of Education based on this research is that any attempts to increase women’s participation in school management should take into account the existing social framework of Afghan religious and cultural norms. For example, female-only shuras may be elected for girls’ schools, with meetings held in a private home rather than the very public school setting.
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*Women’s Participation in School Management Shuras*
### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>EQUIP</td>
<td>Education Quality Improvement Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goal</td>
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<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>NESP</td>
<td>National Education Strategic Plan</td>
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<td>NORAD</td>
<td>Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation</td>
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<td>SMC</td>
<td>School Management Committee</td>
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<td>SMS</td>
<td>School Management Shura</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Background
The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a landlocked country in West Central Asia with a rich history that dates back thousands of years. More recently, decades of conflict have delayed the development in Afghanistan, including its educational development. However, since the fall of Taliban rule in 2001, education enrollment in the country has increased exponentially. Only one million children were enrolled in school in 2001, and these were mostly boys; there are now over 8.6 million children and adolescents benefitting from education, and 39% of these are girls (Ministry of Education, 2014).

These gains in educational access may partially be credited to the work of the Ministry of Education (MoE). However, grassroots-level demands for education and community efforts to provide education for their children have also contributed to the growth of educational access (Strand & Oleson, 2005). The Afghan Minister of Education, His Excellency Ghulam Farooq Wardak, writes, “The people’s role in the development and provision of education through sending their children to and establishment of schools has been beyond expectations” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.6).

The importance of community ownership of education – through community participation in contribution to, and monitoring of education – is reflected in the 1387 Afghanistan Education Law (MoE, 2008) as well as in MoE National Education Strategic Plans (NESPs). Government and non-governmental education service providers in Afghanistan have employed various approaches to promote community ownership of formal schooling, including awareness-raising of the importance of education and creation of local education management structures, i.e., shuras. School shuras may be understood as "councils" responsible for management of Afghan Government schools (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007); they are also often referred to as "school management committees" or "school management shuras".

The World Bank has supported the development and reform of Afghanistan's education sector through two phases of the Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP I & II) since 2004. EQUIP interventions are aimed at increasing equitable access to quality basic education for all children in Afghanistan, especially for girls. Establishing and strengthening school shuras are fundamental EQUIP activities, designed to reduce the gap between the school and the Government as well as to manage the day-to-day operations of education at the local level.

The research presented in this thesis examined the role of women in school shuras in 18 Government schools in Kabul City. Below brief information has been shared on Kabul City and on School Management shura (SMS) as general knowledge.
**An Introduction to Kabul City**

Kabul has been the capital of Afghanistan since 1776. It lies along the Kabul River at an elevation of about 5,900 feet (1,800 metres) in the east-central part of the country. The nation’s cultural and economic centre, the city lies in a triangular valley between the two steep Asmai and Sherdawaza mountain ranges. Roads connect it with most other areas of Afghanistan, with Uzbekistan to the north, and with Pakistan to the east (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014).

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 when the Soviet Union began a large-scale airlift of combat troops into Kabul city. By 1996, when the Taliban militia took control of Kabul, the city lay in ruins because of the genocide going on within different Jihadist factions for almost a decade. The Taliban did little to rebuild it or repair its infrastructure and fled in advance of a coalition of Afghan and U.S.-led forces in 2001. The city remained the capital under an interim government.

Kabul Province has an estimated population of 4 million. Kabul city is home to a mix of 3 million people belonging to diverse ethnic groups, the largest being Pashtuns and Tajiks, that settled in the region hundreds of years ago. Bilingualism (Dari and Pashtun) is common in the capital and is a result of large population movements from other provinces.

International organizations currently employ a large workforce further contributing to improved levels of English language skills. Until the late 1970s, Kabul used to be Afghanistan’s education centre attracting people from across the world and Afghanistan. During the last 20 years, the education rate decreased as a result of the destruction of educational facilities and the increasing necessity for children to support the scarce family income.

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the city’s numerous schools and universities are again becoming accessible to the general population including women. There is a growing network of educational institutions comprising 9 universities (including the prestigious Kabul University, Teacher Training Colleges, Polytechnic institutes), institutions like the Institute of Health Science (HIS) and a large number of public high schools that, after the Taliban regime, have reopened their doors to girls and women.

The Secondary Curriculum is currently being revised by the Government. Emerging private businesses like Roshan, Coca Cola, and the vegetable oil industry as well as the large volume of international organizations in Kabul city provide training and employment opportunities for skilled labor. An increasing number of repatriates from Pakistan, Iran and European countries contribute useful skills and qualifications to the country’s reconstruction. Some only stay for a short-term period to build capacity¹.

**What is a Shura?**

“Shura” is an Islamic term that refers to the rule of opinion of the majority; the word comes from the Holy Quran and is reflected in Shari’a law (Osman, 2001). “Shura means a serious and effective participation in making a decision” (ibid., p.10).

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School Management Shura (SMS)
The main objective of School Management shuras is to provide management and supervision support to the Public Schools supported by the Ministry of Education (MoE) for ensuring the community ownership for the future of their children. This will create an enabling environment for children to get equal opportunity of quality education in the schools with greater care from the community. School Management Shura is a council for each school which aims at increasing quality and “change community attitudes towards girls’ education so that support for girls’ schooling becomes the norm rather than the exception” (Solotaroffi, Hashimi & Olesen, 2010)
The SMS meetings are held on monthly basis and each shura have a 15 member group including 30% female (Ministry of Education, 2011) SMS has a structure and its composition includes membership of the school principals, religious leaders, parents (mothers and fathers), village elders, community volunteers, members from Community Development Committee, and a teacher and students’ representatives. School Management Shuras are established, trained, monitored and supported to encourage partnership between schools and community in school affairs for better educational experience of children. Their primary responsibility is to keep the school running, providing the quality education to the community and to get involved all the sections of the community in the school education quality management.

Every shura in principle has an executive committee and two subcommittees: the finance committee and the procurement committee. All shura members are divided into these three subcommittees.

Problem Area
The participation of women in political spaces is limited in Afghanistan. Karlsson and Mansory (2007) write that the traditional role of women in the country is one of seclusion shaped by religion, culture, and politics. “Women and men gather separately” and “women’s participation in social affairs” outside of the family circle and women’s access to information is restricted (ibid.).

Little is currently known about the quality of women's participation in school shuras, although anecdotal evidence suggests that male shura members retain control over decision-making processes. Yet, this may not be the case for all shura activities: there may be shura responsibilities that are more attractive to women and/or less attractive to male shura members. Moreover, there may be indirect benefits to women and their communities from female shura participation – such as skills acquisition and/or empowerment – that are separate from the value of women's contribution to shura processes. The study presented in this thesis explores female participation on decision-making in school management shuras.

Aim
The overall purpose of this study is to investigate and compare the participation of women in school management shuras in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Research Questions
Question 1: To what extent do the women participate in the school management shura?
Question 2: To what extent do the women contribute to the school shura decisions?
Question 3: To what extent do the women contribute to the school improvement?
Question 4: To what extent female participation in school shura is encouraged?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Women’s Gender Roles in Afghanistan

Gender roles within a society are much determined through games and play, the textbook messages and pictures in schools being the major source (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007). In reality gender differences are noted in all religions and societies around the world. History is evidenced with the gender roles men and women had in different societies. Men are always given a superior position to women and that all the hard, tough and rewarding activities were related to men. Even in today’s modernized world, there are limits to what women can pursue as a career and what not.

Afghanistan is a patriarchal society (Moghadam, 1992; Zulfacar, 2006; NORAD, 2011). Moghadam (1992) defines patriarchy as a “kinship-ordered social structure with strictly defined sex roles in which women are subordinated to men” (p. 35). Although Kandiyoti (2007) does not consider the categorization of Afghan cultural practices useful to the understanding of gender politics and gender relations in the country, it is nevertheless generally agreed that men dominate in Afghan public spheres. “The notions of separation between men and women and restrictions on women’s mobility are prevalent in nearly all groups, as is the concept of family honor, which rests with men’s ability to control women’s purity and behavior” (NORAD, 2011, p. 14). Yet again women are much prominent in agriculture fields and constructions in the villages alongside their men than in cities.

However, women’s public roles in Afghanistan have not remained static over the past century.

In the 1920s women appeared in French style attire on the streets. In the 1930s, women were prohibited to appear unveiled. In the 1950s, to appear unveiled became a choice and education was co-ed. In the 1960s and 1970s, some women worked with men, drove cars and sported miniskirts. In the 1980s, some women danced in clubs, some worked in factories and the dowry was outlawed. In the 1990s, women were forced to take refuge in the veil from rival ethnic attacks. (Zulfacar, 2006, p. 27)

Zulfacar’s (2006) assessment of gender roles in Afghanistan cited above is rather simplistic. Kandiyoti (2007) asserts that such Westernized behavior on the part of Afghan women in the pre-Mujahedeen decades was limited only to a small number of women in Kabul. Despite gains in attention to gender – evidenced by the establishment of a Ministry of Women’s Affairs – women in Afghanistan have historically been (and during the present period of post-conflict transformation continue to be) far less visible than men:

The male-dominant Afghan culture is a major challenge to women’s participation in all areas of political, economic and social life. In particular in rural areas, culture and tradition speak louder than national laws and policies that grant women equal rights with men. (Lexow, 2012, p. 2)

Yet, other authors (e.g. Karlsson & Mansory, 2007) observed the same political changes that resulted in massive increases in girls’ enrollment since 2001 have also resulted in less rigid gender roles in present-day Afghan society. Nevertheless, concerning education, “although decision-making power may primarily be possessed by the male head-of-household […] women are also active participants in the decision-making process and, in some cases, wield considerable power themselves” (Hunte, 2006, p. 3). This role of women is almost
getting prominence at homes with educated mothers, on the part of their children education specifically.

An enabling environment is importantly vital for women to proceed further in societal development works and to get promoted. Based on the fact that women make more than half of every society’s population, it would rather be impossible to think of development without them. This fact can further be supported in the societies like Afghanistan that women are provided with the opportunities that coordinate with the prevailing norms and culture, agreed and supported by men too.

...Development can only have a beneficial outcome for women when the working culture, structure, systems and procedures, and underlying values of the institution which shape women’s lives themselves reflect a concern for gender equity. (Fenella, et al, 1999)

Islamic Teaching on Women’s Participation in Shuras
Islam has a clear role defined for men and women. There have been a number of Quranic verses on the roles, rights and relations including two chapters by the name of women. There is a number of Hadiths about gender relations too. This has had a strong influence on how gender roles and gender relations have developed in Muslim countries (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007).

Being an Islamic Republic, Afghanistan has formulated policies that are informed by Islamic values and integrated in to the Afghan tradition and culture. In the religion of Islam, the general consensus of the majority of Muslim scholars and jurisprudents is that women have the right of giving advice and recommendations and can contribute to the Consultation Board.

It is the opinion of renowned Islamic Scholar Imam Abu Hanifa (see Al-Asbahani, n.d.); that women can take part in all consultation gatherings except Qisas (execution of murderers) and Islamic ordinances; however, Imam Ibni Jarih opines that a woman can be a judge in all affairs, including Qisas and Ordinance. Four Imam (well-known scholars and leaders in Muslim Ummah, or brotherhood) attest that women can also make judgments in social and other affairs (see e.g. Al-Tabari, 1997): even the 10th-century Imam Ibn Hazm listed the names of 20 women who could give suggestions and recommendations during Suhaba (may Allah be pleased with them), i.e., companions of the Prophet (peace be upon Him) for consultation. Since women may be appointed as judges (Badlishah & Masidi, 2009), they may also serve as members of shuras, whether large (such as Parliament) or small (such as a village or school council).

What is a School Shura?
As mentioned, school shuras may be understood as “councils” responsible for management of Afghan Government schools (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007); they are also often referred to as “school management committees” (SMCs) or “school management shuras” (SMSs). Here it is important to mention that ‘schools administered by the local communities’ is a concept supported by the donors and widely by the World Bank in different parts of the world including south Asia. Through this concept, local communities are capacitated to take ownership of schools and defend them in the times of insecurity and conflict. One of the
important steps in this regard is to establish school committees with different names in different context (countries) but with the same mandate and policy all over the world. Empowerment of local communities in school management has received growing attention from both academics and practitioners in developing countries as part of a broad and global program to improve service delivery to the poor, by involving them directly in the delivery process (World Bank, 2004).

In Afghanistan, “schools are responsible for actual delivery of education with close involvement of School Shuras” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 98). The list of shura responsibilities is broad: “involving the wider school community in assessing the school environment, prioritizing school needs, preparing and implementing” school improvement plans and other proposals, allocating funds, procuring goods and services, monitoring and evaluation, as well as “communicating school needs and achievements to community and institutional stakeholders, among other roles” (EQUIP, 2014a, p. 8). School shuras are expected to help the MoE in overcoming some of the barriers to educational access in Afghanistan at the local level in one way or in decentralizing the education in a much better way on the other, such as the poor quality of education, harassment of children on the way to school, and cultural resistance in certain areas of the country to girls’ education (Ministry of Education, 2014). “The main objective of the SMS is to provide management and supervision support to the schools for ensuring the community ownership for the future of their children” (Ministry of Education, 2011, p.16). The assumption is that “genuine community engagement will ensure solutions are appropriate to address local need and that communities have a vested interest in their success” (CAMFED, 2012, Table 3).

According to Yamada (2014), an SMC is “an administrative tool adopted in many developing countries to decentralize administrative and financial responsibilities at school level, while involving local people in decision-making and making education more responsive to demands” (p. 162). The purpose of local community management of education is to strengthen school governance, provide oversight of school staff, and improve accountability for school performance to education stakeholders (CAMFED, 2012). Yet, in Afghanistan, school shura heads are almost always the headmasters or principals of schools, which effectively removes the oversight role entirely. The vitality to support local ownership comes through two major activities in Afghanistan, one is to build their capacities on the predetermined terms of references’ secondly a school grant is provided to the school shuras to improve their schools’ conditions. Yamada (2014) questions the assumed benefits of SMCs – “decentralization, community participation, improvement of school administration, educational quality and learners’ outcomes” (p. 163) – claiming that impact studies of SMCs have had mixed results. CAMFED (2012) reports that there is no concrete evidence that community participation alone can be effective in improving education at the local level.

Women’s Participation in School Management Shuras in Afghanistan

Sullivan-Owomoyela and Brannelly (2009) noted that school shuras in Afghanistan “are primarily made up of men” (p. 59). School shuras consist of 15 member groups which includes 30% female (Ministry of Education, 2011). Women participation was termed to be mandatory because women are powerful catalysts for change (ibid.). The challenge is to assure that energetic, committed leaders have the practical skills to mobilize communities
around local issues affecting women, the ability to leverage organizational resources and the will to increase civic participation in decision making. And this demand would have been in equal coincidence with the EQUIP project objectives as “to increase equitable access to quality basic education especially for girls through school grants, teacher training and strengthened institutional capacity with support from communities and private providers” (ibid. p. 9). Male prominence in shura membership still holds true five years later. “Local traditional practices for resolving disputes through “jirgas” and “shuras” are male dominated and rooted in conservative patriarchal ideologies” (NORAD, 2011, p. 18). Even EQUIP SMS standards take into account male dominance in this respect and call for a minority of women members: i.e., a minimum of 30% female participation in the shuras (Ministry of Education, 2011). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that women have only been included in shuras “to accommodate donor requirements”; and that female membership does not reflect women's “actual participation in joint decision making” (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 189). A later research mapping conducted in Afghanistan reports that there exists “a broad recognition that numbers and quotas do not necessarily represent decisive social change, so there is a need to go beyond the numbers of women present in various institutions” (Fishstein et al., 2012: 59).

**Empowerment**

Goal 3 of the global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) concerns gender equality and women’s empowerment (United Nations, 2000). This MDG is important both in terms of gender parity in access to educational opportunities as well as in terms of women’s participation in political processes. An assumption in this research is that women’s participation in school management is essential to both educational developments, especially for girls’ education, and to women’s own self-worth.

Empowerment can be understood in terms of inequality of power. Empowerment can begin to be understood by examining the concept of power and powerlessness (Moscovitch & Drover, 1981). Power may be defined as the ability to achieve goals, as dominance in a relationship, as control over resources or one’s own environment, or as knowledge (Rogers, 1974). At the individual level powerlessness can be seen as the expectation of the person that his/her own actions will be ineffective in influencing the outcome of life events (Kieffer, 1984). Some individuals or groups always have greater power than others, and those who have the capacity to influence based on any of these factors can be viewed as “empowered”. Other theorists view power as the ability to influence social structures. Whitmore defines empowerment as:

> an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives and the communities in which they live. (cited in Lord & Hutchinson, 1993, p. 6)

This view of empowerment assumes an institutional worldview. Empowerment can also be viewed in terms of the self, rather than in relation to others. Lord and Hutchinson (1993) define empowerment as “processes where by individuals achieve increasing control of various aspects of their lives and participate in the community with dignity” (p. 7). Rappaport’s (1987) concept of empowerment, “conveys both a psychological sense of
personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights” (p.121)

According to Watterstein (1992), empowerment is a social – action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life and social justice. As a result, it is important that research on empowerment begin with an understanding of individuals, not in a clinical sense, but in an experiential sense (Lord, 1991).

For the purposes of this research, empowerment is defined as the ability to assert one’s views and influence change within the social institution of the shura, which can be seen as a forum for democratic participation. And to see how women take positive benefit of their participation within shura, whether they feel empowered within the men majority circles, whether their voices are heard or if the women are participatory in the social circles in their community level. Women’s empowerment is of particular interest to this research since “gender constructs that impede women’s access to the public spheres of society diminish the possibility for equitable and empowering life conditions” (Vissandjee et al., 2005, p. 123).
METHODS

Research Design
The study described in this thesis was as a quantitative and qualitative investigation that aimed to understand shura members’ (male and female) perspectives and experiences with regard to women’s participation in SMSs. Two types of data collection methods were used in 18 schools in Kabul City: structured observation (see Annexes A & B) and focus group discussions (see Annex C).

Sampling
The research used a non-probability, purposive sample of key shuras. A non-probability sample is one in which participants are not selected at random; a purposive sample is one that relies one’s judgment to select participants or locations (Robson, 2002).

In the research design, I assumed differences in women’s involvement in shuras among different types of schools (i.e., boys’, girls’ and mixed schools). I also assumed that little information could be obtained from schools in which shuras are inactive. Therefore, I visited active shuras in a total of 18 Government schools in Kabul. Prior consent of the shuras to participate in the research and the dates of the next scheduled shura meeting were key factors in school selection.

A total of 18 SMSs were observed: 6 schools were in urban areas while 12 were in more rural areas of Kabul City. Out of 270 registered members in the 18 school shuras, a total of 216 male and female members participated, varying from 14 to 70 years of age. Out of the 216, 68% were male and 32% were female participants. The key information to share here were that girls and model schools were mostly females, provided majority of them were school teachers while female participation in the boys schools were either kept limited to 30% or less than that.

Data Collection Methods
Focus groups. Bryman (2008) describes focus groups as guided discussions among multiple study participants for in-depth investigation of a particular issue. A prepared list of questions was posed in either Dari or Pashto to male and female shura members that agreed to participate in the research. It was necessary to interview male shura members apart from female members in order to obtain “information about underlying attitudes, interaction and intentions” (Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987, p. 18) of the male shura members. Annex D presents the main list of discussion questions posed, but additional follow-up questions were posed by the researchers in order to clarify study participant opinions (Wilkinson, 2004). Due to cultural constraints, a male colleague facilitated the male focus group discussions with me. He would have been asking and communicating with the shura members, while I being sitting a side, taking my notes and if any extra questions were needed, I would have let my colleague let in written to ask. All focus groups were audio or video recorded and transcribed.

Structured observation. “major advantage of observation as a technique is its directness. You do not ask people about their views, feelings or attitudes; you watch what they do and listen to what they say” (Robson, 2002, p. 310). I observed 18 shura meetings in
order to triangulate the planned focus group data by systematically noting the sex of the speaker every 5 minutes (See Annexes A & B). The structured observation data revealed patterns about the extent of female participation during shura meetings that they speak out. As it was the pilot study on the subject area, only their participation has been observed, irrespective of the topic etc. (See Annex A for observation template).

**Documentary analysis.**

Documentary sources for the study were “shura journals”, i.e., the records kept by each shura of their meetings. These documents were examined as a resource, in the sense that the study was concerned with the content of the documents and the insights they may offer (Scott, 1990).

Validity in research refers to whether the research method measures what it intends to measure: reliability refers to whether the research tools can produce the same results under similar conditions is called reliability (Denscombe, 2010). To ensure the validity and reliability of the research tools, I asked for colleague comments – including those of my supervisor – on the discussion questions and then piloted a focus group discussion at a school in Kabul.

The research schedule was planned over three full days with the Kabul City Education Directorate’s EQUIP provincial team. I explained the purpose of the study, discussed possible approaches, answered questions, and sorted out the timetable and school selection. The school list was altered two times during the data collection because schools had been incorrectly classified by the Directorate, e.g., a boys’ school was in reality a mixed school.

Data collection began with structured observations during a routine shura meeting at each school. Following the meeting, a focus group discussion was held with the shura members. Shura journals were then collected from all the meetings attended and copied for documentary analysis purposes. Usually one shura, but a maximum of two shuras, were visited during a given day of collection (see Annex A for the research schedule.)

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed in three steps using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a strategy whereby qualitative data is searched for patterns, followed by categorization of the data under categories or themes (see e.g. Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis is an inductive process, in which “the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed on it by the researcher” (Dawson, 2009, p. 119). In this type of analysis, the data are coded line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph to find any data related to the research questions (Coyne & Cowley, 2006). The categories that resulted are “simply coded data which seem to cluster together” (Stern, 1980, cited in Coyne & Cowley, 2006, p. 506).

In the initial stage of my data analysis, 12 categories emerged from data, which were representative statements related to the empowerment of the women in one way or the other within the shura. In the next stage, the categories were clustered and merged to identify a more limited number of relevant themes on women empowerment and participation in the shuras. In the third and final stage, the data were reviewed again to search for statements that would connect to any of the four central research questions. These four themes were broken down into subcategories that mainly can define the different roles apply within Shura on the part of female participation and empowerment, as appropriate (See Annex E for description of the themes and subcategories).
The structured observation data were entered into a database and collated, with a percentage of participation by gender then calculated (see Annex C).

**Limitations of the Research**

The findings of this study apply only to the contexts in which the research was conducted, i.e., the school shuras in Kabul City. Importantly, study participants live in an urban setting, which – as Kandiyoti (2007) notes – is far less traditional than the majority of the country.

In addition, the study cannot definitively state that the views stated by study participants were those of shura members. The presence of symbolic shura members – i.e., community members who had never before attended a school shura meeting – was a common occurrence in the 18 meetings observed. The majority of the female shura participants comprised schoolteachers; their statements may have been compromised by the fear of speaking out in front of the school headmaster. In certain instances, the shura meetings were completely dominated by the headmaster, while the other shura members only listened without speaking a single word. However, the research collected data from a wide range of Afghan participants with ties to the communities in which the study took place, who must suffice as representative voices of the school community.

The structured observation results presented in Annex C would likely have been more useful if the observations had occurred with more frequency than every five minutes. Noting the gender of the speaker every 60 seconds, for instance, would have lent greater validity to the results.

**Ethics**

This research was officially approved by the MoE. I sought and obtained a formal permission letter from the Ministry, ratified by the Kabul City Education Directorate. I showed this letter in each school prior to data collection, before I explained the purpose and potential benefits of the research to the shuras. To reduce the possibility of shura members providing artificial responses, I then assured the participating shuras that the information about the identity of respondents would remain anonymous. I also guaranteed that the research would pose no threats to nor result in any implications neither to individual respondents nor to the schools. I also clarified that the respondents have the right to refuse to participate in the study as well as to withdraw from the research at any time (Bryman, 2012). Some shura members, especially headmasters and headmistresses wanted to know whether there would be immediate tangible benefits – such as additional funding for the schools – linked to participation; I refrained from making any promises and repeated the purpose of the research. In order to secure study participant identities, pseudonyms are used in the Findings section below for narration or quotation purposes.
FINDINGS

Introduction
Overall, the study found that in the 18 shuras sampled—men contributed to discussions to a far greater extent than did women. Importantly, the structured observations revealed that the patterns of shura participation by gender depended on the type of school to which the shuras were linked. In the boys’ school SMSs, 90% of the discussion observed was dominated by men. In the girls’ school SMSs, the discussion was evenly split among female and male speakers. In the mixed school SMSs, 79% of the discussion was dominated by men. It is clear that men controlled the shura meetings in schools where boys were enrolled. While in the 18 shura journals used as a secondary data source for this study only one female contribution was chronicled: the example of the headmistress who secured second-hand equipment for her school.

The section below presents qualitative findings on women’s participation in school management shuras, on women’s influence on shura decision-making processes, on women’s contribution to school improvement and on study participant recommendations on promoting women’s increased participation in school management.

Theme 1. Women’s Participation in School Management Shuras
This theme divulges the pessimistic attitudes of male and even female community members toward the participation of females in the shura. These beliefs largely explain the observed insignificant women’s participation in the public sphere as their traditional role is as housewives/mothers/sisters.

Male Shura Members’ Misconceptions about Female Participation
Interviews with female shura members revealed that they believe male family members have many misconceptions about their and/or other women’s participation in the SMSs. A common belief is that a woman’s main responsibility is to give importance to the household, engaging in tasks such as taking care of children, and serving husband and in-laws. Akbar’s mother, who preferred to be referred to as such, explained the community attitude with the following words: “Our people in our area say a female should be educated only to the limit of knowing how to pray and fast and the rest she should be attentive to her home, cooking, washing, cleaning, etc. For the male it is important that females should be expert at home chores; they never encourage their females to participate in places like our school shura”. Housework was viewed by many study participants’ families as far more important for women than any possible activities outside the home. The male study participants largely agreed that—since shuras were a responsibility outside the home—they were in a better position than women to address any issues faced by the school.

The female school teachers that served on the shuras were, in a way, exempt from this criticism. Nafeesa stated that female teachers’ participation is possible because they are already working in the school. Their husbands do not allow them to participate in any activity other than teaching inside schools, but the shura falls within the school-related activities permitted by their families.
The negating view of male family members toward women’s participation in the public sphere in order to voice their ideas and suggestions for the improvement of the school’s environment so as to ensure a better future for their children appears to be often linked with incidents of insecurity. Rahman implied that women not only cannot but also do not need to voice their concerns in school shuras:

Our men have seen lots of hardships in this country. We are familiar with our country’s situation, it is not safe for our women to come out of their houses and participate in these places like SMSs. Our women know that we participate in these platforms and we communicate their concerns in these shura meetings.

Looking at me, the male shura member Manan said,

You are our sister and a Muslim sister, you know that these sort of decisions outside homes needs responsibility and such responsibilities can only be taken by men, therefore we [men] are the ultimate decision makers with full responsibility of right and wrong with regard to any consequences happening to the school. We can face the government, the municipality, the police and the courts, how come you think women can face these things, it is not possible for them [women].

Moreover, women are seen as not well-suited to the difficult tasks of the world of men, i.e., the public sphere. One male study participant remarked, “Allah has created men to do tough work and face harsh challenges; females are weak and they cannot take those responsibilities”.

Another reason that shura members cited for poor female participation in shuras is that there are no women available to participate. Some men stated that their wives are illiterate, and this is why they cannot participate in the school shura. Manan said, “We are facing challenges to find female teachers for our students to teach! How can we find females to participate in the SMS and then make decisions at the shura level?” And then Manan laughed.

Community Reactions to Women’s Participation in Shuras
This subcategory delves into some community attitudes and reactions that hinder women’s participation in the public sphere.

Manan seemed to be protecting his womenfolk in the following statement:

………shura from history has been conducted by men; [men] make decisions and stand by their word. In case of wrong judgment, [men] are ready to bear the consequences, too. Kindly do not bring our women in the front line to problems and hardships; they being the women in the house have enough to bear. We cannot burden them with extra tensions. Let it be with men and make us accountable if any target is not met.

One example of the damage that can be done by communities is manifested by the spreading of rumors about women who attend shura meetings. Kamila, a teacher and shura member from the 17th education district, which is an urban area of Kabul city, disclosed, “We are very much afraid of people’s gossip after us, while participating in the school shuras”. Naseema, from another district, reported: “People in our community are mostly illiterate. They think of the women going out of their homes as disreputable women, therefore they start making stories after us.” Samina interrupted her, saying that the community thinks “that as shura members, we are trying to work with male strangers by this way they try to spread bad rumors against us and they give us wrong names”. Therefore, leaving the seclusion and
protection of the home in order to meet with men – even for a cause as noble as educational improvement – is frowned upon in some of the communities in the sample.

Ahmed, a shura member, spoke of a girl relative:

There was a girl [Runa], who was our relative. We all, including her father approved of her education. Her brother from overseas called and said, “let her [Runa] go to school.” Men and women in the area said “don’t let her go to school.” There is a lot of talk about girls.... Her brother who came from Iran says, “I wish we were in the city, a better place, so my sisters could get an education. I don’t want to hear anything about my sisters. Our namoos [chastity, a word used to refer to one’s daughter or wife] are our major respect. God forbid, if they are labeled! The neither this shura nor school can bring them back good names nor we can protect them further.

Samina’s daughter is in the third grade, studying in the same school in which Samina teaches. She believes that lack of community awareness of the benefits of education is the reason for discouraging girls’ education as well as the participation of women in the shura. Elaborating on the case presented by Ahmed, she said, “It is the effect of people’s closed mindedness.... If [the girl’s brother] had a mind, he would have said, “Whatever people say, I won’t take notice of it. Until I have seen my sisters being corrupted, talking and flirting with boys, I won’t believe it. This is how the mentality of our men is, and we cannot help it.”

When asked if there is any threat from Taliban in the area, or other security reasons that may be faced by women on the way to a shura meeting, Samina said, “There isn’t any threat from Taliban, It is our culture and our mentality that is Taliban. Our people [community] are worse than Taliban. And most of the times it is our own near relatives like our Uncles are worse than the Taliban”.

The majority of study participants had a comment on this subject. They spoke about the fact that their communities – and, in some cases – they themselves did not view girls’ education or women’s participation in the schools as teachers or even as medical doctors to be beneficial. It is important to point out that none of the male study participants were wholly against women’s participation in shuras, but they never supported their wives or other female family members desire to participate. The only support that was mentioned again and again was for the school teachers, who are already out of their homes for a reason and thus could be the ones to participate in the shuras.

Religious Beliefs Around Females’ Participation in the Public Sphere

In Afghanistan, it is the general notion that cultural and traditional attributes are inspired by mis-interpretation of the Islamic religion practiced in the country. Women’s participation in an SMS is thus considered to be an extra burden on women that has not been mentioned in religious texts.

Framing his responses from an Islamic point of view, Abdul – a religious leader and member of the shura – said:

Under the law of Islam, a woman, like a man, is a responsible and free agent, fully entitled to all civil rights to be treated with dignity and respect. When she is under-age, she is to be taken good care of and never to be subjected to ill treatment on account of her sex. Her right to a good education is established, like that of her brother. Taking good care of a girl is particularly emphasized and promised great rewards.
Salima, an Islamic studies teacher and shura member, confirmed this, stating that:

In Islam a female’s legal independent status is permanent. Married or single, she can enter into contracts, conduct business, own property and dispose of her wealth at will. She is under the same moral and religious obligations [as men], is urged to cultivate her talents and utilize her potential in her best interest.

Study participants largely agreed that, under Islam, a woman could not be pressurized to participate in the shura against her free will. To make a wife/female legally responsible for her own maintenance would be an unfair burden on women, many of whom may not be able to afford their own keep. Such a burden could also undermine her chances of happy marital success and respectful domestic harmony. To make a woman equally responsible for the cost of the household would very likely lead to harmful disputes, distrust, and misunderstandings within the family. A man, after all, is the head of the household and the earner for the family. He is responsible for all the out-of-the-house work, including participation in the shura. This is because men are the earners of the family and for that purpose they had to go out for work and other societal congregations, shura participation can be one of the areas, meant more for men than women. As mentioned in our holy book (Quran), and the translation is according to Assad (1938), “Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allaah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means”.

[4:34]

Theme 2. Women’s Influence on Decision-Making within Shuras

Women’s influence on decision-making refers to the process of active women’s participation in the shura discussions. The observation made was meant only to see if the women speak up during the shura meetings or not. Secondly through the documentary records (shura journals), it was also noticed that less percentage of women had any influence in the decision making of the shura on school improvement. The data was examined for any evidence that the shuras tried to accommodate participating women’s suggestions or comments. The study found very few examples of women’s influence on shura decisions. As argued, women in Afghan society have clearly defined roles and usually act accordingly. Decision-making in a shura with men present is thus very challenging for many women.

In the 18 shura journals used as a secondary data source for this study very few contributions of women (in the girl’s schools only) were recorded. And on the part of general decision trend, there were mostly men.

When asked in which type of decisions women shura members usually take part, Karima a female high school teacher and member of the shura, said:

Normally regarding the greenery in the school, cleaning in the school, following with the students’ families; who are permanent absentees, preparing students for exams, etc. … We are regular participants to the shura, we listen to the male members. The decisions they make are usually the same that we want to make and therefore we remain silent because we agree with [the male shura members]. … The male members do ask for our consent, we show our satisfaction in their decisions and then the decision is finalized.

Robina, a grade 12 female student and a member of the SMS, said:

We, being the students, are never consulted nor made participant to decision making, and our presence in every shura meeting is also not mandatory. It is
only when people from the Ministry are visiting our schools, they call us to show that student participation is there, but this is not the reality. If we are trusted, we can play a very vital role in the welfare and progress of our school and school systems and can bring very good discipline to our school.

Yet, Abdul maintains that men respect the decisions of women at home, so they do likewise in the shura: “because we know that they are deciding and suggesting far better than us as they do in the homes, therefore while reaching to any decision, we ensure to take our sisters’ concerns and ideas into account”. Hamid, another member of the shura and a community leader said that “women in our shuras are heard, and their ideas and suggestions are respected. Being members of a joint shura, we make sure that all are heard here without distinction”. Nasrin, female head teacher and member of the shura, said that “in our shura, we take suggestions from our male members, being people with greater experiences and skills, they guide us through many issues faced by our school and/or shura but the ultimate decisions are made by us [females], but in collaboration with male members [looking at the male members who were nodding, showing that they accept the statements made by the head teacher]”.

Yet again from the structured observation on participation of women to speak within shuras, the percentage varied a lot. In the boys’ school SMSs, 90% of the discussion observed was dominated by men. In the girls’ school SMSs, the discussion was evenly split among female and male speakers. In the mixed school SMSs, 79% of the discussion was dominated by men. And the major participation of women on the topic was more in the girl’s schools only, while in the male and mixed schools, female’s major participation were to nod what males would say and decide.

**Theme 3. Women’s Contribution to School Improvement**

The contributions of female shura members can be classified as contributions related to attracting investors/donors to defray school maintenance or development expenses or as contributions related to hard work within schools, like keeping the discipline within students, maintaining environmental safeguard and cleanliness etc. These contributions involve moral, in kind and/or financial contributions. Given that the number of female shura members identified through the study was very limited, the level of women’s contribution in some schools was quite remarkable.

**Women’s Contribution to School Development as Shura members**

Women’s contribution to shura work and responsibilities has mostly been in-kind, rather than in cash. Women generally volunteer to conserve the school greenery or to maintain cleanliness in the school. Yet, some cash contributions were reported by study participants. One school, however, had a large number of female shura members who pooled their money in order to buy 35 pairs of shoes for students from poor families in the school community. A group of female teachers who are also members of their school’s shura contributed from their own pockets or fundraised from among their friends to buy seeds, pay the gardener’s salary, or finance trucks to remove accumulated garbage from the school. One of the headmistresses had walked into a donor organization’s office and lobbied for the donation of second-hand equipment to her school.
As mentioned above, student safety is one of the responsibilities of school shuras. With regard to special security measures for girls’ high schools, a headmistress along with female teachers who are also members of the shura have taken turns to ensure the safety of students at the end of the school day when students walk home. They would stand in different locations starting from the door of school to two corners of street where the school is located and would have guarded students pass from these places to the main road.

One of the mothers, who were member of the school shura also, claimed that “her daughter shares with her the teachers’ misbehavior or students’ harassment problems that a student can notice but not the administration”. The mother, who is a shura member, raises these issues during meetings. Many of these second-hand concerns have been addressed. As a result, the mother reports being content with the current state of the school environment, which is becoming more and more secure for female students and for their own children.

**Women as Members of Shura Subcommittees**

Every shura in principle has an executive committee and two subcommittees: the finance committee and the procurement committee. All shura members are divided into these three subcommittees.

Women’s contribution to these subcommittees was negligible. Only one shura in the 18 schools sampled had subcommittees of finance and procurement led by women. Shura documents showed that this shura had been granted a recommendation letter for their transparent way of working and on-time liquidation of EQUIP grants.

Kamal, a prominent male community member and the elected head of one of the shuras sampled, said:

> We have our sisters in our shura, they are sharing their concerns, provide their suggestions and advice wherever possible on certain decisions we make at shura level for the betterment of the school. But they are not members of committee, as this membership requires them to go out for quotations, buy things and discuss with people.

Halima, a female teacher and member of the same shura, agreed with Kamal:

> Our families [men] will not allow us to go out of school for any other purposes, if we tell them about membership of these committees; our men will not permit us [to carry out] our sacred teaching profession, either.

Karima, another female teacher and shura member, spoke out against the abilities of her own sex:

> We women do not possess that much knowledge of buying and selling and collecting quotations for procuring objects for school; these are men-related expertise and they can handle it in a much better way.

Yet, two female shura members at a mixed school, Robina and Akseer, declared proudly that they were women and they had a facility for expenses nevertheless. “That is why we have received the appreciation letter from the education directorate for our on-time liquidation of expenses and transparent expenditure of money”.

**Theme 4. Encouraging Increased Women’s Participation in Shuras**

Encouraging increased women participation refers to the ideas and suggestions on sorting out the ways to the more female participation in the school management shuras. This section tries
to explore views from the male and female participants on how to support and facilitate the women participation and recognize their contribution as being the responsible member of the community to their children and to the school. “Encouraging” here would only refer to the responses that the study participants’ provide against the question asked from them. Which in reality seem adverse.

**Mixed Attitudes Toward Encouraging Female Participation in Shuras**

The participation of members from different societal category like those of the influential and religious leaders can play a vital role in awareness of the society. Female participation in the SMSs needs to be promoted within the community through a series of awareness campaigns and religious leaders can play the key role – amongst others. Yet again there are varieties of observations and responses with regard to women participation by the male members’ like Abdul mentioned as:

> In our country, we see successful women participating in the politics, they are doctors, they are taking care of the income of their families, likewise we also approve of our sister’s participation in the school management shuras, but how to encourage their participation is not something, we can suggest. … Females can share their concerns regarding their children and the schools through their male partners and we can consider those concerns for school improvement.

As argued above by the study participant’s, women’s involvement with activities outside the home like participation in the school shuras is not dictated in Islamic texts. Even one has mentioned that if female has to suggest an improvement, they can do it through their male partners at home, for females it is not important to come out of their houses and participate in the shura meetings. There was thus some reluctance on the part of study participants to promote such an additional burden on women to members of the shuras, a part from their very tough house routine works.

**Study Participant Recommendations**

Responding to the probable recommendations on how to increase female participation in the school management shura, study participants’ recommended several different approaches to increasing female participation in and contribution to school management. Karima said:

> In our shura all the females that are participating are teachers in the school. I am sure there can be many other models like our school in the city where only female teachers are participating [as female members in shura]. I suggest having a combined forum under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, where once every two months or three months females from different schools sit together and share their success stories and lessons learned.

Karima proposed a multi-school shura meeting of women in a private home comprising teachers, the wives of male shura members, and students. Another female shura member echoed this approach:

> There are many women who are illiterate but are very intelligent and if consulted for services to school improvement, that can become an asset for women. And, in order to include them, we need to have separate shura meeting for women in a nearby home, where the [EQUIP] District Social Mobilizer can take note of our discussions and share it with the male
members here in the SMS. Because a woman can convey another woman’s voice as accurately as possible.

Karima also asked for shura training for women:

We have heard that shuras are being trained but, being females, we cannot participate and learn. Ministry of Education initially should come to our places to train us and a number of other possible women from the community on the shura, its functions and responsibilities, and let us know our role as shura members. Through such initiatives, women can come to know about the benefits of participating in school management shuras and can sort out to raise their voice and benefit the school in one way or another.

Abdul, a religious leader and a shura member, proposed that:

There can be another idea to establish a female-only shura for all girls’ schools and male-only shura for boys’ schools. And when it is mixed then female teachers can participate to incorporate the female percentage of the school in the shura.

Hamid, a community leader and a shura member refuted this suggestion by saying:

Whatever shura structures are in place, they can work perfectly for all kinds of schools provided they are small, coherent, but involving active members. Neither all male nor all female shuras can work, there are activities that pertain to both gender to perform.

There were good recommendations on viability of environment which is more feasible for women to participate. But it is notable that a male study participant suggests that both male and female can work together, stand alone, none of them can work, which of course is an appraised statement (by a male member).
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Is school Shura Required?
School Shuras were mainly an adaptation of the related model in the other parts of the region/globe where community’s ownership recommendation is made either through a project or demanded by a donor as done in Afghanistan. School shuras are something which has to come clearly and strategically in the Ministry of Education’s policy papers, by this way they will have a formal recognition within the community through proper campaign and elections, and the real (wanted) participants can be targeted, who will have to play a prominent role with regard to school improvement.

The study’s targeted shuras were a total imposed mechanisms on schools and this can easily be generalised to a maximum number of schools in the country, where the interest of participants were noticed low. The representation in shuras was made just for the sake of representation and without the required expertise for being a participant. The shuras are established either by election or selection through a World bank funded project to the Ministry of Education (MoE) by the name of Education Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). Provincial Education Directorates (PEDs) and District Education Directorates (DEDs) has no responsibility to check on their quality assurance and service delivery at the district and community level. Therefore whether to clarify the shura presence within the school were required or not, is much prominent from the participant’s lack of participation and reluctance to service delivery for school improvement.

Women’s Participation in School Management Shuras
This research is concerned with the extent of female participation in 18 Kabul City school shuras. Finding very limited women’s participation in school management in boys’ and mixed schools in the Kabul City schools studies was anticipated, because women could have more to say in the girl’s schools’ promotion and improvement than boys or mixed schools. When saying Mixed, normally boys are more than girls that is why shura structures also provide male more participation and membership than women. The fact that the term “shura” is generally perceived as a male tradition, being a male council, it is one of the established reason to hamper women participation. The women shura representatives sampled were predominantly female teachers or headmistresses, but they were usually also mothers to students in the schools where they teach and serve on shuras. Nevertheless, women were found to be underrepresented in the majority of the school communities studied. Importantly, since Kabul City is a relatively liberal environment in Afghanistan, women’s participation in SMSs in more rural areas is likely far more limited. Thus women participation was symbolic and not of the real housewives and illiterate but responsible mothers of students, who would depict the problems and challenges of schools as an outsider.

This study also explored the reasons behind the limited participation of women in the SMSs. The phenomenon may almost certainly be attributed to prevailing cultural and traditional norms in patriarchal Afghan society, in which men have an upper hand over women in the decisions about schooling, among others. It is unsurprising that these Afghan school communities reflect the dominant positions of men in society and their desired
seclusion of women. As NORAD was quoted earlier that “local traditional practices for resolving disputes through “jirgas” and “shuras” are male dominated and rooted in conservative patriarchal ideologies”, this study has to a large extent proved this statement correct, where men were observed more vocal than women and even decisive without noticing the concerns of fellow women in their shuras. Simultaneously disapproving to a major extent, of women participation in the male shuras.

Negative attitudes about women’s activities outside the home as well as about women’s predisposition for shura membership and shura participation seem to be the major reason for the limited presence of women in school shuras. Due to such attitudes, families and community members are reluctant to make efforts to help remove or reduce some of the barriers – such as street harassment and lack of transportation – to female participation in the public sphere, e.g. women’s participation in SMSs. Shuras in schools do not have long history, therefore they were not the real reflection of community representation either, whether they were male or female participants. Acceptance of school ownership on the part of community is very much important, once it takes place, than female participation, especially for girls schools indirectly will be presumed to be encouraged on the part of male, with all its possible measurements to make participation on the part of female feasible.

However, school management shuras may constitute an essential forum for empowering Afghan women, i.e., an opportunity for women to assert their views and influence community change that benefits their children. As was assumed above that women’s participation in school management is essential to both educational development, especially for girl’s education, and to women’s own self-worth, has been addressed with less but tangible proofs. Women’s participation in shuras is consistent with both Islamic teachings and with the Afghan cultural belief that raising children is the mother’s domain. Therefore, shuras may constitute an important entry point for increasing Afghan women’s democratic participation in social and political affairs, as per MDG 3. Besides that women majority shuras (in girl’s schools) had major accomplishments for their schools both in moral as well as in material terms. Provided women were less, yet again the women had shown their expertise of fund raising, better school improvement plan and championed high grades in graduate exams for their students to enter universities.

It is clear, however, that any attempts to increase women’s participation in school management should take into account the existing social framework of Afghan religious and cultural norms, which is based on Islamic religion. And Afghanistan can never allow that level of liberty for women, to make them able to participate in the out – of – home activities like participation in the school management shuras, with or without permission of their male partners. Even when there were times that women had given the choice of wearing western style of dresses, yet again that was limited to city of Kabul only. Apart from that on the behaviour change for men, their awareness need to have been increased enough to accept womens’ presence in the community platform like shura meetings.

**Women’s Contribution to School Management Decisions**

Societal norms in Afghanistan prevent women from socializing with men to whom they are not related. School shura participation of women in the sample was largely limited to female education personnel and very few of them were mothers as outsiders
(not teachers). Male study participants claimed that they do consult women concerning shura activities, and that men represent the interests and concerns of their wives and daughters who are not shura members, which was a very positive gesture on the part of male shura member. While I being the female researcher for this study, was not able to put forward my questions to these male members, they were very open and free to speak up their mind was because my male colleague was helping in asking them questions on my behalf. Otherwise these frank facts would not have reached me. And it has helped my results because they were quite open with a male while discussing the issues than female. Female shura members reported that they usually agree with the male members. Women in the findings has expressed directly and indirectly that they cannot make decisions without the support of their male shura partners. It is because they are only their symbolically and I assumed that in majority of shura meetings, even they would be reluctant to participate because of the male members’ superiority and majority in those shura meetings.

Women’s Contribution to School Improvement

However, the study found that women who did participate in school shuras were able to advance the educational improvement agendas through in-kind and cash donations, as well as through their volunteer work. Unfortunately, these contributions were undocumented. In the 18 shura journals used as a secondary data source for this study only one female contribution was chronicled: the abovementioned example of the headmistress who secured second-hand equipment for her school. It should be mentioned that female contributions were more to girls’ schools, where they had their major participation in the shura and were in the decisive position at the same time.

Encouraging Women’s Participation in School Shuras

SMSs are viewed by EQUIP and its donor as the bridge between schools and their surrounding communities (Ministry of Education, 2011). Naturally, women are part of this community and should be heard. To be empowered to represent oneself and speak one’s opinions (Zafarullah & Rahman, 2002) – the very essence of shura participation – is an inalienable human right. As argued, women’s participation in shuras can be empowering for women, in that women can feel more in control of their environment and of the part of their culturally-conferred domain – i.e., child-rearing – that occurs outside the home. After all, women’s empowerment “is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights” (Department For International Development, 2000, p. 8).

The recommendations for promoting increased women’s participation in SMSs offered by the study participant may be among the most useful findings of the study for EQUIP and for the MoE as a whole. Pertaining to the 30% at minimum demand of donors for women to be members of shura, can only be materialised if male members and the surrounding community mentally accepts females’ participation, and that can only be possible when taking into account the recommendations provided through the findings of this study.

As a first step in promoting women’s participation in the public sphere, an inter-ministerial, well-planned, and long-term communication and awareness strategy is needed to provide Afghan men and women information about the roles and rights of each gender.
Within this society, advocacy messages should be supported by Islamic quotations from religious scholars. And those Islamic quotations by the religious scholars should be properly delivered to the public with its real meaning without further misconception. Such a campaign could bring many positive changes to awareness of women rights and promote women’s participation in the different levels (local, district, provincial, national) of the public sphere, including women’s contribution to school shuras. Learning about their rights as women can in and of itself be empowering for mothers in school communities (see e.g. Meintjes, 1997).

The study participants request for training for women on the purpose of school management shuras and the skill set required to perform shura duties are may be a good one. EQUIP should ensure that separate trainings are provided for women, especially since the skills learned would be transferable to other democratic structures in which women might participate.

The shura member comments concerning the problematic nature of women’s participation on the procurement subcommittee is also valid. Women in Afghan society cannot visit male shopkeepers to collect bids or tenders for construction-type shura activities. As study participants made clear, it is already a great obstacle to convince women’s families that women should come to schools to participate in shura meetings; even most female teachers do not have permission from their husbands to undertake such work. EQUIP may consider forming another, more woman-friendly subcommittee that would not necessitate visiting multiple locations.

Finally, the recommendation that girls’ and/or mixed schools have separate female shuras are may be a good one, but so is study participant Hamid’s observation that there are activities that pertain to both genders. Women are interested in the education of all their children – not just of their girls – while men should be involved in the education of their daughters, as well. It can be a wonderful idea to hold multi-school shura meetings for women in a private home, but such meetings should not be limited to discussion of girls’ issues. Women may and should contribute to the education of boys, as well.

In conclusion – as with all education-related programming in Afghanistan – it is essential to raise awareness of the community benefits of educating all children, and girls in particular. Like the religious leaders who participated in this study pointed out, education is farz (i.e., obligatory) for all Muslims: boys, men, girls, and women. The school community is a fine place to begin promotion of the right to be heard.

**Contributions of the Research**

This study will advise the work of the EQUIP School Management Shura Unit and/or the new planned directorate dedicated to community participation and support. Understanding how women are positioned within and the limitations of their contribution to school shuras will inform both future programming for women’s participation in education as well as temper donor expectations of what is and is not possible in the Afghan context.

The results of this research add to the literature on women’s participation in public spheres. It is hoped that this study may contribute to the understanding of the limitations and benefits of women’s participation in other social processes and structures, in Afghanistan and in other male-dominant societies outside of the country. These may also include political bodies, such as village development councils.
Agenda for Future Research

As abovementioned, the findings of this study are limited to the adult representatives of 18 school communities in Kabul City. Further research on women’s shura participation and contribution in more conservative provinces may yield different results. Results may vary by ethnic group and/or by security levels, among other population and location variables. The recommendations for increasing women’s participation in and contribution to school management presented in this thesis may need to be contextualized for other areas of Afghanistan.
REFERENCES

Asad, M (1938), Hadith, Islam, Translation, Lahor, Pakistan, Dar Al Andalus.


ANNEX A: SHURA STRUCTURED OBSERVATION TOOL

School: ___________________________  SMS Strength\(^2\) Male: _____  Female: ________
Date: _____________________________  Duration of Observation: ________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minute of observation</th>
<th>Participating gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5(^{th})</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>60(^{th})</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) By “strength”, the tool refers to the instances of participation by gender.
ANNEX B: SHURA STRUCTURED OBSERVATION DATA

1. Frequency of Participation by Gender in Boys’ Schools SMSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Speaker</th>
<th>Strength in Numbers (#)</th>
<th>Strength in Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Frequency of Participation by Gender in Girls’ Schools SMSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Speaker</th>
<th>Strength in Numbers (#)</th>
<th>Strength in Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Frequency of Participation by Gender in Mixed Schools SMSs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Speaker</th>
<th>Strength in Numbers (#)</th>
<th>Strength in Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 “Strength” refers to the instances of participation by gender. A larger number for male/female shura participants means that they contributed more to discussions.
ANNEX C: SHURA FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

School: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________
District: ______________________________

1. What is the extent of women participation in the school management shura meetings?
   a) What is the total strength of females in your shura?
   b) Are they teachers or community women who are mothers or sisters to kids in this school?
   c) How the females decide to participate in the SMS? Whether they take this decision on their own or inform their male family members?
   d) What is the general response of the male on women participation in SMS?
   e) Are female convenient to participate in SMSs, while coming from home?

2. How do women influence the decision-making related to an issue that pertains to school improvement within Shura?
   a) How active they (females) are in discussion? (a Male’s perspective)
   b) How much male members respect the decisions made by women in Shura?
   c) What are normally the topics; women seem too interested to participate in decisions by themselves?

3. What are the contributions made by women within Shura that has benefitted the wider school?
   a) Do women offer their services by themselves or they are made to do so? (male perspectives)
   b) What sort of contributions, women have made so far?
   c) Do those contributions benefit individual or wider school?

4. How do women participate in the shura subcommittees?
   a) Who in shura decides on the membership of committees and how? (by process)
   b) What is the normal reaction of women with regard to membership in the shura subcommittees?

5. How according to you women participation can be enhanced in the SMSs?
   a) Would you really appreciate the women participation be increased in the SMSs for better school improvement, if yes how? (A male perspective)
   b) How do you suggest spreading the word, that women participation is needed in SMS?
   c) What can be the further recommendations to improve women participation in the SMSs?
ANNEX D: CODING SCHEME

Theme 1. Women’s participation in school management shuras
Refers to female members’ active participation in the shura meetings as evidenced by taking part in shura discussions.

Subcategory 1.1. Male shura members’ misconceptions about female participation
- “Female participation is not much welcomed by their families.”
- “Housework is more important.”
- Females cannot fight tough decisions.

Subcategory 1.2. Community reactions.
- Falsehoods and rumors about females in shuras.
- “People’s close-mindedness.”
- “Females’ get labeled...”
- Gossip about females participating in the school management shuras.
- Discouraging female participation.

Subcategory 1.3. Religious beliefs around female participation in the public sphere.
- Women in the Afghan religious context.

Theme 2. Women’s influence on decision-making within shuras
Refers to female members’ active participation in the discussions within shuras and having their “say” in the decisions at the shura level. This includes instances of:
- Females not being listened to in shura decision-making processes
- Females’ opinions not being included in the decision-making processes

However, the data also included the following:
- “Women’s decisions are respected at home.”
- “Women are heard and respected in shura.”
- “Suggestions are taken from our sisters.”
- “In their (men’s) decisions, we agree with them.”
- “We are the ultimate decision-makers.”

Theme 3. Women’s contribution as shura members
Refers to contribution of women as shura members either through attracting investors/donors/their personal contacts or through their own, creative hard work within schools. Their contribution involves moral, in-kind and/or financial contributions.

Subcategory 3.1. Women’s contribution to school development / improvement
- As headmistresses
- As teachers
- As mothers
- Documentation of women’s contribution in shura journals.

Subcategory 3.2. Women’s contribution as members of shura subcommittees
- “Our sisters are part of discussion but not in the committees.”
- Women know less on Procurement and Finances.
• “We are women and we have a good tact of expenses.”

Theme 4. Encouraging greater women’s participation in shuras
Refers to the responses of male as well as female shura members as to their recommendations on encouraging greater women’s participation in school management shuras.

Subcategory 4.1. Mixed attitudes toward encouraging women’s participation in shuras
- Men approved of women participation but could not help
- “The decision-making role is with men.”
- What if shura men encouraged their wives to participate?
- Participation of women in EQUIP shura workshops and trainings.

Subcategory 4.2. Study participant recommendations
- Majority of female shura participants are schoolteachers.
- “A woman’s voice can be easily conveyed by women.”
- Female shuras for girls’ schools and male shuras for boys’ schools.
- “Small but active shura works for all kinds of school.”