

Field Notes and Observations of Gender and Local Level Decision Making in Robat-e Sangi, Herat Province

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This set of observations is being released as a tool to provide researchers and NGOs with information about gender and local level decision making processes in Herat Province. It is based on notes taken in a village in Robat-e Sangi and is not meant to present a comprehensive profile of gender relations in this area. The views and recommendations reflected herein do not necessarily represent the views of AREU.

Section 1: Introduction

These notes are from one of five case studies¹ conducted between March and October 2004, for the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). The overall project objective is to improve policies and programmes that aim to increase women's participation in public life.² In order to do this the project seeks to generate a better understanding among NGOs, the UN, donors and the Afghan government about how decisions are made on priority household and community issues, and how men and women participate in the decision making process.³

In each field site the study aims to find out what are some of the gender based norms, roles and responsibilities involved in household level decision making. What are some of the household and community decision making processes, the methods women and men use, and the social resources they draw upon to assert their interests within the household and community? What are some of the links, if any, between household and community level decision making, and do key community institutions reflect outcomes related to women's needs and interests?

The study uses a gender analysis – the examination of the situation of women and men and the relations between them – as a way to improve understanding of their activities, access to resources, and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other. It is not intended as a study of the situation of women, but rather of locally defined roles and responsibilities of men and women, and the social norms that determine their participation in decision making on priority interests and concerns of families and communities.

This case study, generously supported by DACAAR, was the first of the case studies undertaken for the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Research Project. It was undertaken over a three week period in March 2004 in a village in Robat-e Sangi District of Herat Province.

¹ The case studies of this project are as follows: a Pashtun village in Robat-e Sangi, Herat Province; ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in Mazar-e Sharif; Uzbek and Tajik villages in Hazrat-e Sultan and Khoram, Samangan Province; Hazara villages in Panjao, Bamyan Province; and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in Kabul. These were chosen in order to have some geographic and ethnic diversity in the field sites.

² See Appendices I and II for information on the conceptual background to this study.

³ It was agreed with each NGO partner that findings would be considered and integrated into their programming and that AREU would work with them to identify appropriate ways to feed the findings back into the communities of study.

Section II: Context

Challenges and Caveats

As this was the first case study of this research project, this research was more experimental than those following in Samangan, Mazar-e Sharif, Panjao and Kabul. The research team was still being formed, and learning how to work together to gain a better understanding of the difficult issue of gender relations in Afghanistan.

A Village with Limited Livelihoods Options

The villagers – both male and female – expressed that while both men and women had worked in Iran and experienced “modern” amenities (such as clinics) and a few even had schooling – their return to the village had provided some frustration: the men the researchers spoke to said over and over that since they returned “there is nothing for us to do” or “we are just sitting here”. They have experienced drought in the area, and have some difficulty growing the crops that they grew before the war. Women learned some new skills in Iran, but they argued that now they have no income and no equipment that could enable the women to take part in income generation activities, building on the skills that they learned outside Afghanistan. Many of the families in the village reported that at least one of their young sons works in Iran and sends remittances home, though in a few cases the families were not satisfied because they had not heard from them.

Community Issues and Institutions

The main issues voiced to the research team were the lack of opportunities to earn income in the village, combined with the lack of resources to be self-sufficient, as they perceived themselves to be before the drought and the war. The researchers were told by each participant that there are three institutions within the village that deal with community issues – the *majlis shura* (council of elder men), the Village Organization (the VO set up by DACAAR) and the *majlis zanha* (the women’s meeting set up by DACAAR). The membership of the VO and the *shura* overlap, with the elders taking part in both and retaining influence over decision making within the newer mechanism. This *shura* is run by four elders, who try to help to solve the people’s disputes.

It was difficult to confirm, but the researchers were told that about half of the villagers were landless and half landed. Yet few in the village are able to cultivate their land – there are no longer enough animals and accessing tractors to plow the land and this is expensive. Other complaints were the lack of a nearby school, so that none of the children in the village attended school; and lack of a clinic, so that it was difficult for villagers to seek medical care for anything but emergencies, and in a few cases they mentioned to the researchers this was too late. The villagers appreciated the assistance of DACAAR through the Village Organization (VO), but at the same time criticised the distribution of aid and the work requirements to receive it.

The VO was established by DACAAR to provide the villagers with access to some basic services and to involve them in decision making processes about their priority needs in a more equitable fashion than in the past. Despite the rhetoric around the representativeness of the new VO, it still does not include women and it is questionable how much influence and authority the people actually have over decision

making processes. This is a male only space, and women are not thought of as knowledgeable enough about community issues to participate.

Most people wanted to help themselves, rather than think of themselves as aid recipients. This was expressed most strongly by a recently married migrant worker, who was also the son-in-law of the *arbab*:

I am still young and there is power in my arms so I can solve my own problems. If I can't solve my own problems, I will ask almighty Allah for help, not the foreigners.

And yet there were complaints about the aid coming in the form of work for the villagers that it goes to the *arbab* and is unfairly distributed amongst them. On one occasion, some of the village men ended up in a dispute around the researchers' request to divide into different wealth groups for the purpose of better understanding some of the differences and similarities among their priority concerns and participation in decision making processes. The incident (which was quelled by the research assistant's quick thinking and invocation of the Quran) brought out some of the internal disagreements based on economic status within the community. Apparently the poorer members of the community had little hesitation about voicing their discontent with the *arbab* and his family in front of him, outsiders and the other members of the village, and the researchers were told later that this happens regularly when they meet.

The expression *hoqooq ma khordad* ("to eat one's rights") was used several times to express perceptions about what happens to aid that is distributed. They also related that "rights" are given and taken away by the *arbab*; quite a different concept of rights from that referring to the wider concept of rights used by NGOs. According to one of the landless men in the village who had only been in the village for 5 months, he participates (physically) in the VO, but "no one asks about my problems. I have told them about my problems but they haven't been solved."

The main hopes that both women and men voiced in relation to the *majlis zanha* (women's group or meeting) is that the women's involvement will bring some aid so they can weave carpets, sew and tailor and earn some income. The researchers were told directly that if the women's involvement does not secure these things, and if they are not able to secure some income for their families, the NGO will not be allowed in the village anymore. The main contrasting viewpoint was expressed by the *arbab* from Torghonde, who noted another benefit to women's involvement:

Educated women come here and educate our women, in animal husbandry, birthing and how to clean the house.

Section III: Community “Leadership”

The leadership of the *arbab* was not questioned in terms of his role in representing the village to outsiders, though it was criticised in terms of his fairness and honesty. There was some evidence that he was not as powerful as another *arbab*, also from the same lineage, but living on the border with Iran in Torghonde. Both *arbabs* agreed that they worked together, speaking on a regular basis about issues related to land, aid, and relations with the government. However, the *arbab* from Torghonde also relayed that the leadership structure in Torghonde was more legitimate than that in Robat-e Sangi because it was the traditional system rather than one set up by an NGO.

In fact, there was some level of dissatisfaction voiced by the elders themselves about the role and functioning of the *shura*. They said that in the past, they had a district level *shura* set up by the central government, but that it was not representative of the people. They felt that the new VO includes all of the villagers, rather than just a few people, and more are able to express themselves. This was a perspective that was often heard in this research project with respect to the traditional *shura* (and which is widely documented elsewhere) as well as the newer village organisations that function as a mechanism for aid distribution. It is often unclear whether this rhetoric is an accurate representation of local views, or whether this is something that the leadership from the traditional *shura* feels they have to relay to outsiders in order to display their willingness to work with them.

In contrast with the VO, which had been meeting for a few years, the *majlis zanha* was seen as a newer addition to local decision making processes. The village in Robat-e Sangi was chosen in part because it was understood that this newer mechanism was being set up for women to participate in the local development process that would parallel the VO run by the men. In reality, the women were not clear on their roles in the group. It was supported by the men the researchers spoke with, primarily as a way to access more aid for the village in the form of sewing machines and other technical inputs that would allow women to engage in income generation activities they had been involved with in Iran. But perceptions of women’s knowledge beyond these skills is very low among both men and women (discussed below), and beyond this there was not an expectation that women’s roles in decision making should be expanded within this new mechanism.

The team observed one *majlis zanha* meeting, in which the terms of engagement between DACAAR and the local women were laid out. In addition, the representative for the group was to be chosen. However, when asked why they were there, the women said “we were asked to come here and tell our problems to DACAAR” which contrasted with the view of the local DACAAR staff who felt the purpose of the meeting was to allow the women to elect their own representative. This indicated a lack of agency from the women themselves, and the expectation that the NGO was simply going to provide aid. The circumstances of the meeting were in no way usual for the village, however, in that it included several female outsiders – the foreign AREU researcher and her translator from Herat, a foreign staff from DACAAR, and two Afghan field staff including the health and animal husbandry educator – the one outsider the villagers appeared the most familiar with.

In the observed meeting, one woman from each of the households was supposed to attend and vote on the agreement between DACAAR and the women villagers. In practice several women from the *arbab*'s household were present, and when it came time to vote on the representative for the women's group they all pointed to the wife of the *arbab* and she was selected. However, there was also a confusing period of dispute during which the midwife for the village (also related to the *arbab*) was chosen as her assistant. She was the more outspoken in the meeting, arguing with the NGO worker when the women were told that they may have to participate in trainings outside of the village because the women are not supposed to leave the village.

When the midwife was later asked why she was selected as representative, she noted:

All of the people know that I am a midwife and I am elder[ly], so the people elected me. I know how to bring up children, and I am older than the others. Since we returned from Iran, all the people know me.

It would also be interesting to know what role her being a widow with more decision making power in her own household and a freedom of mobility that the younger and married women do not have plays in this leadership, what role her status as midwife plays in it and what role her own personality plays. Also, to compare local perceptions of qualities of male leaders and female leaders, as was explored in other field sites after this study.

The *arbab*'s wife, by contrast, defined her role in the community in relation to her status because of her husband – and reflected on the role of DACAAR:

*Everyone wants to speak with the *arbab* and comes to her with their problems. They want money, help with their bathrooms, and drinkable water. But the *arbab* doesn't have any money, so instead he refers their questions to DACAAR.*

Section IV: Gender Issues in Community Decision Making

Through this initial study, some themes emerged which carried forward throughout the Gender and Local Level Decision Making research. These included women's freedom of mobility, constraints and opportunities for their participation in public life; local perceptions of knowledge as shaped by gender roles and responsibilities, and how this translates into decision making entitlements; the role of external agents in influencing decision making processes; and social networks. In this particular study, the following issues emerged.

Freedom of Mobility

The women say that there are no "strangers" in the village, and as such some have relative freedom of mobility in terms of working outside of their households – within the confines of the village. Most are able to go out without their faces covered, with the particular exception of the daughter of the *arbab*, married to the man in the village who considers himself to be the most "modern" in the village. In a group discussion among eight widows there was agreement that the *arbab's* daughter was the most secluded and restricted woman in the village – and that her husband did not treat her well. This kind of *purdah* (female seclusion) is considered necessary for protection of family honour, and though it is determined by local norms it does vary from household to household. In this case, the woman is from a prominent family.

However, the researchers were able to gather younger women for a small group discussion much more easily than in the other rural field sites in this research project. One reason for this could be around the lack of full understanding of the purpose of the team's research, which might cause the poorer families to send their daughters to access aid. However, though they were extremely shy, they did speak with the team and expressed frustration at their situations – all were married quite young (before 15) and one fifteen-year-old had already borne three children which she was unhappy about, but said she had no choice in the matter.

As in each of the field sites in this research, the female meeting spaces were centred around their reproductive and productive roles and responsibilities. This included water collection, agricultural work, animal husbandry and preparation for funerals, and social occasions such as weddings.

Gendered Knowledge

Women's access to information and acknowledgement of what they know is limited to these roles and responsibilities. This is partly determined by *purdah* norms. The women depend on their husbands to bring information to them "from the bazaar". A few families in the village, including the *arbab* and his son-in-law, have radios but none of the women would acknowledge that they listened to it or understood what the programmes were saying themselves. In one case, the *arbab's* wife brought a radio from the other room, and the research translator turned it on. While the translator (a Herati woman) said that she could understand it clearly, the other women denied that she could understand anything "because I am illiterate". This example was a telling sign of the acceptable level of knowledge and understanding about issues beyond the village.

The women said they do not know anything because they are illiterate, and the men said this as well. They know about how to raise children, clean house and prepare food, but even their knowledge of animal husbandry and farming is not reported.

The experience in Iran did teach women some new valued skills. These would enable women to generate income for their families, provided they had access to the technical inputs and the markets. A few of the women also acknowledged that they had a new understanding about the value of marrying their daughters a bit older:

When we were in Herat before going to Iran, we did not know anything. We engaged our daughters when they were 9, 10 or 11. But since we have returned back from Iran, we understand that we have to engage our daughters when they are 12, 13 or 14.

Unfortunately, because of the limited ways of earning income in the village, the marriage of girls is still seen as an economic necessity – or as the *mullah* said “selling our daughters is a good business here.” While every participant said they wanted their children to be educated, even their girls, they also said they would not be allowed to go to school unless one was built in their village. In reality, there is not much value placed on girl’s education. As the childless “modern” man put it, “People in this village want girls to stay for four or five years in school; this is enough for a girl so when she goes to the bazaar she can read the signs.” He clarified that it is shameful for girls to go to school for any longer than this, comparing urban and rural emphases on education:

City people want girls to stay in school for twelve years, but in the rural areas they don’t want them to. It is bad that a girl should go to school, after four or five years – it is not good for her to be outside of the house.

Of course the issue also has a practical dimension that cuts across urban and rural areas – their mothers need help with household chores:

The big issue for why girls don’t go to school is because when they learn more, they have to go to Herat or Kabul for university and then their mothers will be unhappy.

This is a very real concern, as there is very little prestige for women who have some education to return to the village to work there.

As in other field sites, a few people made linkages between lack of education and conflicts within the village. In Robot-e Sangi, this was voiced by the *arbab* from Torghonde, as well as a recently arrived landless man: “Since we don’t have a good culture, and we don’t have enough knowledge, every time we attend a meeting we finish with a fight.”

Social Networks

This was an area that was more difficult to explore, given the inter-relations between many in the village and beyond. However, it was clear that the social networks of the individuals and families in the village has an impact on who is entitled to participate in community level decision making. In this village, those from the original lineage

appeared to have more land and more control over decision making as it often related to their own assets. The representation of everyone in the village being descended from nomadic Pashtuns was not entirely accurate, as at least one and probably more were landless and from other areas. This raised the issue of how even in a small village people can have different interests and different levels of willingness to cooperate with each other for developmental reasons.

The *arbab's* family had broader social networks, as displayed through the regular meetings with the *arbab* from Torghonde, frequent trips to Herat and the observed participation of a wedding in a lower village. In addition, while the other widows in the village complained that they did not have any assistance from others, the widow who became the assistant representative in the *majlis zanha* relayed that when she ran into financial trouble to try to gather brideprice to marry her son, she borrowed money from Kuchis travelling through and would pay them back next year when they return and she has more money.

The value of women seeing something outside of their own village was illustrated in other areas in this study, but the fear of exposing women to the outside is something that must be overcome. One way might be to send some trusted men – or women – along in order that the purpose of their visit becomes clear.

Role of External Agents

The field sites chosen were areas in which NGOs were working on community development initiatives; each of these organisations have a commitment to including women and supporting the development of more inclusive decision making processes. In this way, the researchers intended to observe some of the gender roles and dynamics of decision making – though in reality, these spaces for meeting between the villagers was established by the NGO and as such are more formal, public and inclusive than those where most important decisions are likely still made.

The role of the development organisation in this case highlighted some of the power dynamics put in place when an NGO brings aid through staff tasked with gaining the trust of local women and men. In this case the national DACAAR staff were very knowledgeable about the dynamics within the village though less aware of the ways in which their presence may alter them. It is clear for instance that neither the *majlis zanha* nor the VO will meet without the presence of the DACAAR staff. The only local institution in the sense of establishing local rules and norms and upholding the collective values is the small group of the elders and landed men. This may not be an equitable institution, and the DACAAR staff may wish to change this, but their own role in the process may need further examination in order to understand exactly what should be their role in fostering a more equitable role.

Section V: Implications and Recommendations

Between the VO and the *majlis zanha*, DACAAR aims to establish a more democratic process of priority setting and project development with men and women. But the implementation of this concept is constrained by the power dynamics within the community – as well as those established between the women in the community and the NGO, which has far more resources than the village itself. Women appear to be sent to the *majlis zanha* in order to secure more aid for the village, according to the wishes of the men. While this may provide a legitimate and culturally appropriate entry point for working with women, this approach alone may not lead to DACAAR's overall long-term goals. At worst, it could reinforce or strengthen the inequitable dynamics of decision making and resource distribution that already exist within in the community.

As a result, DACAAR should consider the following:

- **Clarify programme objectives, benchmarks and indicators on gender equality, women's empowerment and participation.** There appears to be a lack of clarity on what interventions with women in particular and communities in general aim to achieve, and whether progress is being made. There is a difference between providing access to services and resources than providing people with tools to ensure more equitable access and distribution amongst themselves. DACAAR should consider working with field staff to develop more explicit objectives, benchmarks and indicators that indicate which kinds of participation they are looking for. This would assist staff to develop more relevant activities with communities and over time provide a greater sense of achievement in their work.
- **Work with men to find out acceptable forms of participation for women.** With this understanding, it will also be easier to understand how far the local community can be pushed to include women's more meaningful participation in defining and implementing a local development agenda. It may be that the only purpose of the VO and the *majlis* is as a mechanism for aid distribution, and that it is not designed for promoting social change in the village, but this should not be assumed.
- **Clarify lines of accountability between the NGOs, the VO and their male and female representatives, the traditional *shura* and the villagers.** It was clear that the traditional *shura* still maintained influence over decision making, and that while this was being challenged by some of the poorer villagers this was still far more institutionalised than the externally established VO. It could be useful to do a mapping with the villagers to identify the linkages between them; the different roles and responsibilities of each; and the lines of accountability between them. This could form the basis of a discussion on which kinds of social change different villagers may actually want.
- **Work with the villagers – women and men – on conflict resolution skills to enable them to better communicate and negotiate needs and interests and come up with locally relevant solutions.** This would require working closely with a range of villagers, including especially the more marginalised groups, in

order to assist them to begin to develop skills in negotiation that might prevent fights between villagers.

Conclusion

The research was taken around the time civic education about the presidential elections began. The village men were at that point ignorant of the process of elections, and were happy to take their wives' votes to the polling stations, but not to let them go themselves. They relayed that only "if they bring the box to this village" would they let them participate in the voting process. There was a perception relevant to the links between central government policy and local level realities: they felt that "these are our women and the government will not be able to control them. Our wives are in our control and whatever we choose they should also choose – they will not choose against us."

There is a lot of fear in this village as in others in this study about any expanded roles for women in household and community decision making. There is a fear that when women increase their knowledge or become educated, that they will leave and shame their families, ignoring their gendered roles and responsibilities. This is a very real concern, and one that should not be shied away from in projects and programmes if the goal is truly to enable communities to determine their own priority needs and interests.