

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit  
Case Study Series

**Does Women's Participation in the  
National Solidarity Programme  
Make a Difference in their Lives?  
A Case Study in Kabul Province**



Chona R. Echavez

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## About the Author

Chona R. Echavez is a Senior Researcher at the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). Before joining AREU in January 2010, Chona served as an Asia Fellow in Cambodia at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, during which she looked into healing, dreams, aspirations and concepts of peace among Cambodian youth. She also worked as Senior Research Associate at the Research Institute for Mindanao Culture where she managed a research portfolio that included: population, health, peace and livelihood programmes, considering gender as a cross-cutting issue. She has a Ph.D. in Demography from the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. Her dissertation was on Women and Factory Work in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines.

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AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and nongovernmental organisations. AREU receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Specific projects in 2011 have been funded by the European Commission (EC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Humanitarian Aid Department of the European Commission (ECHO), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and UN Women.

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## Glossary

<i>burqa</i>	a long veil covering all parts of the body with a mesh screen for the eyes
<i>karez</i>	traditional system for tapping the water table via underground canals
<i>mahram</i>	male chaperone
<i>malik</i>	village head
<i>mullah</i>	religious leader; mosque prayer leader
<i>seyali va shariki</i>	social obligations that involve visiting neighbours with gifts on significant occasions such as birth, illness, weddings, etc.
<i>shura</i>	community council

## Acronyms

AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
AWSDC	Afghan Women's Skill Development Council
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CDC	Community Development Council
FGD	focus group discussion
FP	facilitating partner
IDI	in-depth interview
MISFA	Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NSP	National Solidarity Programme

## Executive Summary

This case study is part of a larger project that explores women's participation in different development programmes and projects in Afghanistan. The research specifically explores women's participation in the National Solidarity Programme's (NSP) Community Development Councils (CDCs) as well as non-government organisation (NGO)-initiated groups for microfinance under the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA). It examines the effects these forms of women's participation are having on gender roles and relations within the family and the local community. The project covers communities in Balkh, Parwan and Kabul provinces. This Kabul case study is the third and final one in a series that focuses exclusively on women's participation in the NSP.

The study used a qualitative research approach, collecting data from multiple sources for triangulation. The main method used was semi-structured in-depth interviews supplemented by focus group discussions (FGDs), informal conversations and observations. A total of 55 interviews were conducted with 39 informants for the first round and 16 out of these informants were re-interviewed in the second round. These informants represented male and female CDC members, their family members and community residents. Five FGDs (three for women and two for men) were conducted with a total of 23 participants. Two FGDs were conducted for the officials and members of the CDCs (one for men and one for women). Two FGDs were conducted for community members/household members of the female CDC officials/members, and one for female beneficiaries of the NSP-CDC project.

### Key Findings

- The NSP's requirement that the community set up a *shura* for women as well as for men sent a strong signal to male community members that the programme would listen to women's voices and ensure their participation. This led to them to be more open to consulting with women and accepting their involvement in the project.
- The NSP CDC's most important contribution was to provide a venue for women to participate in the development of their community. It created an opportunity for women to interact with other women, exchange knowledge and express themselves freely.
- The NSP shifted the balance of leadership in the community. The women's CDC helped provide not only a venue for discussion among women, but was also a good start for having women leaders in the community.
- Women's exposure to FP staff during meetings also reportedly helped increase their awareness about their rights and boost their confidence. Interaction with other women improved their awareness of various issues, which in turn improved the way they handled things both within and outside their homes. As this happened, traditional restrictions on women's mobility also reportedly started to loosen.
- The increased awareness described above also improved women's outlook on life. Prior to the NSP, women saw themselves as inferior to men. After the programme, women started to value their own ideas and considered their thoughts to be just as sound as those of men.
- Women started to speak up and their fear of being oppressed started to wear off. As a consequence, they were able to establish better relationships both within their households and in the wider community.

- The members of the women's *shura* gained in power and social status. This change is especially significant given that most of the *shura* members were widows. The fact that widows had to struggle to fend for themselves without a male household head meant that they had previously occupied the bottom rung on the ladder of community status.
- Women's new-found confidence gave them the courage to perform some of their desired tasks, such as purchasing goods for their households in the bazaar. In particular, it meant that they no longer feared being ostracised for joining in activities outside the home or physically harmed by male family members for doing so.
- During and after NSP implementation, *shura* members' participation in household decision-making improved. The main factors driving this were their interaction with other women and their exposure to the programme staff. People came to equate their participation in the programme with having "sound mind" or good ideas, and they were therefore given greater decision-making responsibility.
- Exposure to the *shura*—along with its tailoring and literacy courses—also modified women's attitudes toward their daughters. Women learned about the rights of their daughters and realised the value of educating girls as well as boys.

## Challenges

- There were two separate CDCs organised in the community, one for men and one for women. However, in this set-up, there was no mechanism to ensure that women's voices are heard.
- Women were not in control of funds since the treasurer of the men's *shura* handled the financial affairs of the women's *shura*.
- Some women were unable to participate in NSP activities due to restrictions imposed by male household members—especially their husbands—while others were sceptical about what the programme could achieve.
- NSP implementation suffered a significant setback due to the domineering leadership of the husband and wife pairing who were heads of their respective men's and women's *shuras*. This was a cause of division within the community.
- The lack of literacy among *shura* members—especially women—meant that they lacked the skills to examine the transactions and plans of their *shura* heads. Even the secretary of the women's *shura* was illiterate, and therefore could not document the agreement or disagreement of the *shura*; this in turn was likely a barrier to other *shura* or community members lobbying for their own ideas and interests as opposed to those of the *shura* head.
- The alleged corruption and mismanagement of programme funds in both *shuras* had a significant negative impact on community perceptions of the programme, and on women's participation in particular.
- Security worries in the community still posed a barrier to women's mobility. Women noted that even though they were now allowed to leave their homes, they did not venture too far due to security concerns. They added that it was still not safe for women to leave the community.
- Some women felt that they had gained little from their participation in poorly-organised NSP sub-projects.



- Very few women reported a direct increase in their income as a result of the project, and in many cases their control over their own money remained limited.
- While the NSP did result in a substantial shift in gender relations in the community, this was by no means universal: younger women especially reported that some men still clung to long-standing traditions and attitudes of male superiority. These women reported that male household members did not allow them to participate in NSP activities over fears that doing so would interfere with their housework and expose them to other male community members.
- Women's *shura* meetings were no longer being conducted in the community at the time of research. Informants described how the lifetime of the women's *shura* was dependent on the NSP's continued existence, and that it had ceased to function when the budget for its sub-projects was exhausted.

## Lessons Learned

### *Inclusion of women*

Empowering women through their involvement was an essential component of successful NSP implementation. However, the inclusion of women in all aspects of the programme should be broader in scope, allowing more women to have their voices heard and their ideas taken into serious consideration. In this regard, greater steps need to be taken to avoid women being marginalised or left out of the process in its early stages. Another major factor that could have improved women's participation was the proper identification of key leaders in the community. Informants believed that the people best suited to lead NSP implementation were those who put the interests of the community over their own self-interest. It is therefore important that selection of project leaders is done in a more democratic manner and that people should be free from coercion and other influences when electing their *shura* heads.

### *Identification of needs*

The needs of a community—and especially its women—must be identified in a participatory manner. Informants highlighted that it was important to know people's need before the project so that training activities could be organised accordingly. Women wanted to identify projects that would directly address their perceived needs rather than be coerced into accepting projects that had been pre-determined by programme implementers and community elites. One of the main causes of women's disenchantment with and eventual disengagement from the project was their frustration at not being consulted on project selection and their inability to give feedback during implementation.

### *Project staffing*

Impartiality and neutrality of external staff are also key elements in ensuring women's active participation and successful project implementation. Staff who come to communities should have substantial capacity and skills in dealing with local dynamics and should be impartial in organising community members and should broaden participation among community members, especially women. The involvement of FP staff in the perceived elite capture and mismanagement of the NSP was a source of significant frustration among many female participants.

### *Sustainability*

It is vital that a mechanism for sustainability should also be built into the programme implementation to ensure that the changes set in motion are built on and sustained.

## 1. Introduction

This case study is part of a larger project that examines the effects that initiatives to include women in different development programmes and projects in Afghanistan are having on gender roles and relations within the family and local community.<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on women's participation in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) Community Development Councils (CDCs),<sup>2</sup> and on microfinance initiatives supported under the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA). The study is funded by the International Development Research Council.

This study specifically focuses on a community in Khulm District in Balkh Province where the NSP CDC was implemented in 2006. Three provinces in Afghanistan are covered in the larger study, namely Parwan, Kabul and Balkh. Practical and methodological factors were considered for the selection of study areas. The provinces' security situation was a key concern as well as physical and social access. With the exception of Kabul,<sup>3</sup> provinces where the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) had not yet conducted gender-focused research were selected. The three provinces were also areas where the NSP had been implemented long enough to observe possible outcomes.

The succeeding two sections in this introductory chapter explain the overall research focus of the larger study and the operationalisation of the concepts which are uniform in all the provincial case studies, and will be followed in synthesising the findings across all the cases.

### 1.1 The overall research focus and issues explored

Participation in development initiatives (local politics, community organising and development projects) is seen as a key route to empowerment for women, both as individuals and as a group. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) highlights the twin goals of women's empowerment and gender equality.<sup>4</sup> The NAPWA document adds that the Afghan government has further acknowledged that women in Afghanistan are currently challenged by a severe depletion of intellectual resources due to decades of exclusion and constraints, exposure to violence, and disadvantages in many spheres of life.

Responding to the assumptions regarding participation in empowerment processes and the focus of NAPWA on women's empowerment in particular, this research explores the following issues:

- What are the obstacles for women who wish to participate in development initiatives and community organising? How might these be overcome?

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1 Community is an often used, but rarely defined term. For the purposes of this research the community is based on residency, e.g. the village community. However, it is acknowledged that a person can be a member of several communities at the same time. For example, an individual may be a member of a religious community or community based on ethnic identity within a village, which also represents a larger community across different villages, cities or even nations. In using the term "community", it is recognised that members of specific communities are not necessarily homogeneous, but instead are heterogeneous in terms of power, resources and interests. Adapted from Deborah J. Smith with Shelly Manalan, "Community-Based Dispute Resolution Processes in Bamiyan Province" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

2 CDCs are the decision-making bodies of the NSP at the village level.

3 Gender studies have been conducted in Kabul before the IDRC-funded study, namely, Gender and Local Level Decision-Making and Family Dynamics and Family Violence.

4 "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan 2008-2018" (Kabul: Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2008).

- What factors encourage women's participation and how might these be replicated by other programmes?
- What impact does women's participation have on their lives, particularly with regard to any changes in gender relationships in families and in the community?

## 1.2 Conceptualising and operationalising power, politics and women's participation in development initiatives<sup>5</sup>

Central to this research is the concept of power. Gender essentially describes a relationship between men and women based on power differentials in a manner such that neither gender is all-powerful or totally powerless, but in which power is skewed in favour of men in most societies. The power dynamics between Afghan men and women in the household, among the extended family and in the wider community are addressed in the research. Similarly, the power dynamics between implementing agencies, representatives of the state and development professionals, as well as women participating in NSP CDCs, are also explored.

The research draws on work which recognises both the oppositional and consensual nature of power dynamics.<sup>6</sup> While it is based in theories of power that recognise strategies of resistance used by those who appear to have the least amount of power in a given social order, it also recognises that this may only provide a limited understanding of power if the dominant power hierarchies based on gender, social class, etc. are ignored.<sup>7</sup> It then follows that this investigation into the effects of women's local-level participation on gender relations in families and communities requires a detailed analysis of the various social, cultural and political structures within and around which women operate.

From the outset, the research used a broad definition of politics to incorporate the multiple ways in which women practice politics at the local level. For example, within the Afghan context, a woman simply leaving her home to attend a meeting can be defined as a political act.

In recent years, the term "empowerment" has become a shorthand within mainstream development discourses and as such has lost much of its initial potential for social change. Large-scale projects and programmes are launched with the specific aim of empowering the poor and/or women. Empowerment has come to be seen as a panacea for all social ills, from environmental degradation to low literacy rates. Despite this, not all definitions or understandings agree on what empowerment entails. However, there is a general consensus in the gender and development literature that empowerment involves certain people acquiring more power by becoming aware of the dynamics operating within their own lives and developing the skills and capacities needed to gain control of these dynamics.<sup>8</sup> This is linked to what some call "power to," which

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5 Some of the ideas in this particular section are drawn from the research proposal written by Deborah Smith, the former Senior Research Manager at AREU who designed the project.

6 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: McMillan Press Ltd., 1974); Naila Kabeer, "Resources Agency and Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 435-464.

7 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

8 Srilatha Batliwala, "The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action," in *Population Policies Reconsidered Health, Empowerment, and Rights*, eds. Lincoln C. Chen M.D., Gita Sen and Adrienne Germain, 127-38 (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Kabeer, "Resources Agency and Achievements"; Zoï Oxaal and Sally Baden, *Gender and Empowerment: Definitions, Approaches and Implications for Policy*

is also associated with agency and decision-making, particularly in areas of strategic importance not already typical for the group in question.<sup>9</sup> Gaining self-confidence and overcoming internalised oppression are often recognised as the key to empowerment, a process of finding one’s “power within.” It is through a recognition by those with the least amount of power in a given society of the multiple ways in which power operates and the subsequent changes in the nexus of power dynamics that empowerment can be most easily understood.<sup>10</sup>

While there is no single understanding of what empowerment means, there is also no clear consensus on how to go about implementing a process of empowerment. However, it is often assumed that the best way to empower marginalised groups is through collective organising and group work, or building “power within.” Consequently, empowerment has become very closely linked with strategies of participation and, at the same time, an essential tool in that process.

Participation, as used in development literature, has, in theory, aimed to change the power relations between experts and development professionals and the recipients of development. As with empowerment, participation has become a development shorthand since the late 1980s and, like empowerment, it has lost much of its transformative potential. Instead, it has become subsumed within mainstream development discourse, often with a greater emphasis on efficiency outcomes rather than on any shift in power dynamics.<sup>11</sup> Having people participate has become an aim in itself, often without a detailed examination of what the consequences of the participation may be. Further, there is a need to explore how levels of participation are actually measured, with there being a tendency for presence to be seen as the same as participation. In recent years, the theory and practice of participation has begun to be criticised.<sup>12</sup>

The study operationalised these concepts using the framework shown in Figure 1. The framework reflects both the projected short-term and long-term impacts of the NSP. However, the study can only explore the current short-term impacts because the projects have not been operational long enough to capture long-term impacts at the individual, family/household, and community levels.

The study examined how the NSP principles of gender equity and transparency and accountability were implemented in the study community and what effects these principles had on women’s participation and its outcomes. It also examined how social preparation of properly informing the community’s elders or “whitebeards,” affected women’s participation in the NSP CDC. Gender equity is specifically examined in terms

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(Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 1997); Jo Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” *Development in Practice* 5, no. 2 (1995): 101-107; Rosi Braidotti, Ewa Charkiewicz, Sabine Häuser and Saskia Wieringa, *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development-Toward a Theoretical Synthesis* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

9 Kabeer, “Resources Agency and Achievements”; Janet Townsend, “Empowerment Matters: Understanding Power,” in *Women and Power*, eds. Janet Gabriel, Emma Zapata and R. Townsend, 19-36 (London: Zed Books, 1999); Jo Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997).

10 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (London and New York: Prentice Hall, 1980).

11 David Mosse, “‘People’s Knowledge,’ Participation and Patronage: Operations and Representations in Rural Development,” in *Participation—The New Tyranny?* eds. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, 16-35 (London: Zed Books, 2001).

12 Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, “The Case for Participation as Tyranny,” in *Participation—The New Tyranny?* eds. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, 1-15 (London: Zed Books, 2001). Mosse, “‘People’s Knowledge,’” 16-35; David Mosse, *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005).

of women's participation and representation in the CDC, decision-making in subproject selection and control of programme assets.

The changes that the study identified as a result of women's participation in the CDCs included an increase in their decision-making power, access to and control over resources, respect within the family, and increased confidence and physical and social mobility. The questions meant to identify these changes were open-ended and gave respondents the opportunity to express their views on the important changes in their lives. These expected changes were also identified by the NAPWA as outcomes of interest, achieved through investing in programmes that develop women's economic skills, sharpen their political leadership and decision-making capacities, increase their mobility and promote a change in people's attitudes regarding women's and men's roles in society.<sup>13</sup> The low status of Afghan women generally stems from unequal gender relations, with men having more power both inside and outside the family. Women's inability to decide for themselves, as well as their lack of contribution to the decision-making process within the family, deprives women of self-confidence and weakens their self-image.

At the community level, changes identified as outcomes include increased community-managing roles with more decision-making power, and increased esteem from people in the community. Social and cultural norms in Afghanistan have prevented women from participating in activities outside the home. Husbands and families convey the message that women cannot be leaders and should stay home.<sup>14</sup> Again, this is a manifestation of discrimination against Afghan women as these limited social, economic and political roles are imposed upon them.<sup>15</sup> The study considers key questions such as: do women CDC leaders actively assume management roles in community activities? How do they participate in the decision-making process in community affairs? How is women's participation in community activities perceived by community members?

### 1.3 Structure of the case study

The case study is structured in line with the operational framework in Figure 1. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research methodology, site selection, ethical considerations, and social and geographical contexts that help explain the data gathered and the dynamics of the community studied. Chapter 3 presents the NSP guiding principles of gender equity and transparency and accountability, and how they were operationalised during programme implementation at the community level. It also explores women's motivation for participating in the CDC and the challenges they encountered in the process. The facilitating and hindering factors of women's participation are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 4 focuses on family information before participation. This serves as a baseline of information prior to NSP implementation. Chapter 5 presents the immediate outcomes of women's participation in terms of its impact on their personal lives, and on their families and households. Chapter 6 discusses changes in the community's perception of women after their participation in the NSP. Finally, Chapter 7 provides some suggestions on how to improve women's participation, which in turn are seen as a means of improving programme implementation.

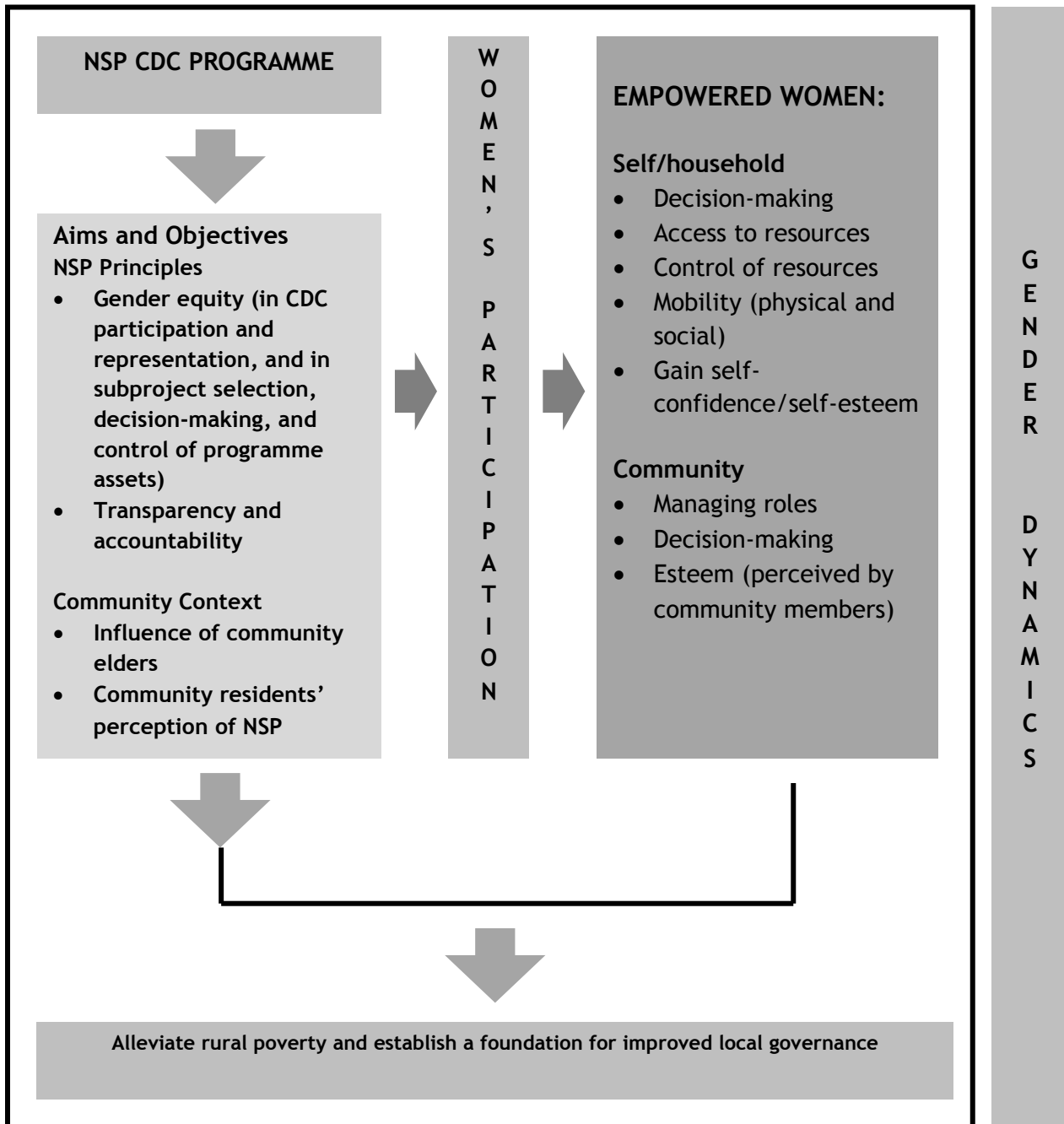
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13 "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan," 12.

14 United Nations Development Programme, "Power, Voice and Rights—A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific" (New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd, 2010).

15 "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan," 3.

Figure 1. Operational framework of the concepts used in the study





## 2. Research Methodology, Site Selection and Context

This section outlines the research method adopted, the site selection process, how trust was built in the community, household selection criteria, ethical considerations, and the provincial and community contexts of the study site.

### 2.1 Research methodology

The main method used to collect data was semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs), supplemented by focus group discussions (FGDs), informal conversations and observations. A pilot study was conducted in Kabul to test and improve the research tools before field work started in Parwan, the first case study province.<sup>16</sup> The team sought permission for the study through a meeting with community elders, introducing AREU staff, the research, and its objectives and methodology to the community. Expectations were also levelled off and a clear distinction made by the between AREU as a research organisation and other welfare/service delivery NGOs.

### 2.2 Site selection

The major considerations for site selection were: 1) security of the area and safety for researchers; 2) openness and willingness of community members to participate in the study; and 3) at least three years of experience with a CDC. The last was necessary to ensure that the study could explore the outcomes at the individual, family/household, and community levels.

The team took several steps to select an appropriate study site. These included: 1) asking permission from officials in Kabul Province to conduct research in the area; 2) conducting a series of meetings with provincial- and district-level officials and stakeholders (government officials, NSP staff and NGO FPs) regarding possible study sites; and 3) visits to communities to meet the village head, community elders and community members. Out of six possible study districts, the team finally chose the community of Boyina Bagh<sup>17</sup> in Kalakan District because of its favourable security situation, the length of time the NSP had been operating in the area, and local people's willingness to participate in the study.

#### Household selection

Households with female members in the CDC *shura* (council) were easily identified. There were four women who held elected posts and another four who were non-elected but were active in the CDC. Their households were identified so their family members could also be interviewed.

#### Distribution of informants and participants by sex

The study interviewed a range of informant/participant types to obtain detailed information about the functioning of the CDC, male and female CDC members' experiences, experiences of those participating in CDC activities, and the perceptions of CDC members' families and other community residents about changes among the female *shura* members. CDC members in the participating households were interviewed two to three times (see Table 1 for more details).

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<sup>16</sup> This was done to ensure that the interview guides were appropriate and the research team could obtain answers from respondents without much difficulty. It allowed testing and refining of the research protocols.

<sup>17</sup> A pseudonym to ensure informants' anonymity.

**Table 1. Distribution of respondents in the study**

Sex	Type of interview			
	Chit-chat/informal conversations (before and after the interviews)	IDI		FGD: 3 for women and 2 for men = 5 FGDs
		1st round	2nd round	
Male	9	16	4	11
Female	15	23	12	12
Total	24	39	16	23

A total of 62 women and men were involved; 39 as IDI informants and 23 as participants in the five FGDs conducted by the research team. The categories of these informants and participants were: CDC officials, ordinary members, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the NSP project, and community members. Representatives of the NGO FP provided information on NSP practice in the village. Of the 39 informants, 16 were interviewed twice. Informal conversations were also conducted with 24 individuals (15 women and nine men). Of these five FGDs, one was conducted with female CDC officials, one with male CDC officials, two were conducted with female and male communities respectively, and one for women who were beneficiaries of the CDC project.

### 2.3 Ethical considerations

The “do no harm” principle of not placing informants and participants at any risk through contributions to the research was upheld throughout the research process. Permission was sought from community elders before beginning any work in the community and in the introductory meeting as many members of the community as possible were invited so the team could explain the objectives of the study and level off expectations. Informed consent was sought before conducting any IDI or FGD. Since some were not able to affix their signature to the consent form, verbal consent was taken. Informants and participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information and the anonymity of the sources. They were also assured that transcripts and notes of the interviews would be kept in a safe place that only the research team had access to.

### 2.4 Kabul provincial context<sup>18</sup>

Kabul Province is located in central Afghanistan, bordered by Parwan in the Northwest, Kapisa in the Northeast, Laghman in the East, Nangarhar in the Southeast, Logar in the South, and Wardak in the Southwest. The province has 14 districts plus the provincial capital, Kabul City. With a population of approximately 3.8 million,<sup>19</sup> Kabul is the most populous province in the country, and four-fifths of its inhabitants live in the urban areas of Kabul City. The average household size in Kabul is around 6-7 members. Pashto is spoken by around sixty percent of the population and Dari is spoken by around forty percent.

The production of industrial commodities appears to be concentrated in specific districts: Cotton is produced in many villages in Surobi, Paghman, Deh Sabs, and Khaki Jabbar,

18 Information from this section is taken from “Kabul: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile” (Kabul: Central Statistics Office/United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2004); and “World Food Programme Food Security Atlas for Afghanistan, Provincial Profiles, Kabul,” <http://www.foodsecurityatlas.org/afg/country/provincial-Profile/Kabul> (accessed 21 March 2012).

19 “Afghanistan CSO Population Data 1390 (2011-12)” (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2011).



while sugar extracts are produced in Paghman, Bagrami, Chara Syab, Surobi, Mir Bacha Kot, Musayi and Qarabagh. A small number of communities also produce honey, while handicrafts—especially carpet weaving—are widespread.

The population of Kabul has access to good education facilities and benefits compared to other provinces. Access to primary and secondary schools is relatively easy and requires a trip of less than five kilometres for substantial portion of the population. However, spatial distribution of health infrastructure is more dispersed.

## 2.5 Community context

Kalakan district is located at the northern part of Kabul province with a population of around 26,800. It has been seriously affected by the war and most of its infrastructure has been destroyed by the protracted conflict. The community of Boyina Bagh is located four kilometres away from the district centre where most local government offices are located. At present, there are about 50 to 60 households in the community. Informants reported that there were once 150 to 200, but most residents had moved to the cities or other areas during the war and many had decided to settle for good. The community's population is predominantly ethnic Tajik.

Today, Boyina Bagh still has a weak local market, since for many years protracted conflict made it impossible for people to produce beyond subsistence levels. However, things have reportedly improved compared to ten years ago, when there was no market at all, although people still have to go to other villages or the district centre to purchase goods. The availability of work for men and women in both private and public sectors remains limited. Women's lack of education means it is particularly hard for them to find work, even in the public sector. Many of the men in the area now work at a nearby brick kiln, making it a main source of income that supports their families. Almost all the women are housewives and some of them help their husbands on the farm; others raise livestock as added income for the family.

The village lacks social services. The only school in the community is the newly-opened girls' school that runs up to grade 4. The nearest preschool and government primary and lower secondary school are approximately two kilometres from the community. There are no private primary, lower and upper secondary schools, or government upper secondary schools nearby. Although most school-age children currently attend primary school, less than half of those eligible to attend secondary school do so. Health services remain absent in the area, as well as electricity, public transport, piped water, public standpipes, and a public sewage system. Ten years ago, the village's only source of information was the national radio station. At present, the community has access to a local newspaper and national television stations.

The community's NSP project has established six wells within the village that now serve as a main source of drinking water. Except for a tailoring vocational course established two years ago (again initiated by NSP), the community suffers from lack of social assistance or agricultural extension programmes. Groups currently working in the village are the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Boyina Bagh Youth, CARE and the Sanayee Development Organization (SDO). BRAC is an education and health-focused association that has interactions with organisations outside the community. Most of its volunteer members are men, and it has received government funds for its activities. SDO is the other NGO that operates in the area and also has links with organisations outside the community.

### 3. The NSP and Women's Participation

The NSP was established in 2003 and is described as “the flagship national priority programme of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.”<sup>20</sup> The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) describes the NSP as a vehicle for promoting good local governance and empowering rural communities, including the poorest and most vulnerable groups. It aims to enable communities to “identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects.”<sup>21</sup> It is implemented through 29 NGO FPs and UN Habitat. The donors supporting the NSP include the World Bank, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, the Japanese Social Development Fund, several European governments, USAID and the Government of New Zealand.

This section will address the NSP in Kabul Province and how its two guiding principles (gender equity and transparency/accountability) are operationalised. It will also examine how this has affected women's participation. The effects or outcomes of women's participation will be discussed in Section 4.

#### The NSP in Kabul Province and in the study community

The two FPs operating in Kabul Province are ActionAid and SDO. ActionAid covers four districts with a total 246 CDCs established to date, while SDO covers 11 districts with a total of 596 CDS established. The FP involved in this study established a total of 27 CDCs in Kalakan District. In Boyina Bagh, the following NSP sub-projects were implemented: water wells, tailoring and literacy courses, and *karez* (underground canal) cleaning.

#### 3.1 Principle: Gender equity

Table 2 shows how the principle of gender equity was reflected in the NSP and FP official documents (e.g. the NSP operational manual and UN Habitat trainers' manual) and how these principles were operationalised in the community where the study was conducted.

##### Formation of the CDC *shura*

The majority of the informants interviewed noted that in the past, community leadership was dominated by men and there was no venue for women to participate in discussion or decision-making on community affairs. In the formation of the NSP *shura*, most informants said that one of the preparatory activities involved FP staff calling women to attend a meeting in the house of the *malik*. At the meeting, NSP staff explained to them that it was necessary to form *shuras* for both men and women before they could start implementing the projects. After the meeting, most of the women in the community knew about the NSP and the formation of the *shura*.

##### How women were encouraged to join the *shura*

The heads of both the male and female *shuras* claimed that they had gone from house to house throughout the community to encourage people—especially women—to get involved with the NSP and join the *shuras*. Both of them said that all households were invited. However, both claims were contradicted by non-member and non-beneficiary informants, who said they had never been informed.

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20 Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, “MRRD Strategy and Program Summary: Poverty Reduction through Pro-Poor Growth” (Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, 2008).

21 Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, “National Solidarity Programme (NSP) Operational Manual” (Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, 2007).

**Table 2. NSP policies and practices for promoting gender equity**

<i>Principle</i>	<i>NSP policies and practices: Operational manual</i>	<i>Operationalisation at the community level</i>
<b>GENDER EQUITY IN NSP PARTICIPATION</b>	<p>Gain early agreement with community leaders about ways in which women can participate in CDCs in a culturally acceptable manner.</p> <p>Organise parallel meetings for men and women so that women do not need to mix publicly with men. Even if mixed meetings are acceptable, it may be better for women to hold separate meetings so they can feel free to participate and speak openly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the introductory activities, FP staff invited the women in the community to a meeting at the <i>malik</i> (village head)'s house. The FP staff explained the importance of forming <i>shuras</i> for both men and women prior to project implementation.</li> <li>• A separate <i>shura</i> for women was seen as advantageous so that they could discuss issues among themselves without inhibition.</li> <li>• Each sub-committee for men and women had the following officers: a head, secretary, treasurer, and procurement officer.</li> </ul>
<b>GENDER EQUITY IN CDC REPRESENTATION</b>	<p>Organise separate voting venues for men and women to encourage more women to vote.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two separate voting venues were organised. Male representatives voted in the mosque, while female representatives voted in the house of an active woman who was later chosen as CDC head by the elected female representatives.</li> <li>• The community residents expressed their desire not to have meetings attended by both women and men.</li> </ul>
<b>GENDER EQUITY IN DECISION-MAKING AND CONTROL OF PROJECT ASSETS</b>	<p>Inform community leaders that at least one NSP-funded subproject should be prioritised by women and managed by the women's CDC subcommittee or by a project committee nominated/approved by the women's CDC subcommittee.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community sub-projects were identified by both men and women. The women selected a tailoring project and women's literacy course. The men chose the digging of wells and cleaning the <i>karez</i>.</li> <li>• The women's CDC relied on the men's CDC treasurer in handling money matters and the purchase of materials for the projects.</li> </ul>

Participants in one of the male FGDs said that there were various factors contributing to motivating people to join the *shura*, especially women. They said that informational radio programmes organised by the NSP had encouraged women to take part in NSP projects and join the *shura*. Another main source of motivation they cited was permission from women's husbands, adding that more and more men were allowing their wives to join community meetings. The third and most important they gave was the encouragement from the NSP staff and FP field workers:

*There were some other “engineers”<sup>22</sup> who came from the NSP office and they said, “We will provide some courses for the women like tailoring and literacy courses and some other projects which are necessary for the community.” We told them that this was good and we would be happy with this.*

(A) NSP- KB -FGD-GM-09082010

One female informant also noted that most of the women invited to be *shura* members were widows. She went on to explain that this choice was an intentional one, since widows do not need to ask permission to leave their homes, and can delegate household chores to their older daughters.

### **Criteria in the selection of *shura* members**

Many informants said that they were not aware of the selection criteria for CDC members. However, they assumed that CDC officials and members should have more knowledge than the rest of the community, be trustworthy, and be able to spend money properly. However, other informants pointed to the key role FP staff played in the selection of *shura* members. One explained that there was a seminar workshop conducted by the FP which introduced the project and formally selected the members. Some said that the FP staff did not outline any selection criteria for *shura* members, but rather encouraged people to pick the leaders they thought could best implement the programme and serve the community. However, a number of female informants said that FP staff and the head of the women *shura* already determined the outcome of the *shura* member selection. One FGD participant and male *shura* member added that community members were reluctant to take on responsibility, and that he had been forced to fill his position in the absence of other takers.

### **Election of *shura* members and leaders**

While some male FGD participants and IDI informants said that CDC members had been elected, other IDI informants reported that there was no election and that the head of the CDC was selected through appointment. However, the majority of responses suggest that an election did indeed take place, and several described their personal experiences of voting:

*One day when we were sitting in our homes, the men in our village said that there has been news from the district governor's office that a project called the National Solidarity Programme would be implemented in our community. We waited for it to start. After some time, our malik gathered the people and there were three women from NSP office, who told us to select the head and the other members of the women's shura. Two or three other meetings happened before this one, but this time they asked us to vote. Then the head—myself—the deputy head, secretary and treasurer were selected as officials of the women's shura. All the women from village selected us for these positions.*

Rahila, 45-year old married NSP *shura* officer

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22 Community residents referred to male FP staff as “engineers.”

However, women were reportedly unsatisfied with the results of the election. According to some informants, the NSP staff who conducted the meeting in the *malik's* house told women to elect Rahila as head of the CDC, which they then did. Other informants said that the election was just for formality and that the head of the CDC was already determined. Finally, there were reports that another woman had clearly been elected as head of the CDC, but that Rahila and the NSP staff were able to change the result.

*The women who came from the FP office were intimate friends of Rahila and she was always preparing lunch for them. When other women complained about Rahila to these women, they ignored them and said they didn't know what they were talking about. There was a woman from the FP office whose name was Mandana, who was an ally of Rahila. They made a deal with each other, and Mandana selected her as the head of women's CDC.*

Gita, 25-year old married non-beneficiary

The deputy head of the CDC confirmed that a secret ballot had taken place, with votes placed in a box. However, she insisted that the result had been rigged in favour of Rahila. She said that she should have won the election because she got more votes than Rahila, but FP staff had changed the result. However, she nevertheless agreed to accept the position of deputy head because she said she would still be able to help women in the community.

Rahila's daughter said that her mother was elected head of the women's CDC, but then admitted that some people did not want her mother to lead the CDC. Later in the interview, she admitted that Mandana had selected her mother to be the head of CDC because she was a knowledgeable woman in the community. This appears to confirm the claims of other female informants that FP staff were involved in rigging the election.

Rahila herself also seems to support this version of events. Although she initially claimed that she had won her post honestly, she later admitted that it was Mandana who influenced her election. She said that during the election, she did not even know what the voting box was for, and that others had to explain it to her. She then claimed that a few days later, women had started congratulating her on her election as the head of the women's CDC. She then added that she did not even want the job. Later in the interview, she admitted that people were against her election. When asked who had wanted her to be the head of the women's CDC if so many people were opposed to it, she answered that it was Mandana, who told the women that they should accept Rahila should be the head because she was knowledgeable and active.

### **Perspectives about a separate *shura* for women**

Most informants agreed that a separate *shura* for women was good for the community because it gave women the chance to discuss problems with each other and explore ways to address them. At the start, women were very excited to be involved in the NSP because of the new opportunity this presented. However, most female CDC members claimed that they were not consulted in most of its subsequent activities because Rahila dominated the discussions and made all the decisions herself.

Despite this, most female informants admitted that the women's CDC helped provide not only a venue for discussion among women, but was also a good start for having women leaders in the community. The daughter-in-law of the CDC treasurer said that women were happy to have women as leaders via the NSP, since in the past it was only men who had held leadership positions in the village. Women's exposure to FP staff



during meetings also reportedly helped increase their awareness about their rights and boost their confidence.

However, there was a lot of frustration among women informants because they believed that the programme could have achieved more were it not for the bad leadership of the women's CDC. Most informants reported that there was corruption and that a large amount of the money meant to pay for meeting venues, the tailoring course and the literacy classes ended up being appropriated by Rahila. Rahila herself acknowledged that people were complaining about her leadership of the *shura* leadership and management of its sub-projects, but she also said that the CDC provided benefits for women in the community. She argued that women were now aware of their rights because of their interaction with other women, and had also benefitted from being able to come out of their houses to attend meetings.

Male FGD participants said that women neither worked with men nor sat with them during meetings. Some male participants said that their religion did not allow them to sit together, while others said that the women were less literate than men, which made them too shy to attend meetings with them. They also said that the having a separate *shura* for women allowed women to discuss matters among themselves without inhibition. They added that separating men from women had a long tradition in their community, and that women did not speak their mind whenever they were in a meeting with men.

### Activities of the women's *shura*

Interviewees and FGD participants agreed that the *shuras* were established to implement projects for the community, but also felt that both had centred around their leaders. As one women's *shura* member put it:

*The head said that my husband and I are heads of the male and female shuras and I will do whatever I want and you have to accept it.*

In addition to Rahila, the women's *shura* head, some informants also said that FP staff played a domineering role in women's *shura* meetings in particular. However, there was also a recognition that FP staff had played a helpful role in providing training and facilitating the group's activities:

*When Mandana visited us, she would always tell us, "Women in the village should sit together and have shura. You must solve your problems among yourselves. You must think about the activities that are suitable for women in your village. You must pool your ideas with men's ideas. Try to find a way to alleviate poverty in the village. You must solve people's disputes and not allow people to fight among themselves. You should create unity and solidarity among people." These were the things she told us.*

*Omrana, 18-year old female family member of women's shura member*  
*FP staff conducted training about women's hygiene. Also, they met with us and they talked about women's role in their house and community. They also discussed the importance of unity among the people in the community.*

*Maida Gull, 50 year old women's shura member*

The treasurer of the women's *shura* did not keep its money, instead entrusting it to the treasurer of the men's *shura*, who deposited it in the latter's bank account. Although she affixed her fingerprints in signing some documents, she did not have access to this account and was not a signatory on any cash withdrawal. The men's treasurer confirmed

this, adding that women could not process bank transactions. Furthermore, he claimed that he helped the women in recording expenses and in managing their funds for the projects.

There was general agreement that the role of the women's *shura* was largely limited to conducting meetings, a problem some informants attributed to high levels of illiteracy among its members. The fact that Rahila made most of the decisions and took charge of most important tasks—reportedly with the assent of FP staff—limited discussion and the exchange of ideas among other *shura* members since dissenting views were not tolerated.

### **Cooperation between men and women's *shuras***

Information varied on the level of cooperation between the men's and women's *shuras*. Some informants said that the two *shuras* did hold joint meetings, and that women's *shura* members did not cover their faces and were not embarrassed to talk to men. However, they could not identify the matters of cooperation and the issues discussed in these meetings beyond the simple claim that the women had reported their activities to the men. There was also no indication that the men's *shura* had made any kind of report to their female counterparts. Many informants flatly denied any cooperation between *shuras* and insisted the only way that each obtained information about the others' activities was through their respective heads (who were husband and wife). However, this information did not filter down to other members of the women's *shura*, perpetuating the couple's strong influence on the programme.

From the evidence, it ultimately seems likely that the male and female *shuras* did not meet and that there was no formal cooperation between them. Some informants said that there was an almost complete lack of mutual awareness between the two bodies, and that even the alleged corruption within the women's *shura* was unknown to male *shura* members apart from the head.

### **Challenges to women's participation in the *shura* and NSP project implementation**

Almost all informants agreed that the NSP was well accepted in the community and that they were willing to participate in its activities. The answers of the informants and FGD participants show that male and female *shura* members and NSP project beneficiaries faced few obstacles to participation, whether from their families or the wider community. Most female *shura* members and beneficiaries said that family members assumed some of their tasks in the household when they attended meetings or tailoring and literacy classes. Some informants added that most of *shura* members were widows and therefore had very little housework to do, as well as no small children to look after. This allowed them to devote their attention to their tasks as members of *shura*.

However, some women were unable to participate due to restrictions imposed by male household members—especially their husbands—while others were sceptical about what the programme could achieve. Younger informants who were not project beneficiaries also said that their housework prevented them from taking part, highlighting how those who were able to do so had more people in their household to help share their workload.

NSP implementation suffered a significant setback due to the domineering leadership of the husband and wife who were heads of the men's and women's *shuras*. This was also cited as a cause of divisions within the community. Some informants noted that

certain people became unwilling to participate in other community activities because of their experience with the leadership of both *shuras*. Another challenge to NSP implementation was the lack of literacy among *shura* members, especially those from the women's *shura*. This meant that they lacked the skills to examine the transactions and plans of their *shura* head. Even the secretary of the women's *shura* was illiterate, and therefore could not document the agreement or disagreement of the *shura*; this in turn was likely a barrier to other *shura* or community members lobbying for their own ideas and interests as opposed to the interests of its head. A final problem was the alleged corruption and mismanagement of programme funds in both *shuras*; most informants and FGD participants reported that the men's and women's *shura* heads took most of the money for themselves.

### 3.2 Principle: Transparency and accountability

In its operational manual, the NSP stipulates the following provisions regarding accountability and transparency (see Table 3).

Although some mentioned figures, none of the study participants were able to accurately recall the exact budgets allocated to the women's and men's *shuras*. Female FGD participants and informants said that they were never told the exact amount, or how much was allocated to each *shura*. There were also no clear figures available for the amounts spent on wells and other projects.

**Table 3: Transparency and accountability in the NSP operational manual**

<i>Accountability</i>	<i>Transparency</i>
<p>The CDC shall maintain records of income and expenditure for cash and in-kind contributions. The CDC financial records shall be available for public inspection at all times. The government may ask at any time for an external/social audit of a CDC's financial records. The CDC financial records shall be disclosed for public inspections on a regular basis.</p>	<p>Transparency must be promoted at all levels of subproject management. Communities are required to publicise all project-related information using a variety of techniques decided by the community-wide assembly. Project information (amount of grant received, spent, community contributions mobilised, contractor payment information) may be communicated at community meetings, displayed on public notice boards, announced at Friday prayers, or in local newspapers.</p>

Source: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, "National Solidarity Programme Operational Manual"

#### Budget allocation and disbursement

In one FGD, female participants said that 10,000 Afs had been promised to each family as part of the NSP, but that they had never received it. However, this figure actually represented the amount factored in per household when working out the community's NSP budget. People thus appeared to have been misinformed about the nature of this figure:

*They should give 10,000 Afs to each family and they had to give that money in cash.*

Jamila, 45-year-old women's *shura* officer



*We wanted the money in cash, those 10,000 Afs.*

Naziya, 45 year old women's *shura* officer

The same women reported that the women's *shura* treasurer was not able to do her job because the men's *shura* treasurer was the one disbursing and managing the budget for both the men's and women's *shura* sub-projects:

*Men were spending but they didn't give anything to the women's treasurer. We told them to give the money to the treasurer but they said, "You're illiterate, you'll lose the money."*

Mah Gul, 50-year old women's *shura* member

One informant however said that women's *shura* members did know the overall budget of the project, but that it had not been divided between *shuras*. She said that all the money was kept in the bank under the management of the men's *shura*, and that transactions were made by men.

Almost all of the informants agreed that the disbursement of funds and withdrawal of money from the bank were carried out by men's *shura* members. Since all of the signatories to the bank account were men, they were the ones who managed the funds. The men claimed that they accompanied the women when purchasing the machines and materials for the tailoring course. However, female *shura* members disputed this, saying that they were not informed how the money was spent and were not involved in the purchasing process.

The male *shura* treasurer said that the allocation of the funds was already determined at the start of project implementation and the funds for women's projects were already assigned. However, his testimony also demonstrates that the management of funds—including those allocated for women—was carried out exclusively by the men's *shura*:

*Yes, it was specified in the proposal how much money there was for the tailoring and literacy projects and how much for other projects. The women's money was assigned to women's projects and the men's money to the men's projects. We were withdrawing the money from the bank, the signatures of head, assistant, secretary and treasurer of the men's *shura* were needed on a document in order to do so.*

Later, he admitted that the men were withdrawing the money first, and then reporting it to the women's *shura* and the rest of the community:

*When we withdrew money from the bank, we reported it to the women's *shura*, as well as the rest of the community. We also reported it to the village *shura* [separate from either of the NSP *shuras*]. The money was with the men's *shura*, but we gave the money for the women's projects to the women's *shura*.*

He felt that the men's disbursement and management of the women's *shura* funds was a way of helping them, arguing that since most of the women were illiterate, they could not handle monetary transactions:

*There are lots of problems in rural areas. The women who were key members of the women's *shura* were illiterate so we helped them with the administrative work. No-one from the women's *shura* was literate so we were doing the calculations and other things for them.*

## Accounting and monitoring

Male FGD participants insisted that the accounts for the money spent on the NSP were in order. The head of the men's *shura* claimed that he personally reviewed the accounting of the entire project and ensured that the money was spent properly. He said that all the money provided by the project had been spent properly as allocated. The head and the treasurer of the men's *shura* also reported that FP staff had told the community that they had found no discrepancies or evidence for mismanagement of project funds.

*At the end, when the project was finished, I collected all of the shura members and told them, "Now you should give your accounting and show where you spent the money and how it was spent." They gave the accounts to the people and told them that this amount of money was spent for this purpose and that amount of money was spent for that purpose.*

Mohib, 45-year old male community leader

*They accounted for the budget. The budget was spent where it was allocated, like digging wells, karez cleaning, tailoring and literacy courses. They gave full accounting and information about the bills.*

Akbar, 54-year old men's *shura* leader

The treasurer also insisted that all funds had been clearly accounted for. He said that the men's *shura* kept a book for recording project activities and expenses. According to him, these books provided complete information, including on the disbursement of the funds and what activities money had been spent on:

*When we made a purchase, I calculated the expenses and wrote that calculation on paper and also on a board which the FP gave me. For example, I wrote that I bought these things on that date from this company at this rate. There was an evaluation from the NSP office at the end of project and they were asking about the details of project's expenses and accomplishments. We had a book for accountability; when we withdrew some money from bank I wrote it down in this book, and the same for when we spent it...For example, [the NSP office] would ask how much money we withdrew from the bank and for which projects. They came here weekly to monitor our projects.*

However, most of the *shura* members involved in disbursement and purchasing could not explain the accounting and management structures in place to ensure proper handling of funds. They simply said that they withdrew the money needed to purchase equipment and materials as well as pay for the salaries of the hired trainers and other project expenses.

Other informants, especially women, offered a different story. They said that there was no proper accounting and monitoring of the funds and they blamed Rahila for taking most of the project's money. They also said that she had hoarded the sewing machines that should have been distributed among the women after the tailoring course; misappropriated the rent of the training venue and the payment they had collected for heating; and appointed her daughter as teacher for the literacy class when there were better-qualified people available.

### 3.3 Projects run by the women's *shura*

Some female informants and FGD participants said that the tailoring classes and the literacy course were selected by beneficiaries themselves, explaining that these were the projects that women has identified as most suited to their needs. Male FGD participants supported this statement, saying that female beneficiaries had been very interested in

the tailoring course and were the ones who selected this project. However, most female interviewees said that the project had been identified by Rahila, the head of women's *shura*. Some claimed Rahila had warned that if anyone spoke out against the project, they would get no help at all. They added that even members of the *shura* could not complain because Rahila would not listen, and imposed her will in implementing the projects she wanted.

Several male and female informants and FGD participants attested that many women had wanted other projects such as electricity, livestock-raising, water for irrigation and other livelihood activities. However, others contested that these activities were not on the list of projects offered by the FP, and that there were not enough funds available to support larger projects such as irrigation and electricity:

*At the proposal-writing stage, the FP representatives told us that the projects we initially identified were not in the list of projects to be implemented. For example, we requested an irrigation system, then a clinic and then a school but the FP said that these project were not on their list. They pointed out that they had the following: community centre, levelling the streets, providing clean drinking water and some other projects...that were not as expensive as those we originally identified. The FP did not interfere in the selection of projects for women and women were free to select a project from the specific set included in the list.*

Shams, 25-year old men's *shura* officer

According to male FGD participants and certain informants, everyone was invited to learn about the tailoring project, but only a few women decided to really pursue the course and learn from it. However, other female informants insisted that they had not been informed. One woman said that she had not been informed because she was very poor and the project was not for poor people. Others believed that the only people who had good relations with the heads of the *shuras* had been invited as beneficiaries.

When it came to implementing the projects, some women also reported that Rahila had also personally selected the tailoring and literacy trainers. Informants were divided on the quality of training on the tailoring course, For example, one member of the women's *shura* with prior experience in tailoring said that the training had been poor, and that there had been opposition to the venue and trainer as well as the course itself:

*The tailoring course was in Rahila's house, but other women or girls weren't ready to take a course there. Some people said that we should put the sewing machines in someone else's house, but finally everyone agreed on putting machines in her house. It was Rahila herself who selected the trainer for the course.*

Gull Shrin, 48-year-old female community member

However, others refuted this position, blaming the students and not the teachers for their failure to learn tailoring and basic literacy. They said that the students lack of interest in the courses had limited their capacity to learn, pointing to those who had benefitted from the courses as a testament to their effectiveness:

*The tailoring trainer was good and she tried hard to help the women learn sewing. But some of the young girls and women did not try to learn how to sew. The trainees wasted their time and did not learn.*

Kamellah, 40-year old female NSP beneficiary

*The teacher is responsible for teaching their students well and make sure that they learn. The teacher for the tailoring course was intelligent but there was problem with women's interest and enthusiasm. At the beginning of the course, women had more enthusiasm and interest but then they lost interest.*

Shams, 25-year old men's *shura* officer

Shams further blamed women's failure to gain from the tailoring course on the shortage sewing machines. He said that there were only 20 machines for 40 students, which limited the opportunities for students to practice their sewing skills. He further noted:

*This meant there was one machine for every two women, and it was difficult for their teacher to teach them both at the same time. For example, I am studying on a computer course and we have one computer per five students; it is very difficult for us to practice what we have learned.*

### **3.4 Community perceptions of the NSP as a whole: Men and women**

Male FGD participants said that the NSP achieved 80 percent of its goals in improving people's lives and increasing unity in the community. They said that the project allowed them to clean the *karez*, increasing the amount of water available for irrigation, and dig wells, improving the community's access to clean drinking water and reducing the instance of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea. They said that this had reduced women's workload by substantially cutting the distance they had to travel to fetch water. However, some informants also noted that most of the wells dug through the programme were now dry. One added that this was because male *shura* members had dug the wells close to their homes without considering whether they could sustainably produce water.

The NSP's main limitation as cited by male informants was a lack of funds. They felt that the project funding was not nearly enough to fundamentally address people's lack of self-sufficiency in the community. However, others also pointed to the issue of mismanagement. Some participants blamed community leaders for mismanaging NSP funds, which had led to benefits for only a few people—such as the men's and women's *shura* heads—and not the community as a whole. However, other FGD participants and IDI informants said that despite the shortcomings of the sub-projects and the weak management of funds, they still benefitted overall from the establishment of the *shura* and the projects it implemented.

Most of the women agreed that the NSP benefitted them by opening up opportunities for them to get involved with the development of their community. It also provided a venue for interaction with other women, increased their knowledge about their rights, and boosted their self-confidence and personal development. Some also reported gaining skills from the tailoring and literacy courses (these changes are discussed in greater detail in Section 5).

However, women were also clear in their frustration with the leadership of the programme particularly the alleged corruption of the women's *shura* head. They were also frustrated about the poor outcomes of the literacy and tailoring courses. In relation to this, they noted that women's participation in the programme clearly dwindled over time, and that by the end of the projects, some women were no longer interested in being involved in any NSP-related activities.

## 4. Women's Status Before NSP Participation

### 4.1 Decision-making

According to male and female informants, household decision-making was dominated by men prior to NSP implementation. They reported that the community's culture and traditions assigned the highest level of authority in the household to the husband or father-in-law:

*My mother has never made any decision [in our house]. If she makes a decision, she consults with my father first. When she consults with my father, then she makes a decision. We don't go anywhere without my father's permission. If we go somewhere like a wedding for instance, we first get permission from my father. When my father has given the permission to my mother then we will go. If my father doesn't permit us, we can't go anywhere. If my father is not at home, neither I nor my mother can do anything.*

Manihja, 17-year old female family member of NSP course beneficiary

Most informants said that women were considered inferior to men and it was customary for women to submit to the will of their husbands or fathers.

In contrast, some informants said that their fathers or husbands consulted their spouse in any decisions they made. Others said that the women in their household were free to decide on household matters once they had consulted their husbands. However, even in these cases the balance of decision-making still ultimately tipped in favour of their husbands or fathers.

In addition to tradition, a lack of access to education was seen as both a cause and a result of women's limited ability to make decisions. Some informants said that young women were seldom allowed to go to school and their lack of knowledge thus further excluded them from the decision-making process in both their households and the wider community.

Widows had higher capacity to make decisions for themselves. Without a husband and only the children with them, they were able to take responsibility for their households. In most cases, widows held authority over their daughters-in-law and made decisions on their behalf. Informants, especially younger women, said that widowed mothers-in-law could decide not only for themselves but for the rest of the household.

### 4.2 Mobility

Women were generally confined to their homes, except when performing household tasks such as fetching water or washing laundry outside. As the below quote indicates, they could only go outside to run errands if their husbands or fathers asked them to do so:

*No, I don't remember ever going to the bazaar alone. My husband is a very harsh man; he doesn't allow me to go to the bazaar alone. I always have to go with someone else to the bazaar. Even though I am now the mother of many children, he still doesn't allow me to go outside alone, not even to my mother's house.*

Rahila, 45 year old women's shura officer



In this village, women who ventured out alone were often scorned or reprimanded by other community members. Female informants explained that this was because it was against Islamic teaching for a wife to go outside by herself.

However, other women who held positions in the community had higher mobility. They could go around the community while doing their duties, and there also were no restrictions against their going to the town or the city, especially if this was necessary for their jobs. For example, one informant said that her mother-in-law had been highly mobile even before the arrival of the NSP because of her role as a health worker in the community. Informants also said that Rahila was also more mobile because her husband was the leader of the village, which allowed her to move around without the social restrictions imposed that custom imposed on ordinary women.

Informants also mentioned that even when families had migrated during the war years—whether to other provinces or to Pakistan or Iran—women had still largely been confined to their homes. Some who had moved to other countries did report greater freedom of movement due to a more permissive environment in their host communities. However, even in these instances their mobility was still dependent on the authority of their husbands or household elders.

### **4.3 Control over finances**

According to almost all informants, men were almost exclusively responsible for managing household expenses and deciding how money should be spent, and in only a very few cases was there reportedly a degree of shared responsibility between husband and wife. For example, some female informants and FGD participants said that they managed their husbands' income. Other women who had earnings from running their own enterprises, such as goat-raising, or who had money from their parents also had more autonomy in how they spent their money. However, in all cases women still reported any expenditures back to their husbands. By contrast, some older women reportedly had greater control over money in their households, even keeping the money earned by their husbands or sons.

In this community, purchasing items in the bazaar was predominantly a man's task. Some women were allowed to do this, but only with their husbands' permission, and as long as they were accompanied by their mother-in-law, father-in-law or older sons. On rare occasions, groups of women were allowed to go to the bazaar accompanied by a single male elder. Most of the participants attributed these restrictions to security, arguing that going outside the house alone left women vulnerable; others again said that women going outside alone would be subject to criticism and condemned as indecent.

As was the case in decision-making, widows also had full authority over the money they earned without husbands or parents-in-law to meddle in their affairs. Despite the fact that widows needed to work especially hard to provide for their families, the greater authority they had over their earnings helped increase their control of their lives and their households. Widowed informants claimed that not only could they do what they wanted with their only money, but they also had the authority to spend their sons' earnings.

### **4.4 Women's interactions with others**

Most women said that they were not allowed to visit other households—including those of their parents or relatives—without the permission or company of their husband or

parents-in-law. Informants said that permission was often denied to women to visit their relatives or neighbours, and that some were therefore unable to complain to anyone about issues of domestic violence (see below). Coupled with the limitations on mobility preventing women from going to the bazaar, this meant that opportunities for interaction with other women were very limited. Again, widows appear to have been an exemption to this rule, able to interact with neighbours and relatives since they had no male authority figure to answer to. Families who had migrated to other countries also experienced higher levels of interaction with other people, depending on the environment of their host communities (see above).

#### 4.5 Family violence

Informants and FGD participants were reluctant to discuss the issue of family or domestic violence. However, there were clear indications that violence against women was occurring: one informant said that husbands beating their wives was common in the community, while another said that women were not allowed to complain about any violence inflicted on them.

Individual informants did sometimes describe instances of domestic violence within their own households. Rahila, the head of women's *shura*, admitted to experiencing domestic violence despite her status in the community. She said that her husband had beaten her many times, that wife-beating was very common, and that women in the community experienced significant suffering as a result. She went on to describe how most women in the community seemed to be the slaves of their husbands or household elders.

According to informants, men's parents helped perpetuate this violence and even encouraged their sons to inflict harm upon their wives. Women's parents were also reportedly passive when violence was inflicted on their daughters, advising their daughters to be patient with their husbands and strive to please their in-laws. One informant described a common situation when explaining the lack of support mechanisms in the community that could help protect women from domestic violence:

*My husband is strict and he used to beat me. No one was there to solve our problem and I never talked with my parents. That time, I only cried and I could not do anything else. If I spoke about the problems that my mother-in-law had with me, my parents also blamed me. They told me not to complain about my in-laws and to be patient.*

Kamellah, 40-year old female NSP beneficiary

Few informants said that their fathers or husbands were kind to their mothers or to their wives. As a consequence, most women lacked the courage to express their opinions or make decisions within their household, and their movements were completely controlled by their husbands.

## 5. Impact of Women's Participation in the CDC and its Projects

For the men, participation in the CDC *shura* was nothing new, since there was already a community *shura* before the arrival of the NSP. For the women, however, participating in the CDC was their first experience of being involved in such a body. They said that it was the first time in their life they had been given the chance work with other women in dealing with community issues. Despite the problems with the women's *shura* projects and the domineering role played by its head discussed in Section 3, its members agreed that they had nonetheless made several gains as a result of their participation.

### A new venue for women

Most of the *shura* participants felt that its most important contribution was to provide a venue for women to participate in the development of their community. In addition, it created an opportunity for them to interact with other women, exchange knowledge and express themselves freely:

*My familiarity with other people has increased...I have learned from others and my mind has been opened. No one can learn anything inside the four walls of their house. I have learned everything outside of the house; when someone said a new word, I repeated it, and so I would learn ten new words in a single day. Believe me that we housewives couldn't talk—through participation in NSP we gained the courage to speak up. This was a big issue that instructors told us—disunity doesn't bring anything good and we cannot have peace between us while we harbour ill feelings toward each other. Nowadays, neighbours help each other and we live in the village like members of the same family.*

Mah-Gul, 50 year old men's *shura* member

Informants also said that the experience had also left them well-prepared to participate in any future development interventions in the community, as the quote below illustrates:

*I think if some other NGOs or the government introduce some other programmes for women, our villagers will not have any problem with their participation. You know, the NSP CDC paved the ground for women to participate in our community. The fact that men did not prevent women from participating in the CDC's activities is a big change. After women's participation in the CDC, all the women in our village knew that men would not hinder their participation in their community.*

Nazanin, 18-year old family member of women's *shura* member

### Changes in their social status

The members of the *shura* gained in power and social status. While this was most true of the *shura* head Rahila, other members of the *shura* also experienced such improvements, describing how *shura* membership had boosted their confidence and self-esteem. They said that other women now sought their advice in dealing with issues at home and in the community. This change is especially significant given that most of the *shura* members were widows. Despite having greater freedom and autonomy than married women, the fact that widows had to struggle to fend for themselves without a male household head meant that they had previously occupied the bottom rung on the ladder of community status. However, when they began attending *shura* meetings, they discovered their self-worth:



*Now my eyes are open. I am more aware and I am more courageous now...In the past, I could not talk in front of other people. Now it's very easy for me. Our CDC meetings helped me do this.*

Maida Gull, 48-year old women's *shura* official

As one widow informant noted, before the NSP, people wanted nothing to do with a widow, whereas now other women and even men were listening to their opinions. This shows the increase of not only their confidence, but also the increased respect they gained from the community.

One CDC member who had opposed the leadership of Rahila and the way projects had been implemented also commented on how her social status improved because of her increased interaction with other women. She noted that while she used to advise women prior to the NSP's arrival, her greater interaction with them further increased her status in this regard:

*After my participation in the NSP CDC, I have started resolving the problems of other women. Although I have helped women resolve problems with their families in the past...after participating in the NSP CDC, the network of people that I relate to has increased, and so too has the number of people I help.*

Mah-Gul, 50-year old women's *shura* member

### **Changes in decision-making**

During and after NSP implementation, *shura* members' participation in household decision-making improved. The main factors driving this were their interaction with other women, and their exposure to the programme staff. People came to equate their participation in the programme with having "sound mind" or good ideas, and they were therefore given greater decision-making responsibility:

*In the past, women didn't have much role in decision-making, but since the NSP, women have been consulted and they have had a venue to share what they think, feel and believe. The CDC members also became more familiar with each other, so now people have more concern for one another.*

Qader, 48-year old husband of women's *shura* officer

Another factor facilitating their increased involvement in decision-making was the growing openness of men to consultation. Informants noted that the NSP was clear in its requirement that the community set up a *shura* for women as well as for men, and that this was a strong signal for men that the programme would listen to women's voices and ensure their participation. This change was noted as follows by participants in one of the women's FGDs:

*Before the NSP, there was no gathering of women in the community. After the NSP, we knew how to involve ourselves in household and community decision-making, because we too were family and community members. Before the NSP, we thought decisions were only made by men. Now, we know that we also have the right to involve ourselves in decision-making.*

Naziya, 45-year old women's *shura* officer

As another informant noted, interaction with other women improved their awareness of various issues, which in turn improved the way they handled things both within and outside their homes:

*In my opinion, it is good that my mother can persuade my father. Before this programme my mother never argued with my father. My father always did*

*what he wanted to do and didn't pay attention to her. This programme taught my mother how to persuade others. Mandana would always say, "Talk to your husbands and tell them what you want. They might not listen to you at first, but they will in the end. You must reason with your husbands and bring logic to them." My mother tried to do it and was able to make him listen and persuade him.*

Omrana, 18-year old female family member of women's *shura* member

Women FGD participants also noted changes in their decision-making authority in the household, which they attributed to their attendance at NSP-organised meetings. They said that those who had participated in the project had slowly conquered their fear of their husbands, and could now talk and express their ideas freely:

*Now look at Rahila. In the past, her husband beat her a lot and she was so afraid of him. But now she can make decisions and she has authority in her home. Now we all have a good status in the home and we can make decisions there. Because when women participated in CDC meetings, the NSP staff said, "Women should be aware of their rights in the family and in the community. It's not good for women to stay silent in the house, they should know about their rights, about how to talk with men in their house, and about how to be involved in decision-making." After we heard this, we gradually started involving ourselves in household and community decision-making.*

Ma Gull, 50-year old women's *shura* member

By contrast, a few informants said that there had been no changes in the decision-making processes in their homes. One informant said that decision-making in her household already involved consultation among family members, and that this had not changed. Other participants also asserted that their fathers were still the ones making the decisions, even after their mothers had participated in the NSP as beneficiaries of the projects. This suggests that while some households made a dramatic change toward providing women a higher stake in the decision-making process, some remained unchanged despite their participation in the NSP CDC.

## Changes in mobility

For both *shura* members and project beneficiaries, participation in the NSP brought women outside of their households and exposed them to greater interaction with other women in their community. As this happened, traditional restrictions on women's mobility had reportedly started to loosen. More and more women were allowed to go outside their houses and this had slowly gained acceptance among the majority of community members. Some women also attributed these changes to people's migration experiences during the conflict period. However, most of them also felt that the NSP has played the most significant role in breaking these restrictions.

Other female informants also said that men's views on women's mobility had also changed with their exposure to the programme. As a result of these experiences, more and more men had grown aware of women's rights and the role they could play in development:

*In the past, our men didn't let us go outside, especially during the time of Jihad [mujahiddin period]. They didn't let women go to the doctor or out to buy something at the bazaar. They didn't let women visit relatives' or neighbours' houses. But those men changed a lot after the NSP came. Now women can go to the bazaar and they can go to their relatives' and neighbours' houses for siyali va shariki [social obligations that involve visiting neighbours with gifts*

*on significant occasions such as births, illnesses, weddings, etc.]. Though they didn't learn from the tailoring course, they learned from each other. Now the women can go to the bazaar. It's not like before, when they didn't give us even one Af to buy some medicine for ourselves.*

Jamila, 45-year old women's *shura* officer

However, security worries in the community still represent a barrier to women's mobility. Women themselves admitted that even though they were allowed to go outside of their houses, they would not venture too far because of possible security threats. They added that it was still not safe for women to go outside the community.

### **Changes in control over money**

Women informants and FGD participants also noted that there had been changes in women's level of control over money. As discussed in Section 4, women previously had no control or stake in the management of household income. However, following the introduction of the NSP, women said that they had slowly gained greater authority over household finances. Some said that the money they earned was now under their control and they could spend this in whatever way they wanted. Others also said that their husbands provided them some control over their income and were slowly beginning to consult them more often in matters of household expenditure.

As with other changes, informants felt that these shifts had taken place as a result of their exposure to the NSP. In particular, they pointed to the lectures and discussions they had with FP staff as well as the interactions they had with other women in the programme as important factors driving these changes:

*After the NSP men changed a lot, and families changed as well. My husband lets me take charge inside the house, and he lets me spend the money [without asking what I'm doing with it]. Because when the NSP staff came, they talked to the men and told them, "You have to behave well with your wives and give more authority to them."*

Naziya, 45-year old women's *shura* officer

However, there were again still households where fathers or husbands continued to dominate spending despite their members' involvement in the NSP. For example, Rahila's daughter said that her father took all the money she had earned through the project and determined how it was spent:

*My father would take all the money from my sister and my mother. My father said, "You are sitting in the house and you don't need the money. Give it to me. I will take your money and spend it for the household." My father said that he would buy everything and pay for their medical expenses. My father spent all the money my mother earned. It was the first time in her life that she earned some money, but my poor mother didn't even get to touch it for five minutes.*

Omrana, 18-year old female family member of women's *shura* member

This shows that there were many women in the community who were still deprived of control over their money despite the influence of the NSP. However, it also echoes the accounts of other informants in demonstrating how women who earned money as a result of their participation were able to improve their sense of self-worth by providing an income for their families.

## Changes in livelihood and household economy

In comparison to the above changes, very few women said that they had improved their income as a result of the NSP, for example through the new skills they had acquired from the tailoring training, as summed up in the quote below:

*It didn't have a good impact for those who couldn't learn. But it was good for me, because I can sew my clothes in my own house.*

Razeya, 18-year old female NSP tailoring course beneficiary

The majority of female informants and FGD participants said that the tailoring project and literacy course did not meet their expectations when it came to improvements in their economic situation. Ultimately, this led them to consider the project a failure in terms of the direct benefits it offered. However, it did have a more indirect impact: several informants described how interacting with other women during either the *shura* meetings or the literacy and tailoring classes gave them new information on how to improve their livelihoods. Others said that the interactions they experienced during the NSP improved their familiarity with other community members, which in turn helped improve the sales of their products. As Mah Gul described:

*While I already had physical mobility in the past and had the chance to visit other women, after participating in the NSP my mobility and my familiarity with other women has increased. Now, a lot of women come to my house and buy milk from me because they say that Mah Gul's milk is pure and is not mixed with water. They say Mah Gul makes good yogurt and no one can make good yogurt like her. My life is better than in the past; I have earned some money, my market is good, and people in the village love me and say that my milk and yogurt is very good.*

Another indirect income improvement was the reduction of their expenses. Some women who attended the tailoring course no longer needed to pay for a tailor because they could sew their own clothes. They said that this reduced the household expenses and therefore helped improve their household finances:

*Since my stepmother's participation in tailoring class, she has been able to sew our clothes. She took a sewing machine from Rahila. Apart from my mother, none of the other members of the tailoring class got a sewing machine, the rest are still in Rahila's house. It's good that she has learned how to sew. Sometimes, her close relatives bring round their clothes to be sewn. She says, "It's good and useful for me that I learned to sew the clothes in the house. I can solve my problems in my own house." I feel very happy my mother can sew and we do not need to take our clothes to a tailor.*

18-year old female teacher and family member of a female NSP beneficiary

## Changes in attitudes

Increased interaction, mobility and opportunities for learning were the main factors facilitating changes in the attitudes of women involved in the NSP. Most informants and FGD participants asserted that the women who had participated in the *shura* and its projects had developed a more positive attitude toward both themselves and other people in the community. Most informants also described an increase in women's self-confidence, noting that they had started to talk to men and discuss domestic and community matters with them. According to informants, the increased awareness also improved their outlook on life. Prior to the NSP, women saw themselves as inferior to men. After the programme, women started to value their own ideas and considered their

thoughts to be just as sound as those of men. After their participation in programme, women started to speak up and their fear of being oppressed started to wear off. As a consequence, they were able to establish better relationships in both their household and the wider community.

Exposure to the *shura* and its tailoring training and literacy courses also modified women's attitudes toward their daughters. Women learned about the rights of their daughters and realised the value of educating girls as well as boys:

*In the past my mother didn't see any value in girls going to school, but now she says that her daughter should go to school and learn something. Generally, people didn't consider sending girls to school before the NSP. But after the NSP, everyone wants their daughter to go to school and study. Women teachers get 1,200 Afs per month, which is good for them.*

Baseer, 35-year old son of women's *shura* officer

*When I participated in the shura and I sat with literate women, I learned new words. Now, I regret my previous life and think it would be better if my children and I were literate. In our family, only my daughter and my one son who is a teacher are literate. It is good for everyone to be able to read and write. It was good for the people who participated in NSP because they learned tailoring and literacy. Apart from those two courses, women went outside their houses and had new experiences. People who didn't participate didn't get to benefit from the courses, and they didn't have the opportunity to interact with other women outside their houses to learn something or get experience. This is the difference between those two categories of people.*

Gull Shrin, 48-year old women's *shura* member

Women's new-found confidence gave them the courage to perform some of their desired tasks and gave them a level of security that they will not be ostracised for joining in activities outside the home and will not be harmed physically by male family members for doing so. They also realised that they could perform men's tasks—something previously thought impossible. As a result, they became confident enough to demand equal treatment compared to men:

*No, I did not go to the bazaar; if I went there shopkeepers would cheat me. I have gained courage from participating in the NSP. Shopkeepers can't cheat me anymore as I have learned how to bargain when I buy something. Now I can buy things at a reasonable price. They can't just sell me any defective product, and I argue with them if they try. I am even talking with you now, which I could not do before.*

Mah-Gul, 50-year old women's *shura* member

## **The end of the NSP**

By the time of research, *shura* meetings were no longer being conducted in the community. Informants described how the lifetime of the women's *shura* was dependent on the NSP's continued existence, and that it had ceased to exist when the budget for its sub-projects was exhausted. However, most informants clearly believed in its importance as a venue for the interaction and development of women. They suggested that the CDC head should have been more proactive in calling the women to meetings to continue their interaction and discussions. However, some women clearly stated that they would not attend any meeting initiated by Rahila.



Despite the absence of formal meetings, informants said that the interaction of women initiated by the women's *shura* had continued informally. They said that women continued to discuss issues and daily concerns among themselves, and that the *shura* had ultimately paved the way for a more open community and improved women's mobility within it. They added that formal meetings could still happen if there were a need for it, and that if issues arose in the community that specifically concerned women, they would surely come together to discuss them and find solutions.

## Conclusion

The NSP brought about an increase in the knowledge and awareness of both male and female community members, providing women with the leverage they needed to participate more equally in their households and in the wider community. It boosted their self-confidence and courage to assert their ideas, increasing their stake in family and community decision-making, as well as in the management of household resources. The women's *shura* and its sub-projects helped increase women's mobility, offering a venue for greater interaction with other women and FP staff and an accompanying exposure to new knowledge and ideas. This in turn became a potent driver of improved social cohesion and better development direction. Many informants felt that their silence had been broken by the programme. Men's perceptions of women were also changing as a result of their increased awareness of women's rights and first-hand experience of what women could achieve when given the opportunity. Social and traditional restrictions on women had loosened as a consequence, and domestic violence had also started to decline.

However, the NSP's impact also had its limitations: many women were dissatisfied with the domineering approach and alleged corruption of the women's *shura* head. Others felt that they had gained little from its poorly-organised sub-projects. Very few women reported a direct increase in their income as a result of the project, and in many cases their control over their own money remained limited. And while the NSP did result in a substantial shift in gender relations in the community, this was by no means universal: younger women especially reported that some men still stuck to their old habits, clinging to previous traditions and attitudes of male superiority.

## 6. Suggestions for Improving Women's Participation in the NSP and Improving Programme Implementation

The FGD and IDI responses included several suggestions for how to improve women's participation in the NSP and, by extension, achieve better results in programme implementation. First and foremost, they noted that empowering women through their involvement was an essential component for successful NSP implementation. Informants made it clear that the inclusion of women in all aspects of the programme should be broader in scope, allowing more women to have their voices heard and their ideas taken into serious consideration. In this regard, greater steps need to be taken to avoid women being marginalised or left out of the process in its early stages.

Another major factor that could have improved women's participation was the proper identification of key leaders in the community. Informants believed that the people best suited to lead NSP implementation were those who put the interests of the community over their own self-interest. It is therefore important that selection of project leaders is done in a more democratic manner and that people should be free from coercion and other influences when electing their *shura* heads. These views are summed up in the below quote:

*In my opinion when a project comes to our village they shouldn't entrust it to people who will then choose whom they want to be involved with it. It should be a project that should benefit the interests of all the women in the village. In my opinion, the money is not important. It should be a project that helps our women to come out of this darkness, increase their awareness and knowledge, and help them to find the courage to speak up and get involved in household and community affairs.*

Nariya, 50-year old women's *shura* member

It is also important for the needs of a community—and especially its women—to be identified in a participatory manner. Informants highlighted that it was important to know people's needs before the project so that training activities could be organised accordingly. Women wanted to identify projects that would directly address their perceived needs rather than be coerced into accepting projects that had been pre-determined by programme implementers and community elites. They added that programme implementers should do more to allow people to express their ideas and find mechanisms to address their needs. One of the main causes of women's disenchantment with and eventual disengagement from the project was their frustration at not being consulted on project selection and their inability to give feedback during implementation.

In relation to this, impartiality and neutrality of external staff are also key elements in ensuring women's active participation and successful project implementation. Informants said that the staff who come to communities should have substantial capacity and skills in dealing with local dynamics. They added that staff should be impartial in organising community members and should broaden participation among community members, especially women. Again, the involvement of FP staff in the perceived elite capture and mismanagement of the NSP was a source of significant frustration among many female participants.

A mechanism for sustainability should also be built into the programme implementation. While not speaking specifically in these terms, female informants did express their concerns about the future of the programme after the end of its specific projects. As illustrated in the quote below, informants expressed the need for self-sufficiency and

self-reliance, but were unable to highlight any mechanisms for achieving this:

*The NSP should be implemented in a manner that is good for Afghan communities and will produce positive results. People should try their best to resolve their problems by themselves to be self sufficient—how long must we be dependent on outsiders?*

Baseer, 35-year old son of women's *shura* officer

The key factors for facilitating women's increased participation and improving programme implementation therefore run as follows:

1. Proper identification and transparent selection of leaders.
2. Proper identification of projects and transparent selection of beneficiaries.
3. The involvement of impartial development workers from outside the community who are perceived to be interested in the welfare of all and not just a few.
4. The presence of a built-in sustainability mechanism to carry momentum forward, especially regarding women's participation.



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