Case Studies Series

GENDER AND LOCAL LEVEL DECISION MAKING: Findings from a Case Study in Mazar-e Sharif

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Shawna Wakefield

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About the Author

Shawna Wakefield leads AREU's Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project. Previously, she worked as a Programme Specialist with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), assisting with organisation-wide strategic planning, programme formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and knowledge-sharing processes and advising on economic security and rights programmes. She worked briefly with UNIFEM's Afghanistan field office, and moved to AREU in early 2003. She has also worked as a community organiser with refugee and immigrant women in the US. She has a Masters degree in Public Policy and Administration (MPA) from the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) at Columbia University in New York. She is interested in improving linkages between grassroots women's interests, and meso and macro level policy making.

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives. AREU was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, UN and multilateral organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

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Glossary of Dari Terms

Afghanis (*Afs*)	The official Afghan currency (US$1= approximately 43 Afs)
Arbab	A village headman, appointed by the *uleswal*
Burqa	Full body covering for women
Eid	Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan
Gozar	A neighbourhood
Jirga	A tribal or clan council
Kalantar	Informal representative of the *gozar* to the municipality
Maharam	A close male relative
Manteqa	Area
Mullah	Islamic cleric
Naan	A meal; literally “bread”
Naqes ul aqal	Incomplete knowledge
Nomayenda umume	Neighbourhood representative
Purdah	Separation of women from men; literally “curtain”
Quam	From the Arabic language, meaning people, nation, tribe, group and indicating solidarity group
Quran	The holy book of Islam
Shura	Traditional council of elders
Uleswal	District administrator appointed by the central government
Wakil e gozar	Officially appointed representative of the *gozar* to the municipality

Glossary of Gender Concepts and Terms[1]

Authority	Power attached to a position that others see as legitimate.
Community	Group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact with each other on a sustained basis. Also, organisations, networks, village institutions and inter-household associations that make up local civil society.[2]
Community decision making	The political and social process and mechanisms through which decisions about issues related to the welfare of civil society are made.
Community institutions	Rules, norms, behaviour and practices that persist over time to serve collectively valued purposes.[3] These are often informal, with loose but widely understood structures and leadership entitlements.
Gender analysis	Examination of the situations of women and men and the relationships between them; considers roles and responsibilities, access to resources, activities and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other.
Gender relations	Relations between men and women, often expressed through the roles that they play in the household and the community as determined by their biological sex.
Gender roles	Learned behaviour that determines which activities, tasks and responsibilities are considered male or female, including reproductive, productive, community managing and political functions.[4]
Household	Social unit consisting of those who eat from the same pot.
Non decision making	Creating or reinforcing barriers to the airing of issues about which there is concern or disagreement.
Norms	Rules and expectations of conduct which either prescribe a given type of behaviour or forbid it.
Participation	Active involvement of people in influencing and sharing control over the formal and informal institutions and decision making processes that affect their welfare, and that of their families and communities.
Power	Ability to carry out decisions, achieve aims or further goals even when others are in disagreement; ability to exclude issues from decision making, effectively making them non decisions.[5]
Production	Work done by both men and women for pay in cash or kind, including market production, domestic labour and subsistence production with actual value and potential exchange value.[6]
Reproduction	Childbearing and rearing, domestic tasks required to guarantee maintenance and reproduction of the labour force, including their care and maintenance.[7]
Solidarity	Unity as a group that produces or is based on common interest, objectives and standards.

[1] For useful resources on guidelines and concepts related to gender equality, see "DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality." Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: Paris. 1998. In the Afghan context see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. *Report of the EC Rapid Reaction Mechanism Assessment, Afghanistan, Gender Guidelines*. European Commission Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit. April 2002.
[2] Kabeer, N. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. Verso: New York. 1994, 304.
[3] Uphoff, N. *Local Institutional Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases*. Kumarian Press: Connecticut. 1986.
[4] Moser, C. Moser, C. *Gender, Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. Routledge: New York and London. 1993.
[5] Kabeer, op cit.
[6] See Moser's Triple Roles Framework, 1989, and the work of economist Diane Elson.
[7] Moser, op cit.

Section I: Introduction

The enthusiasm with which many donors set out to support Afghan women's right to participate in public life at the fall of the Taliban has proved more difficult to act upon than originally acknowledged. Some gains have been made at the policy level, but for many women these have been largely rhetorical. This is in part due to an emphasis on addressing the concerns of educated and urban women, which are likely very different from the concerns of uneducated and rural women.[8] Another reason is the fear of a backlash when addressing controversial issues, of which gender equity is considered to be one. This study has taken as one of its premises that the difficulty in making progress in this field is also partly due to a neglect of the particular social, economic, political and even geographic context within which women's lives are situated.

This paper is one of five case studies[9] conducted between March and October 2004 for the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). The overall project objective is to improve policies and programmes that aim to increase women's participation in public life.[10] The project seeks to generate a better understanding among NGOs, the UN, donors and the Afghan government about how decisions are made on priority household and community issues, and how men and women participate in the decision making process.[11]

This study uses a gender analysis — the examination of the situation of women and men and the relations between them as a way to improve understanding of their activities, access to resources, and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other. In the Afghan context gender is a key determinant of the enjoyment of the right to participate in public life, with constraints attributed to cultural and social norms that are often justified by interpretations of Islamic religious principles. Gender analysis, often confused for analysis that looks only at the situation of women, is an important way to understand the different patterns of involvement, behaviour and activities that women and men have in making decisions that affect the lives of communities, families and the individuals living within them. This research was undertaken because of the perceived and real difficulties in creating effective policies and programmes for increasing women's participation in public life. However, this is not a study of the situation of women, but rather of locally defined roles and responsibilities of men and women, and the social norms that determine their participation in decision making on priority interests and concerns of families and communities.

In each field site the study aims to find out: what are some of the gender based norms, roles and responsibilities involved in household level decision making? What are some of the household and community decision making processes, the methods women and men use, and the social resources they draw upon to assert their interests within the household and community? What are some of the links, if any,

[8] For further discussion on the causes and consequences of this bias, see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. "Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-first Century". In *Nation-Building Unravelled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*. Donini, A., Niland N., and Wermester K., Eds. Kumarian Press: Bloomfield. 2004.

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

[10] See Appendices I and II for information on the conceptual background to this study.

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

between household and community level decision making, and do key community institutions reflect outcomes related to women's needs and interests?

The case studies are designed to stand alone, but only when read together can some of the nuances of difference in gender relations between field sites be understood. A briefing paper in early 2005 will examine the themes that have emerged across the case studies. This will focus on possible strategies to increase women's participation in development processes by capitalising on opportunities and dealing appropriately with challenges.

This case study explores these themes within two neighbourhoods *(gozars)* in District 7 of Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province.

Summary of Findings[12]

Several important issues emerged from this study, relating to leadership, participatory institutions, and the factors that constrain women's participation in decision making.

Leadership

- **Both men and women were able to define the qualities of good leadership, but almost none identified people with these qualities within their own neighbourhoods.** By contrast, while local level representatives to the government (*kalantars)* described themselves as having most of these qualities, both men and women in the communities felt the opposite. Most felt that "no one is helping to solve our problems."

- **Qualities of good male leadership and good female leadership were perceived in accordance with gender roles.** A good male leader was defined as someone who is educated and who can speak to all kinds of people, including the government and external agents. A good female leader was also defined as someone who is educated, but who helps the people at the same time as fulfilling her household responsibilities.

Participation in Institutions

- **Newer, more participatory institutions have emerged in Mazar since the fall of the Taliban, but appear to be built on top of traditional institutions and power structures rather than transforming or replacing them.** These include the male elders and local level representatives to the government (*kalantars)* who are involved in all neighbourhood level decisions. As a result, women and other traditionally marginalised groups remain excluded from real participation in defining local development agendas and subsequent access to benefits.

- **There was limited interest among both poorer and uneducated women and men in participating in neighbourhood institutions.** They saw this simply as "attending meetings" and many thought it was a "waste of time." Both were unaware of the specific activities of these institutions, though men easily

[12] The following findings, and this paper as a whole, are referring specifically to the field sites looked at in this particular case study. While there is some similarity in findings throughout the research case studies, findings are not meant to be generalised.

identified the general issues they address while women said that they had "no information about community issues."

Constraints on Women's Participation

- **Women's participation in community development initiatives may be held to a higher level of scrutiny than men's, because of gender norms that place importance on the role of women in the family.** There is a need for women's participation to produce tangible results for their families first and foremost. Otherwise their participation can be considered "shameful." This impedes women from developing their own social networks, and participating in community development. Those women who had participated in humanitarian aid efforts during the Taliban, referred fondly to social and economic benefits they had received, which have since ceased.

- **Women are considered, by both women and men, to lack knowledge.** This is linked to lack of education of women and compounded by the lack of education of their male relatives, who may themselves see little value in participating in efforts that they do not see of benefit to them, their families or others in their neighbourhood.

- **Education may be increasingly important for women's participation in household decisions, whereas this has been less important for men.** Education is seen as a ticket to greater status in the household, particularly where others are uneducated, which can increase their ability to influence decisions that affect them and their families.

Section II: Context and Methodology

Mazar-e Sharif (hereafter "Mazar") is the urban centre of Balkh Province, and one of the largest cities in northern Afghanistan, with a population around 700,000. There are about 89,000 families living within the ten districts and 199 neighbourhoods (*gozars)* of Mazar. Within each *gozar* live between 200-600 families. Though most of these *gozars* are dominated by one ethnic group, they are to a certain extent ethnically mixed. Mazar, like most urban areas, is made up largely of migrants from neighbouring provinces and as a result the city consists of a mix of ethnic groups, bringing with them a variety of customs, cultures and norms. These are likely to account for some of the differences in gender relations between households, though this study does not explicitly explore ethnic differences.

Box 1: Neighbourhood Information

The field sites for this study were two neighbourhoods (*gozars)* in District 7 of Mazar-e Sharif. This is a newer district, established around ten years ago and comprised primarily of residents who were displaced from rural areas during the violent Russian invasion and drought, which rendered rural livelihoods dependent on farming and animal husbandry nearly impossible. The study *gozars* also had a significant number of returnees from Iran and Pakistan.

According to a socio-economic profile of Mazar prepared by the CFDO, the District 7 population is approximately 61% Tajik, 12% Uzbek, 9% Pashtun, 2% Hazara and 1% Turkmen.[13] District 7 has nine formal institutions and organisations (including both Community Forums among others), 22 mosques, 4 high schools and 3 elementary schools (mostly for boys). The majority of the teachers are women, and the majority of students are boys.

It is estimated that half of Mazar's population is unemployed. This is a result of the destruction of much of the industry that existed prior to the Russian invasion and the flight of many of those entrepreneurs that drove economic investment in Mazar. Continued insecurity in Mazar discourages investment and limits freedom of movement of both men and women.[14]

There are many NGOs and UN agencies in Mazar working on projects that provide assistance to women and families, including income generation, health education and literacy. The most high profile of these efforts to work with women is the Community Forum Development Organization (CFDO), which emerged from the first Community Fora in Afghanistan, established by UNHCS-Habitat in 1995. The Community Fora are "multi-functional neighbourhood-based centres that provide economic, educational and social benefits to thousands of women and men throughout the city."[15] They were initially run almost entirely by women, who continued to participate when the Taliban twice entered Mazar: first in 1997, causing international UN staff to evacuate, and then again in 1998. Centres where women could meet separately from men were established, and women engaged in productive, vocational and service related projects such as baking, embroidery, tailoring and carpet weaving through organisations like the World Food Programme, International Committee for the Red Cross, Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, International Assistance Mission, and Medecins San Frontieres. When

[13] It is not clear what the remaining percentage is made up of. All references to population and ethnic breakdown in Afghanistan are considered to be rough estimates, considering the difficulties – both logistical and political – in gathering statistics.
[14] Beall, J. and Esser, D., *Urban Governance, Management and Vulnerability* (Draft). Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: Kabul. December 2004.
[15] Tamas, A. "Origins of the Community Fora Programme: Innovative Community Development in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan." 1998, 5.

the Taliban forbade women from working and going outside without wearing a full body covering (*burqa)* and being accompanied by a close male relative (*maharam*), they continued their work through home based initiatives. The CFDO, known to most simply as "the institution," was established in 1997 to support the work of the Fora.[16] Many of the organisations seeking to address the needs and interests of women in Mazar are in some way cooperating with the Community Fora.

Description of Methodology

Partner Selection
For each field study, the researchers chose NGO partners based on their experience of working with communities,[17] their interest in improving their work with women, and their capacity to facilitate the research and advise the researchers on security. The researchers hoped to provide NGO partners with insights into appropriate entry points for promoting the increased participation of women in decision making processes that affect their welfare, and the welfare of their families and communities as a whole.

In Mazar, Save the Children US and the CFDO supported the research. The former was chosen because of their experience working directly with women from a variety of households throughout Mazar on health and sanitation, and their willingness to provide assistance to the research team. The latter was chosen because of its years of experience explicitly promoting the participation of women within the study communities.

Participant Selection
In the two District 7 *gozars,* as with the other field studies, the researchers first met with the community leaders as pointed out by the partner NGOs. In this study, the assistance of a female health worker with Save the Children US was instrumental in introducing the team to women who had taken part in health trainings, a few of whom were also involved with the CFDO as representatives in their Community Fora. Through the health worker's initial introductions, the team was able to follow the social networks of these women by asking them for introductions to male family members and women who are like them or who they help on a regular basis.

As in other studies in this project, the researchers returned to those participants who had illustrative stories to tell, in terms of gender relations in their households and at the community levels. This was a much easier task in this urban area than it was in some of the rural areas, simply because several of the women in Mazar were much more used to talking to external agents. In reality, however, the researchers were limited to speaking to those who had time to talk. It was easier in this regard to meet with women in their households than men, who were usually working outside of the home. The participants included women (18) and men (15).

Research techniques[18]
The research was carried out by a team of three: one female American team leader with extremely limited Dari; one female Afghan research assistant with fluent Dari and Pashto; and one male Afghan research assistant with fluent Hazaragi, Dari and

[16] Ibid, 2.
[17] See below for a discussion on "finding community." This discussion challenges that it is possible to identify community per se, but that what should be looked at when trying to understand the social context of people's lives that determine gender relations is people's social networks and solidarity.
[18] The team spent about 2 ½ weeks at the field site in April 2004.

Pashto. The same team carried out the research for all but one of the case studies.[19] In general, the male assistant held discussions with men and the female assistant held discussions with women, while the team leader alternated between them over the course of the study. The basic methods used in the research in Mazar were as follows:

- **Semi-structured interviews** to gather descriptive information in participants' own words as much as possible, on individual women's and men's perspectives on their roles and responsibilities and gender relations in their households and communities. Using this open ended technique, the researchers gained a better understanding of perceptions of individuals' household roles, responsibilities and rights in decision making, respective contributions and the perceived value of those contributions.

- **Observation** was intended to allow the researcher(s) and participants to slowly familiarise themselves with each other. This was difficult to do in the urban setting, where most people stopped their daily activities to speak with the researchers and they were not able to stay with the participants in the evenings. Nevertheless, the team benefited from spending time in people's homes.

- **Focus groups** were carried out with female heads of household (two),[20] young married women (one) and middle aged married women (one). Unfortunately, it was not possible to arrange focus groups with men because it was difficult to find a time during the day when a large enough group could be gathered for discussion. The focus group discussions with women enabled the researchers to gather more in depth information with respect to the ideals, rules and norms that regulate women's lives. It also enabled us to identify other women, and through them, men to interview.

- **Life histories** were used to gather descriptive information about participants' lives and the important events that happen to them. Histories and stories provide a better explanation of perceptions of individuals' household roles, responsibilities and rights in decision making, respective contributions and the perceived value of those contributions. In a few cases, the technique elicited sensitive information about power and authority that would be unlikely to have come out in standard questionnaires.

[19] This is with the exception of our study in Robat e Sangi, Herat where a different national female assisted with the research.

[20] This included primarily widows, though in some cases they were probably not truly heads of household as they depend on the income of their sons or brothers-in-law and live by their rules. In other cases while they live with sons or brothers-in-law, they are not taken care of and must provide for themselves.

Section III: Household Decision Making

Participants were asked to tell the researchers about:

- The main issues and problems in their households;[21]
- How they go about making decisions about these issues;
- Who participates;
- How they are expected to participate;
- Who makes the final decision; and
- What happens if the decisions are not agreed upon.

By engaging in discussion with members of various households in the field sites, the researchers were able to isolate some of the diversity in the field study sites due to factors such as education level, wealth, occupation, and family origin. These factors are likely to have an influence on gender relations, roles and responsibilities in household decision making.

> "When a man wants to make a decision, he should discuss it with someone. If he can't find anyone, he should take off his turban and discuss with that." *Sheer Mohammad, 37-year-old married man with 4 children*

There was more differentiation in the presentation of appropriate gender roles, responsibilities and norms of men and women in Mazar than in the rural field sites. This may be due to the population's greater exposure to people of diverse backgrounds, as well as economic status and necessity to adapt *purdah* norms to their particular situation. Some of the key underlying values and behavioural norms assigned to women and men are nevertheless shared to a certain extent between field sites, and while some women and families stretch traditional boundaries, behaviour is always mediated by prescribed gender norms.

As in other studies, there was a gap between rhetoric and reality, shown partly through nuances observed over repeat visits to some of the households. It is an ongoing project to identify and highlight these gaps because it is here that the most interesting insights into how men and women are able to assert themselves in daily life, as well as in more major decisions, are found.

In general, participants discussed issues that are seen to affect all members of the household rather than individual or personal issues.[22] This is telling in and of itself. It is important to understand the reasons that people may represent themselves, their households and their community to outsiders in certain ways and not assume that it is a complete picture of the reality of their lives. On the other hand, some discussions with individuals and groups highlighted areas that may have been too difficult for participants to discuss in detail, and which were not expressed as areas of particular concern but clearly impact on their participation in and control over areas of decision making. For instance, domestic violence was raised on several occasions in the context of wider discussions on roles and responsibilities, in cases where women were perceived to have failed in fulfilling their household responsibilities, or playing their proper role. But whereas in a few of the rural sites in this study it came out in a matter-of-fact manner, in Mazar — where women had

[21] This paper uses the definition of household that has been used in some of AREU's livelihoods work, which considers a household to be a unit of people who eat from the same cooking pot. However, in many cases several different households live very close together.

[22] The general lack of trust in outsiders, partly a result of the years of war and displacement, combined with cultural norms that dictate that most private issues are kept private, is always an issue when asking questions about household decision making and this impacted on the research in Mazar.

generally heard that they had rights as well as responsibilities — it was taken as a more personal and private issue.

Among poorer households, there were fewer large decisions to be made about money. The men and women of the poorest households — those without paid sources of income, who did not own land or a house — felt frustration at the lack of control over the situation and events of their lives. Behind the initial rhetoric that all Afghans are the same, everyone, particularly the poorer households, seemed to be comparing their own situation to that of others.

The household as an institution: gender roles, responsibilities and norms

A gendered analysis of decision making looks at the institutions that determine what issues are considered to be important; whether these will be permitted to be discussed; whether and when decisions will be made; and who gets to participate in, influence and control decisions. This analysis necessarily begins at the household level, because of its "central role in enabling, constraining and differentiating its members' participation in the economy and society at large."[23] This is an important level of analysis for development planning and practice, which must be linked with the community level and its institutions: decisions made in the household determine which women and men will be able to participate in development activities.

The households in this study were made up, at their largest, of extended family units, including paternal mothers and fathers, married sons, unmarried children, daughters-in-law, and unmarried daughters. These included households where men and/or women earned income, and households that were headed by women. As compared to the rural sites in this research, however, there were smaller households that were made up of only husband and wife, living with unmarried children, and sometimes a widowed mother-in-law.

Women

When asked about the responsibilities of women in the households, both men and women were likely to say that women were just in the house doing the housework. "Housework" includes activities such as the preparation of food, cooking, baking bread, cleaning and other productive and reproductive work. This included managing younger members of the household, handling the early socialisation of children and caring for sick and/or elderly relatives. In all of the households who had children attending school, it was seen as women's responsibility to ensure that they got to school and studied when they returned home.

The successful handling of these roles and responsibilities and adherence to *purdah* norms which restrict women's public exposure, are inextricably linked to women's honour. As a result, the main responsibility for women of any status is the well being of their household. One of the more educated and wealthy participants in the study offered this view with regards to the relative importance of housework:

> "Management of the house is most important. The priority is inside the house, and if this is taken care of then she can have the opportunity to go [out]. But in Afghanistan every man wants dozens of children so it is impossible for the woman to leave these children and go outside. Also, there are a lot of house chores. If the

[23] Kabeer, Naila. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. Verso: New York. 1994, 283.

> woman has a mother-in-law or a sister-in-law to help her take care of the children, then she can go outside."

Even in the case of one married female NGO worker, Seema, who is the only breadwinner in her household, responsibility for housework is primarily hers. She works full time, is otherwise active in the community and still comes home to prepare dinner and ensure that the household is running smoothly. Her husband has relatively few responsibilities, by contrast, other than shopping in the bazaar.

Box 2: Husband's View on Household Roles and Responsibilities

"The household chores and also the education of the children — to take them to school and courses are the responsibility of my wife. The work outside the house to find money is my responsibility, spending it is my wife's responsibility. 95% of Afghan women are dependent on their husbands." — *Ayoubkhan, middle-aged educated government worker*

There were essentially two types of women for whom it was acceptable to work outside of the home: 1) poor women with no other option than to go out and contribute to household income and 2) women who are literate or considered to be "educated." [24] These women should have someone to assist them with their housework, such as unmarried children old enough to take care of the young ones or mothers-in-law willing to provide assistance with household chores. Initially the researchers were often told that it is no problem for women to work outside the home, especially if they are able to work with other women. There was an expectation that poorer women would earn income, and that in these times "women and men should work shoulder to shoulder." In practice, though, the majority of the female participants in this study did not work outside the home. Those who did were often widows or female heads of household, doing domestic work out of necessity in wealthier households (i.e. cleaning, cooking, baking bread). The rest were educated, working as teachers, a doctor and an NGO worker, and had community roles which are discussed later in the community section of this paper.

The care provided to family members, including husbands and parents-in-law, who are infirm or disabled is another responsibility of women which can be extremely time consuming and is often underestimated. For instance, Farida became the primary care provider for her husband when he was shot and lost the use of his legs several years ago. When the researchers asked about the responsibilities of the other people in the house when he was sick, he laughed at the question, shrugged and said "nothing, just housework." He later admitted that their work had increased, and that his eight-year-old daughter provided assistance to her mother and to him as well. He said that he runs the house, and that what he expects from his wife is "a good dinner, soon and good….without that there will be fighting." Another example is that of a middle-aged Uzbek woman who smiled when relaying that her workload had decreased substantially since her mother-in-law, who had been ill for several years, passed away.

Men

Men are expected to provide income for their families and go to the bazaar. There is a keen sense among the female participants that it is primarily the responsibility of their husbands to earn income and "bring food for our families," particularly as women's ability to earn income is limited by a variety of factors. The ability to

[24] "Educated" is a subjective term, but generally refers to people who had greater than grade 6 education.

provide food for one's family is the most important responsibility men have in the household.

As with women's roles and responsibilities being related to honour, men's honour is attached to their ability to provide food for their families. When they are not able to provide, women in the household must go outside to find work, which though more generally accepted in urban Mazar than in more rural locations, requires them to adapt *purdah* norms. Strict adherence to the ideal of *purdah* is not possible for poorer families with fewer livelihood options. Nevertheless, it reflects negatively on men and their ability to carry out their own responsibilities. This may differ among different socio-economic and ethnic groups. The research team encountered a family in which the mother worked and had been providing the only source of income for the family for over ten years. The husband was upset and angry about their situation and the only time he expressed satisfaction was when reflecting on the time when he had a job and was the primary breadwinner in his household. He voiced frustration to the research team that women were taking the jobs of men, when they were willing and able to work.[25]

The incidences of domestic violence that the researchers came across were in households where the woman earned income but the man did not, though such violence is obviously more widespread than has been documented thus far. This cannot be separated from the impact of years of conflict on families. It is known in other conflict and post-conflict situations that changing roles resulting from violence at the extra-household level are often temporary and may be linked to new forms of violence inside the home, particularly against women.[26] This is a phenomenon that needs to be much better understood in the Afghan context.

In Islam it is the duty of a husband to provide for his wife or wives, though the ramifications for failure to adhere to these are not clear. Nevertheless, the notion of the failure of males to complete their responsibilities in the household did come out in several women's expressions of frustration at household life. For instance, in a focus group of female headed households, a woman provided us with the example of a male relative who was ill and did not work anymore. His wife is known to argue with him regularly, saying "if you can't afford to provide for me, then let me go."

The examples of men engaging in household chores, including taking care of the children, were rare. A middle-aged Uzbek woman with eleven children told the researchers, "If I need help with my work, my husband helps me if he is not busy. For instance by holding the baby." This suggests that if he is busy with something else, he is not responsible for this care and shows that it is in fact primarily a responsibility of the woman in this household.

Children

The most important responsibility of children is to do what they are told by their parents. This includes a range of housework duties, going to school and studying, and in poorer families working outside the home to earn extra income for the household.

[25] This included the team's female research assistant, who was present when he made this comment.

[26] A 2002 UNIFEM-commissioned report based on research and consultations with women in war torn countries around the world notes that in conflict and post-conflict environments "many things contribute to an increase in domestic violence - the availability of weapons, the violence male family members have expressed or meted out, the lack of jobs, shelter and basic services." Rehn, E. and Johnson Sirleaf, E. *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment of the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women's Role in Peacebuilding.* UNIFEM. 2002, 14.

While it was rarely reported outright that the children had responsibilities for the functioning of the house, the tasks they carry out are difficult, time consuming and varied. The researchers observed both boys and girls collecting water from the neighbourhood tap or from their own well and cleaning rice, among other chores. Girls in particular have a heavy burden, taking care of younger siblings while their mothers are busy with other household tasks. Many families had at least one child that was going to school, and while these children are generally expected to do their school work, girls are first and foremost expected to help with the household chores. In this respect, while many women wanted to send their girls to school, there was a conflict of interest between this desire and the responsibility to ensure that household chores were completed. One poor mother came to tears describing her situation: there was no one to help her at home, and no money to pay for basic school supplies, yet her daughter insisted on going to school.

Inter-dependence and changeability of roles and responsibilities

The relationships between men's and women's roles and responsibilities in the household are perhaps more apparent in rural settings, where nearly every aspect of subsistence is handled locally. However, as is usually the case, women's unpaid productive work in the household enables others to engage in paid productive work outside of the household. As a result of the greater responsibilities of women, particularly poor women but also women who are educated and working, their workload increases. A more in-depth study, in which more time is spent with the participants and in the *gozar* during the early morning and evening hours when family members are at home would provide more insight into the nuances of this finding.

The reality here is important because in many cases there is under-reporting of the actual work that women do in the household, which may lead to overestimates of the available time they have for participating in income generation activities and other community development initiatives.

Realities of household life: gender, power and participation in decision making

> "The less important decisions are taken by my wife, because I am at work, but the important decisions, such as who should go to school and who they should marry are taken with the opinions and suggestions of the household members, because the household is running with the opinions of the household members. Without this I think a house cannot survive for a long time."[27]

As might be expected, the study found that people are usually only included in decisions related to their areas of responsibility. While generally the breakdown of responsibilities are gendered along the lines that one might expect between public and private sphere[28] activity (and this has somewhat predictable effects on participation in decision making), it is the nuances of how women and men

[27] Abdul Jamil, a middle-aged Uzbek man.

[28] The "private" sphere is often referred to as women's domain with public space being considered the domain of men. This distinction has lent itself to simplified understandings of access to decision making processes. It is a somewhat artificial divide, determined by that which is visible when decisions that affect a community are made, but that does not take into account the relationship between how decisions are made at a household level and what gets decided on at a community level. Also as Grima points out in her work on Pashtuns, every interaction with another individual is determined by established expectations in that kinship tie, giving different meaning to the concept of "private" depending on socio-cultural context. Grima, B. *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women: The misfortunes which have befallen me*. University of Texas Press. 1992, 71.

manoeuvre within these areas that determine the extent of their participation and whether they have a voice in activities that take place outside of the home. This gives insights into the areas that men and women are entitled to gather information and develop knowledge about, and areas that may be more negotiable than others.

Distribution of work

As compared to the rural field sites in this study, decisions on the distribution of paid and unpaid productive work among household members came out strongly. This is related to the relative availability of paid work and the economic need for women to engage in it. Finding money and food was one of the biggest concerns of poor people and it was widely acknowledged, by both women and men, that this requires the participation of women. An elderly man told the researchers that women can work because "women have carpet weaving skills and are teachers, workers in NGOs, watchmen in the schools and cleaning the houses of people."

In the case of educated women, there was an expectation among both men and women that they should earn some income. But while poor families must give women permission out of economic necessity — an acceptable justification for adapting gender rules and norms — it was also said that "rich families will not give permission for their daughters to go outside and work." The main exception to this were the adult daughters of a village headman (*arbab*) who clearly had a range of social and economic resources to draw upon but were also able to engage in non-traditional women's work as a doctor, pharmacy owner and teacher.

Box 3: Experience of War:
New Roles for Women May Only Be Temporary

Marzia, a middle-aged married woman with ten children, had worked in many jobs over the years, especially while her husband was jobless during the war. This included four years as cook in a hospital until the Taliban forbade her from working there anymore. She worked in a foreigner's house, followed by a rich landowner's house, cleaning, baking bread and cooking for them. A few years later her son got a job driving for an NGO and told her not to work anymore. He provides the family with 1000 Afs every month. Despite the family's financial difficulties that have caused her husband to consider selling their house, and her willingness to go and work in people's homes again, she says "he will not listen to me."

This is just one example of what may be a wider phenomenon of how norms that sustain traditional gender relations may be resistant to change even though appearances may indicate otherwise.[29]

This was a sentiment often expressed by even the most educated women, who were themselves breaking with custom to go outside, work, earn income and even take community leadership positions (as discussed below) even though they were not extremely poor. These educated women were providing new examples, sometimes of women who are able to work outside of the home, using their literacy and relatively high levels of education while maintaining family honour.

There is an expectation among literate women that their husbands will give them permission to work and put their literacy skills into practice:

[29] El Bushra, J. "Fused in Combat: gender relations and armed conflict." *Development in Practice* 2003; 13(2&3): 252-265.

> "In all these 12 years since my marriage, I was not allowed to go to school and become a teacher. He had married me, while I was in 11th grade, as he wanted to marry a literate girl from his own clan, and then didn't allow me to study at school."

Box 4: "Becoming like men": Widows' Perspectives on Power and Authority

In a focus group of female headed households the women, all widows, expressed contradictory emotions about their situation. They all had greater amounts of freedom and autonomy relative to when their husbands were alive, and yet also had much less support from family members and neighbours. At the same time, it is likely that the women had idealised their situation prior to becoming widows, as they had come into extremely difficult lives with gains in control in some areas but extreme losses in others:

Ziba Gul - "Now I feel that I am a man, not a woman. Powerful and with authority."

Khadija -"It's not easy when one week a man doesn't come home. It is very difficult for his wife who has spent one week without him. But our husbands have gone forever. Now we all feel like men, because we work like them. There is no difference between us and men."

Bibi Gul - "The *kalantar* always appreciates me and thinks that I am like a man because by my own struggle I provide food for my children and I never ask for help from others."

Khadija - "We are like men because whenever work comes to our *gozar* — like work in the spaghetti factory or in people's homes I participate, and I also make carpets. So I do whatever I can for myself and my children, so there is no difference between me and a man."

Even though the women were comparing their former situations with husbands to their current situation without, there was clearly a gap between rhetoric and reality. It was the response of the female neighbourhood representative (*nomayenda umume*) that was telling:

> "If your husband married your daughter to anyone, even a stranger, could you say anything? No. So why are you saying that the two of you took decisions at home. Afghan women do not have any rights in society and in the household. Look at me. I am educated and I think that I have the best situation of any woman in the *gozar*. But if my husband does not want me to do something….(shook her head). Last week there was a wedding and I asked my husband for permission and he said there is not need for you to go because none of our relatives are there and none of your friends are there. So I could not go. In Afghanistan no woman has rights and authority."

The widows retreated saying "We don't know what kinds of decisions we make because we are uneducated" and "We only know how to provide food for our children and make decisions about this." This tirade expressed the frustration of this relatively free and educated woman at the situation of her life as well as the context of her life, and sufficiently deflated the women who had just minutes before been discussing their power and authority since their husbands died.

In practice, it was up to the males in the male headed households to make the final decision on this matter. The issue of the type of work and the environment women are able to work in is important for perceptions of whether or not the work is appropriate. Another factor that compounds justifications men use to restrict women's work outside the home is that the types of available work are often physically difficult, and do not necessarily build new and marketable skills. They also often engage women in traditional activities that may not be sustainable.

Expenditures
Daily expenditures include purchasing consumable items from the bazaar. It is the responsibility of men to do the shopping in the bazaar, but some women had more freedom to go to the bazaar than in the rural field sites in this study, usually wearing a full body covering (*burqa)* that provides a form of seclusion from men when in an otherwise public space.

The most talked about area of decision making around expenditures was housing. This included the desire of many younger couples living with in-laws to live apart from them; the desire of many of the poorer families to move to their own family compounds; and the desire of renters to own their own homes. Marzia, a middle-aged married woman, said, "He wants to sell our house to open a shop, but I will not let him sell our house. I tell him 'I will work again in other people's houses, and will not let you sell the house. You can sell the carpet and the TV but not our house.' But he does not listen to me."

Marriage was also discussed as a major expenditure, including bride price (essentially a one-time offering of money or other productive resources given in exchange for a new bride) and wedding costs. A few of the families had not had a bride price exchanged for their own marriage and as a result did not ask for it when they married their own daughters, saying "my father did not want to sell his daughter" or "I will not sell my daughter." For those who do pay a bride price, it is a major expenditure which usually results in enormous debt and is a source of stress for many families. While this was a sensitive issue, and the expenditure itself was not discussed as a topic of household decision making, in cases where a bride price had been paid, both women and men appeared to know exactly how much had been exchanged both in their own marriage and that of their children.

Marriage
In general, marriage was relayed as a decision that is ideally made between the mother and father of the groom and bride, or as an agreement between two families, but with the "participation" of the girl and the boy. While it was generally understood, although to varying degrees, that children are expected to accept the marriage partner chosen for them by their parents, it was also admitted that children can have influence in some cases. Two examples showed how the participants, one male and one female, were able to influence marriage decisions. In both cases, they were asked whether or not they accepted the decision and were able to informally and indirectly indicate their preferences to their parents (see Appendix V for Life Histories of these individuals, illustrating these examples in more depth).

There was a feeling among several of the participants that marriage decisions happen differently among those families with rural and/or uneducated parents, compared to those with educated parents. The education level, and perceptions of their levels of knowledge in general (see discussion on Gendered Knowledge below), appeared to be an indicator of the level of decision making power that women have over the marriage of their children. The education level of marriageable males and females also made a difference to the level of input that they could make to marriage decisions, particularly where their families were uneducated. Educated women are considered to have "more value" than those who are uneducated. Those who were consulted on the choice of their marriage partners were, not surprisingly, much happier with the result of their marriage than those who were not. The researchers were told by a few of the women that girls who are older when they are engaged are more prepared to influence the marriage. The

older you are, the more knowledge and courage you have, and the greater value you have in your family. When you are older "you and your husband understand each other better" and you will not fight as much. In a culture where in general, the ability to command respect is correlated with age and experience, this is not a surprising finding. And yet to a certain extent it contradicts the assumption that younger girls who have less experience of life are therefore more likely to abide by the rules of their new household.

Several women relayed their frustration with being married too young and made the connection between early marriage, lack of ability to express their opinions and the resulting unequal relationships with their husbands. They felt they did not have a common understanding with their husbands, and that they were disadvantaged in household decisions by being married young. By contrast, Jamila, a widowed teacher who is a neighbourhood representative of her community's forum, described the relationship with her husband as being a loving and respectful one. She felt her husband respected her, and that the basis of this was that she had been educated and old enough to contribute to the marriage decision making. The economic reasons for poor families to marry their girls at a very young age were raised by many of the women, most of whom had had a bride price collected for them:

> "I was fourteen years old, and we did not know anything about life. Our families were uneducated, so they gave us to our husbands. At that time, the parents were uneducated and living in the village. If anyone came, even if he was 60 or 70 they would give their daughters to them, just for money. If when we were young we could have been given information about our husbands' families and about him, there would have been more understanding between us. When our daughters are older they can better make decisions about whether they want to marry or not."

In these cases, it is much less likely that either the mother or the girl will have a say in decision making in her own marriage. But it was also mentioned that some women would try to wait and marry their daughters when they are older, allowing them to be educated, in order that they could contribute to decisions about their own marriage.

Between husbands and wives, the husbands had the most control over decision making on the marriage of their daughters and sons. For instance, Marzia (Tajik) explained the situation of her marriage, in which her paternal uncle, who her mother had been married to when her father died, made the decision about who she would be married to because he was now the head of household. Her mother had no way to influence his decision, though she was not happy with the marriage because the groom was almost 15 years older than her daughter.

The only person who portrayed a direct participation in the decision making around their own marriage was a man who was quite well educated and had a military background. His father and all paternal uncles had been killed during the war, leaving his mother as the head of household. She tried to identify partners for him and he was repeatedly dissatisfied with her choices. He told her that "you are not the one to marry these girls, so you should let me make the decision." She finally agreed with this logic. Most respected their fathers too much to speak with them directly, and would rather communicate their desires through the mother.

Sending Children to School

Whether or not to send children to school was considered one of the more important decisions made in these households, yet it was one over which most women had little or no control, although some were able to wield some influence.

Because many of the families desired to send their children to school, those who did not feel able to send them were quick to justify their reasons with a range of obstacles:[30] there was no time because of household chores; no money to pay for school supplies; and no reason for poorer children to go because job opportunities are only available for those with social connections. This came out much more strongly in Mazar than in the rural studies of this project. This is perhaps because in rural areas there are far fewer opportunities for children's formal education, but also far fewer opportunities for its practical application, particularly for girls.

The decision of whether to send children to school or not, especially girls, was an area of household conflict in several cases, and a violent one in at least one home. While by no means definitive, the exposure of the families to education and the origins of the household members appeared to be important indicators of whether or not children were allowed to go to school. For instance, in her role as a well known neighbourhood teacher, Jamila frequently tries to influence many families in the district to send their girls to school and cites girls' and women's own lack of knowledge about their rights as an obstacle:

> "Most families that want their girls to be educated are from the city, and some are uneducated as well. When the woman comes from the village, she doesn't know that she has any rights."

Her experience trying to influence parents was illustrative of the realities of decision making on children's education. She occasionally meets with mothers, but usually works with fathers because the women "always tell me that they cannot make these decisions by themselves — only the men can take decisions." (See Box 5 for more examples.)

The researchers came across examples where girls themselves had influenced these decisions. This occurred in families that had educated members, or where the mother wanted their daughters to have a better life than they themselves had. The experience of migration, living abroad, and exposure to education seemed to be an influencing factor. Those who migrated abroad had seen examples of women working as teachers, doctors and NGO workers, and hoped that their daughters could take advantage of opportunities and enter professions. The impact of these experiences on gender relations and power dynamics appears to be significant.

But still the opportunities available for girls and boys are slim, and there is preference for educating boys over girls, as suggested in the following statement by a middle-aged man:

> "I don't have proper education, but I love to educate my sons and daughters. I don't want my son to be like me, and every night I advise my children to try to

[30] As noted in a recent survey carried out by UNICEF, the barriers cited in Mazar City for not enrolling children in school were the expense (28.6%), domestic work (15.7%), lack of separate schools for girls and boys (15.7%), distance from home (14.1%) and security (5.9%). These were unfortunately not disaggregated by gender, but if they were, one could surmise that domestic work, security and distance from home would likely be of greater concern for girls than boys.

learn as much as you can. I am ready to go to do any kind of work; just you pay attention to your lessons.'"

Box 5: Education Decisions
"When I was eleven I told my father I wanted to go to school, but he would not let me go…When my father was in the 4th class, the teacher wanted him to buy some eggs, but he didn't bring any and was failed by the teacher. Now he thinks that poor students cannot do well in school, only the rich children who can give gifts to the teacher. He thinks that you don't have any value in school if you are poor.

My mother started fighting with him to give me permission to go to school, but he wouldn't give in. Every day my brothers and sisters and I went to school, and he got angry, he never gave permission for us to go to school. Two or three times my father beat me for going to school but I went anyway. I wanted to go very badly.

Ten years ago my father told me that he would shoot me if I did not stop going to school. But last year I started to go again, and the fighting started again between my mother and father. Because of this my father engaged me to be married, to a relative who is a cousin of my father's.

The man he engaged me to is also poor, and no one asked me what I wanted to do. I was very unhappy and I am still unhappy. He is living near Turkmenistan. But my father does not care if I am happy or I am unhappy about it. My husband is educated, so when we get married he might let me go to school, but I won't go because it is too late for me. Three times I went to school and I didn't get any permission to go. Now all of my friends who went to school are all doctors and getting good jobs. But there is no point in me going to school now. Even though my father knows about these stories, he thinks it is because they were already rich that they are getting these jobs. For me there was no need, because we are poor."

The female heads of household the researchers spoke with exercised more decision making control over the education of their children, although at the same time were more constrained in their ability to provide this opportunity for their children, especially where they were very poor. For instance, one widow told the researchers, "My husband did not want my children to go to school, but after he died, I sent them all to school." In the same group, another said, "We can't send our daughters to school, because we need them to help us with the work in the house." One said, "I wanted to send my children to school, but there was no money."

As will be discussed below, the issue of education is one that many consider to be a private one for families. Nevertheless, the issue does appear to be addressed at least on a rhetorical level in community level dialogue, unlike most household level issues.

Disputes
It is generally considered dishonourable to have conflict within an Afghan household. Ideally women do their best to maintain harmony in the household, even though in reality conflicts involving women are also accepted as some of the most common in Afghan society.

Household disputes came up quite frequently in discussions, particularly in terms of what happens when roles and responsibilities are not adhered to or when decisions are not agreed, primarily by women. The composition of the household and presence of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law was an influencing factor. There

was concern among participants, not only about wanting to own and not rent their homes, but also about living with their parents-in-law. One mother-in-law described the "presence of strangers" in a home as causing tension and impacting on the harmony of the household. Given that newly married women usually go to live with their in-laws this provides strain on both the newly arrived members as well as on the rest of the family. As this woman put it:

> "Strangers interrupt the lives of a husband and wife. So it makes disputes. And sometimes the bride does not respect their father-in-law or mother-in- law, so it makes disputes."

For instance, one mother-in-law we spoke with was very jealous about the attention her daughter-in-law was given by her husband, and felt that he provided the daughter-in-law with gifts and financial assistance whereas she received nothing. One man described his strategy for resolving disputes among women in his household which included providing gifts for both his wife and mother-in-law in order to "calm them". Household disputes seemed to occur regularly between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

A woman who had suffered under the control of her own mother-in-law decided to marry her daughter to a man whose parents were deceased in order that she would not suffer the same fate. As a result, the couple lives alone, and has avoided this type of conflict. Living apart from in-laws was a common goal of many of the participants, both male and female.

Several men mentioned that it is up to them to ensure that there is no fighting in the household. This was expressed, in particular, in poor households where it was felt that the lack of resources caused people to fight over what little there was. There was a feeling among several people the researchers spoke to that in wealthier households, there is no need to fight.

In reality, it is between the wife and husband to work out disputes, with individuals in different households exercising their own strategies and methods for resolving disputes. The two examples below from a focus group conversation with middle aged married women illustrate this:

> "First, I try to convince him, if it doesn't work, then I ask a senior relative to convince my husband and make him act as we ask him, thus we resolve the problem in my advantage or disadvantage. It has been 11 years, since I got married, and during all this time, I haven't quarrelled with him. Whatever he says, I accept, and whatever I say, he accepts too." – *Middle- aged married woman #1*

> "If I ask my husband to bring something, he agrees. If he doesn't, then I agree and submit to his will. What else can I do? I can't convince my husband, even if I am right, I am woman, I apply all my courage to try to convince him, but he doesn't agree. I only suffer in silence. What I want, my husband doesn't accept. Any problem can be solved, but it's very difficult to solve the problem of matrimony." – *Middle-aged married woman #2*

The next section of this paper illustrates how women's decision making influence changes in relation to decisions made at the community level, especially through neighbourhood institutions.

Section IV: Community level decision making

Finding "community"

The term "community" is used in many different ways and is a loose and somewhat subjective concept that is being operationalised in reconstruction and development efforts. The definition of communities and the boundaries that define them are fluid as well as subjective. It is particularly complicated in the Afghan context. Researchers on various ethnic groups and regions of Afghanistan like Monsutti and Glatzer[31] have recognised multiple, and sometimes overlapping forms of solidarity (lineages, tribal groups, hamlets, *manteqa,* etc.). Solidarity is generally understood to refer to the sense of unity among a group of people that produces or is based on common interests, objectives and standards. It is extremely complicated to identify the sources of solidarity in this context, and therefore remains all the more important not to assume them. For instance, while family units in Afghanistan are strong, and women's interests are perceived to be met in pursuit of the well being of their families, it must be considered only an assumption as few efforts have been made to understand the range of women's interests. To date, development actors have not provided much assistance to create the kind of enabling environments where these will emerge. This includes spaces which are not perceived by men to be threatening and where women feel safe to identify and express not only their interests or needs, but the contributions they can make to development processes.

The cultural norms and behaviour assigned to women and men are likely to differ both among and within *gozars,* in part because they are made up of people from different cultural backgrounds, lineages and families. Many of them have also had different experiences of war and displacement, which may have exposed them to new and different behaviour and gender relations. The extent to which these factors have influenced gender relations in Mazar, and in these *gozars* in particular is outside the scope of this study, but is likely relevant in terms of the different experiences of "community" different actors within the *gozars* have witnessed in the past and are experiencing in the present. These concepts are relevant both for understanding gender relations as well as participation in community development processes.

The physical boundaries of the *gozars* are not precisely agreed by the government, the organisations working there or the people living within them. The researchers were given several different versions of the *gozar* boundaries by official sources and the people themselves. Nevertheless, these are, in effect, important as the administrative and geographic boundaries that determine what constitutes community in Mazar. It is along these lines that community development efforts are conceived and implemented, and along which aid is distributed.

While community is being used in the sense of geography, it may go along with a set of assumptions that see the geographic boundaries of community as somehow related to the existence, or appropriate site for development of, social bonds that will foster the realisation of collective ideas of people's well being. In this way, community is understood more as "a group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact on a sustained basis," suggesting the existence of trust,

[31] Monsutti, A. *The Impact of War on the Social, Political and Economic Organization in Southern Hazarajat* (Unpublished paper). 2004. and Glatzer, Bernt. "War and Boundaries in Afghanistan: Significance and Relativity of Local and Social Boundaries," in *Weld des Islams* (Leiden) 41, 3. 2001, 379-399.

reciprocity and solidarity that could contribute to building cooperation among residents that could be harnessed for development. The oft-discussed work of Robert Putnam showed that the networks of reciprocity and solidarity are a precondition for development, rather than a result of it.[32] A 1998 report prepared for the Mazar Community Fora Programme argues that "the way a development agency conceptualizes the community in which it works has a profound impact on its activities."[33] The impact of existing concepts of community is greater than could have originally been imagined.[34]

These issues are significant for the topic of gender and local level decision making because of the fact that sources of solidarity, which may not be closely linked to the physical boundaries of these *gozars*, may in fact prevent people from working together.

The different experiences of men and women and young and old of life beyond the household is one layer of difference that is commonly understood in the Afghan context. But the ways in which constraints on women are compounded by other factors, such as class, race, ethnicity and education, are not widely known. In order for there to be any degree of solidarity around identity, there also need to be opposing identities that make up other communities. Forms of solidarity, like culture and gender norms, change over time to accommodate the reality of people's lives and are a potentially important area of study. If what community development really aims to do is foster the conditions for people to define and implement their own paths of development, these dynamics should be taken into account.

The impact of the Taliban's presence in Mazar on how people perceive their own identity in relation to their neighbours and the preconditions for their interaction has had a notable effect on conceptions of what constitutes "community" for aid organisations and their programming. For instance, restrictions placed on women's movement during the Taliban seizure of Mazar required organising the community forum neighbourhood meetings by blocks. The neighbourhood forums have kept this structure to some extent.[35]

In this field study the researchers heard very few expressions of solidarity among neighbours. While people often mentioned that they have good relations with their neighbours and attend their weddings and funerals, there was little feeling of trust and reciprocity. This dynamic makes it difficult to engage in neighbourhood level activities that seek to promote cooperative forms of social and economic development at the neighbourhood level, let alone at the district level. Some female participants had created their own friendships and social networks beyond the family as a result of their education levels or simply their personalities. But others were isolated from their neighbours and their families, because they did not work outside the home and seemed to have limited trust in their female neighbours.

[32] Putnam's work also discusses "social capital", a term that has been widely discussed, but generally "refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." He says that this contributes to norms of reciprocity and social trust, facilitates coordination and removes some of the barriers to collective action. Over time, these networks are associated with past successes in collaboration, can serve as a "cultural template" for future collaborations and strengthen the sense of "we" over "I", eventually contributing to the willingness of people to work together. Putnam, R. "Bowling Alone." *Journal of Democracy*. 1995; 6(1): 65-78.
[33] Tamas, A. "Origins of the Community For a Programme: Innovative Community Development in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan 1995-1998."1998.
[34] The CFDO uses a logistical definition of community for developing its community and neighborhood forums. It is estimated that each district has between 15-20 *gozars*, and these are grouped together to form clusters. It is based on population and distance from each other so that there are between 250-600 families located in each.
[35] Interview with Samantha Reynolds, Mazar-e Sharif, 16 April 2004

Women-specific initiatives that seek to create safe spaces for women to meet, voice their concerns and engage in skill building activities, would need to take these varying layers of solidarity and the impacts on gender relations into account.

This creates a challenging paradox for programming: if organisations are attempting to strengthen social ties as part of a programme of participatory community development, they will have to address the stigma felt by poorer women. These women are often less restricted by male relatives to participate in initiatives for economic reasons, but are less likely to participate in activities that are perceived to be solely social. The researchers did not have access to the wealthiest women in the field site, such as women with families that own land and their own homes, who are often more secluded than poorer women, as they do not have the level of economic need that sometimes requires women and their family to adapt their adherence with *purdah* norms.[36]

Widows and female headed households reported frustration at their lack of social ties with both their families and neighbours and complained that they were not taken care of in times of need. In a focus group, one woman expressed a common opinion:

> "There was a time when we had reputations in the community. Now the community is distancing itself, thinking if we come back to them, we will be asking them for food and money."

This lack of trust and reciprocity in the *gozars* may be a common urban phenomenon,[37] as it is elsewhere, but has also probably been exacerbated by the years of war, displacement and migration. While most participants in this study were Tajik, the different ethnic groups have different cultural norms and practices that effect how the different social groups, including widows, are treated. The large number of IDPs, returnees and migrants in these *gozars* means that there are a wide variety of cultural norms being practiced. In addition, many of the poorer households who did not own property moved frequently from *gozar* to *gozar* and while this in some cases expanded the opportunities for women to develop their own friendships and social networks — thus increasing their abilities to form new relationships of trust and reciprocity with neighbours — in others it seemed to contribute to feelings of disconnection and lack of social support. This exposure to other ethnic groups and practices also led some to judge the behaviour and practices of these other groups, sometimes asserting the comparative superiority of their own. These perspectives emerged particularly with respect to practices of marriage and the taking of bride price, with the more educated participants generally critiquing it by saying "we do not want to sell our daughters" or that those who do are "backwards." This is reflective of the traditional urban/rural divide.

On the other hand, many of the men, especially elder men, agreed that widows are in need of special support and assistance by members of the community and aid organisations. The same women acknowledged that the elders in the *gozar* tell them that they respect them and that "now they are like men." This was both a source of pride and shame for these women.

[36] *Purdah* norms are related to the seclusion of women, according to interpretations of Islam on the maintenance of women's honour. This is discussed in the context of a Pashtun village in Inger W. Boesen's work as well as more recently in Floortje Klijn's work on water supply for DACAAR.

[37] This is not to idealise the past or community life outside of the urban areas, it is only to acknowledge that among more cohesive social units there are relatively more common understandings of local social norms and structure.

Initially, the researchers were often told that "we are all the same" or "Afghans are all the same," and only later in conversations did the diversity come out. This is likely due to both a matter of pride for people who do not want to be seen as asking for handouts. On other occasions, women expressed their individual stories among a group of similar women, but eventually came back to saying "we are all the same." People were generally proud about their economic situations, and voiced a desire to help themselves, rather than to be helped by others.

Community issues

The gendered analysis of decision making in the study neighbourhoods looked first at the household in order to illustrate some of the rules and norms operating in the "private," because they dictate how men and women are able to participate in, influence and control decisions at the neighbourhood level. This analysis also contributes to an understanding of the way in which gender norms within the household may constrain certain women and men from participating in, influencing and controlling decisions, including those taken at the community level.

The issues considered to be important in the household were rarely the same as those relayed at the *gozar* level. These latter issues were water, electricity, the lack of a clinic and the need for jobs.

The lack of a reliable electricity supply in the *gozars* and the dysfunctional sanitation system were considered by men to be the main community issues, but among women the lack of clinics and jobs were more important. The latter is the main issue that transcends from the household level to the community level. These are, essentially, basic needs that should ideally be addressed by the municipality, but which are currently primarily dealt with by NGOs through the CFDO.

Neighbourhood leadership and institutions: a gender perspective

While opportunities for women to participate in household decision making are nuanced, with women expressing several ways they are able to influence decision making, there are relatively few channels available for them to access community level institutions and influence decision making.

Having said that, there are many more opportunities for women to emerge as informal leaders in Mazar than in the rural sites in this field study. This includes working as teachers and NGO employees who are often seen to be helping their neighbourhoods and at the same time helping their families by providing income. These are also relatively well respected positions that require some level of education. In fact, education is seen by many as a prerequisite for good leadership: "Educated people know about god, human rights and if aid comes and it needs to be distributed, the educated people are honest and they take the opinions of the people."

A group of female heads of household agreed that female leaders "should be honest, friendly, educated, know the problems of the people, be with people and help the people and not always think about herself and her power in the community…" and went further, pointing to another member of the group saying "she established a home school and taught her children — she is a good leader because she has all these qualities." The reference to household duties is illustrative of the values and assumptions that are placed on women's work and

participation in public life, which are predicated on gender norms, some of which may be changing. Nevertheless, how much this change is a function both of the situation of their lives and family context, as well as women's own sense of obligation to their household responsibilities[38] is not known.

Box 6: Security Concerns Constrain Women's Participation and Leadership

Concerns for women's security is a main reason that is given for preventing their participation in public life. This is a concern that constrains women who are heavily restricted by *purdah* norms, but also constrains relatively free women from taking leadership roles that are very public.

For example, Zuhal, *nomayenda umume*, who is very free to work and to participate in community functions and is not afraid to sit in front of men, is also constrained by gender norms. Her husband supports her, and she feels this is because he is educated and from a "bright minded" family. She felt she had a lot of support from her neighbours and family to participate in the Constitutional Loya Jirga to ratify the new constitution of Afghanistan. An historic opportunity, she was asked by them to go and she wanted to go herself. But it was her husband who had the final say, and would not let her go because of a concern for her security, that she would speak about women's rights and would be killed for it. She later told us, "In the future, if all the guns are taken away, I will run as a delegate to the Loya Jirga."

The perspective of the representatives and leaders in the community, are also illustrative – the qualities of bad (particularly male) leaders are widely known and those with slightly more legitimacy are well aware of them. The concept of fairness and generosity was juxtaposed against corruption and greediness by those discussing good leadership. The researchers were told by Jamila "through my students and their families, I became well known. They know that I am honest and friendly with the students and when the aid comes, I distribute it to others and don't take any for myself."

The neighbourhood institutions in Mazar addressing community issues range from the relatively new and formal (the Community Fora), to the informal and more traditional (the *shura* and the role of the elders).[39] Both appear to be important in terms of power and authority in setting the rules for community decision making. There was little overlap between the informal and formal institutions in terms of leadership and participation, but much in terms of perceived functions. The role of the elders[40] is prominent, and it was agreed that they determine which decisions will be addressed and have final say over most decisions in the neighbourhood.

[38] The experiences of women in Pakistan, noted by Ayesha Jalal, may be illustrative. She notes that while educated urban middle and upper class women have "toyed with notions of emancipation," they do so carefully and with little challenge to their prescribed roles in society. "Such deference is merely the outward expression of a deeper and largely subjective consideration: the stability of the family unit and by implication the social order itself. As beneficiaries of social accommodations worked out over long periods of history, middle and upper class women everywhere have a stake in preserving the existing structures of authority, and with it the convenience of subservience that denies them equality in the public realm, but also affords privileges not available to women lower down the rungs of the social hierarchy" in Jalal, A. "The Convenience of Subservience: Women and the State of Pakistan." In *Women, Islam & the State*, Kandiyoti, D, Ed. Temple University Press: Philadelphia. 1991, 79.

[39] "Traditional" is a term that is widely contested among social anthropologists and other scholars because it is such a subjective term. It is often juxtaposed against the "modern" which can have negative connotations when "tradition" is equated with being less advanced. It begs the questions, where does tradition begin, where did it end and is it necessarily inferior? The idea of what is traditional and what is not is always produced and reproduced according to the influences of the times, which may not always be local. In this context the term is used as participants used it. The analysis of what this actually means as a social construct is a topic for another study.

[40] The term "elders" is a loose one, referring primarily to men who are the oldest in a community and have a role in community advising and decision making. They are not necessarily always the oldest in a community, however: in one case in a community in Kabul the researchers were told by a man who was about 70 years that he could not fully participate in community life because he was not an elder. The status is therefore also linked to confidence,

While most of the men could at least name those who made decisions at the community level, most of the women felt it was neither their business to understand these issues, nor to know who was dealing with them. More educated women were more likely to articulate community issues and know who was in charge of making decisions related to them. Their representation of community issues and of leadership was usually no different from the men in these cases.

Box 7: Municipality and CFDO Structures	
Municipality structure	**Community Forum structure**
• Mayor • Sections • Head of district • Sections • *Kalantars* (*gozar* level)	• CFDO • Sections (production, social development, education, programme administration, youth) • District Development Council (*shura*) • Community Forum

The Kalantars and the Elders

"There are no leaders in the community, just one *kalantar* but he only helps his own relatives. Then there is one representative, but they do not help the poor, only their own relatives." *Women in small compound with 5 families living together*

"The mullah only has responsibility to cite the Koran and go to funeral parties." – *Mohammad Amin (Fawzia's husband)*

The male elders and the informal representatives of the *gozars (kalantars)* were consistently cited as having decision making power and authority on the aforementioned issues. And while their characteristics did not fit those described as those of good leaders, they were raised as the closest the neighbourhood had to leaders. The role of female elders was not discussed at all. The research team attempted to meet with these women in order to understand their own perceptions of their roles in neighbourhood level issues, but discussions with the research team were restricted by their husbands. For instance, one male elder initially told the researchers to come and meet his wife in their home, but when the female researchers arrived, he said he had changed his mind because he was concerned that others would accuse him of receiving aid and keeping it for his own family. This was telling both in terms of the protection of his wife and the lack of trust in elders, as well as the *kalantars*. Unfortunately, this made it difficult to assess the relations between male and female elders, and any role that women may have in increasing the access of female community members to decision making power and authority. Though there is evidence that in many Afghan communities, women are able to access elders through their husbands or in other indirect ways, there was no discussion of needing or wanting to speak with them among the women spoken to in Mazar.

The *kalantars* in each of the *gozars* in the study referred to themselves as "a bridge between the community and the district governor." The *kalantar* from one of the *gozars* said:

> "It is my duty to stop any fighting between the people in this area, ensure people who commit crimes are punished, and if a smuggler or a woman with bad character,

knowledge and experience and the respect that is given. There are also terms for women elders, but were not discussed in this study at any depth.

> such as a prostitute comes into the area, it is the responsibility of the *kalantar* to send a team to make an investigation. The government gives the *kalantar* the authority to distribute messages for them, usually through the mosque."

This description showed a major disconnect between the perception of the roles and responsibilities of the *kalantars* on the one hand, and the needs and interests of the men and women respondents on the other. It also illustrates an inherent barrier between the women and men of the neighbourhood, as the women do not attend the mosque,[41] where most of the important announcements are made. The *kalantars* do not fill any official role *vis a vis* the government, but are the closest link there is between the neighbourhood residents and the municipality. They are said to be "chosen by the people" but further than this there is no official selection process. One *kalantar* said:

> "I was chosen to be *kalantar* by two *gozars* because of my good attitude and manners. I didn't go to their houses and ask them to choose me as the *kalantar*. The people came to me and asked me to be the *kalantar*."

But while the *kalantars* view themselves as representatives, the process by which they are selected was not clear to the people. Respondents said rather that the *kalantar* was "introduced" to the community, and most of the men, save the elders, appeared to have very little say in choosing or removing the *kalantar*.[42] The researchers only came across one story of a *kalantar* being removed.

The same rhetoric on leadership was articulated by most of the respondents who had some role in representing the people. However, there was little evidence that this ideal was reflected in reality, and apparently the selection of leaders has little to do with the determination of women and other marginalised groups in the neighbourhoods.

Neither women nor men were happy with the role of the *kalantars*. They felt that they have distributed aid unfairly, ignoring the needs of the poorest and distributing aid first to their own families.[43] This was a perspective that was expressed widely, and included the *arbab*s who lived in each neighbourhood prior to the late 1980s and were also seen as corrupt and dishonest. The *kalantars'* role as decision makers, along with the elders of the community, was not disputed by the study participants, but they were not seen to be helping to solve the problems of the community.

The following is an example of some of the tensions that exist between *kalantars* and elders: the researchers were told by one of the elders of the *gozar* that the *kalantar* was useless to talk to because "he is not a very good person. He has a bad character, and also he doesn't know how to talk." At this point, the *kalantar* walked in and in front of him, the elder said "he is like a brother and a cousin and the people love him." While the *kalantar* is not a trusted individual, he enjoys a

[41] The researchers visited the Blue Mosque on three consecutive Wednesdays, known as "women's day." This is primarily a social gathering, however, with an amazing display of women coming from surrounding districts and villages in their finest clothing. Many of them spend the entire day there, picnicking and chatting in its perimeters and praying in the mosque itself. Few of the women from the *gozars* looked at in this study visited the mosque regularly.

[42] Interview with Islammudin Amaki, Mazar-e Sharif, 6 April 2004.

[43] Recent research by AREU provides evidence of the levels of corruption and lack of trust in both the *kalantars* of Mazar, and the mayor in particular, Beall, J. and Esser, D., *Urban Governance, Management and Vulnerability* (Draft). Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: Kabul. December 2004. The paper provides an example of a respondent from District 7 who notes an example of a *kalantar* going to the mayor with their local problems, but was dissatisfied by the lack of accountability of the *kalantar* to the mayor and the mayor to the central government, because of a feeling that the central government is itself not present.

certain level of power and authority, relative to most neighbourhood residents, but does not provide services to the community. One reason for the lack of change of leadership is a reluctance to contribute to the conflict that results from altering existing power dynamics, and there appeared to be no interest in trying to remove him.

There is also tension between the other institution mentioned by the respondents, the CFDO, and the *kalantars,* elders and municipality. As greater amounts of aid flow through the CFDO and other NGOs as opposed to the municipality, their power and authority may decrease with the rise of more inclusive and participatory community institutions. This is the hope of the CFDO, which attempts to provide new opportunities for women and other marginalised groups to take on new roles and participate in community life and development initiatives.

The CFDO and Representatives

The CFDO aims to "empower communities to plan, manage, finance and monitor their development projects" and "provide a mechanism through which the spirit of the community can be harnessed in order to carry out productive endeavours such as education, income generation activities, social services provision, and local governance strengthening. This approach involves the community at every level and is much more interactive and dynamic than the out-dated social intervention models still in wide use today." It is envisioned that the project will lay the foundation for long-term local governance and will rebuild social capital and leadership within districts, villages and neighbourhoods of Afghanistan.[44]

These Community Fora were developed at a time when formal governance structures did not function at all and when the Taliban took control over Mazar in 1998. They have been extremely influential over the way community development initiatives have been carried out in Mazar, and increasingly, throughout the country. Prior to the Taliban take over of Mazar, the programmes of the CFPO had been largely run by women. In part because of its relative longevity through periods of serious instability and in part because of its unprecedented involvement of women, the programme has been heralded as a success and expanded in urban areas and throughout the country as a whole through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). The first women the researchers were introduced to had been involved with early Fora initiatives.

With the expansion of the Community Fora in Mazar, the institutional structure has been formalised in order to increase the participation of neighbourhood residents in the Fora. There are increasing numbers of neighbourhood councils functioning in addition to district councils, which allows for neighbourhood level representation to the district committees. Every *gozar* has one representative (*nomayenda umume)* and every street has a leader — with 14 female representatives and 14 male representatives in District 7.[45] Each male and female representative is charged with holding regular meetings with their respective constituencies, and then meeting together at the neighbourhood level to share the interests and needs of their constituencies and strategise about ways to address these. There is a perception that the selection of representatives for the Fora is more transparent than that of the traditional leadership of the *kalantars* and the elders:

> "The *nomayenda umume* is elected by the people in the mosque. They chose him because he is well educated and talks very well. He can speak with all kinds of

[44] Amaki, Islammudin. Unpublished paper on the CFDO.
[45] Ibid.

> people in the government. The *kalantar* was not educated and he cannot talk very well. He is a rich man and does animal husbandry. Everybody knows him, but we do not know what he does."

This strategy theoretically provides a rare opportunity for women to exercise leadership; to participate in legitimate social activities; and to have a more equal role with men in terms of community management.[46] The fact that women representatives exist at all is an achievement of the Afghan led CFDO. However, challenges to their leadership and coordination with male representatives exist that are only partly related to the formal structure of the institution.

Both the male and female CFDO representatives have difficulty finding ways to make progress on the overall goals of the project. The demands of the people often exceed the resources available to meet those needs, making it challenging to gain and keep people's trust and get them to participate. Though both men and women were aware that aid is channelled through "the institution" no respondents reported being involved in defining the needs of their *gozar,* deciding which projects to engage in, benefiting from those decisions or knowing where the aid had gone. Different rumours, spread by both poor people with little or no access to power as well as *kalantars,* were heard about aid that had been distributed through the CFDO for distribution to the poor, but had ended up in the marketplace instead. This is likely due to communication problems between the CFDO leadership, the neighbourhood representatives and the local people, but is a matter of concern in terms of gaining trust and getting people to participate in efforts they feel will be beneficial to themselves, their families and the neighbourhood as a whole.

The informal leadership displayed by women both now and during the Taliban era is significant and the implications and perceptions of these forms of leadership need to be better understood. Some of the women who participated in these early Fora forged important links between their neighbourhoods and the external agents who were providing aid, and this legacy seems to have lived on into the post-Taliban period. This form of leadership appears to be generally respected, and in fact mirrors the language that is used by the *kalantars* we spoke with in terms of their functions. These women in some cases meet the definition of good leadership that was offered by many of the participants — most of whom did not distinguish between male and female leaders. Many of the women who had leadership roles in the forums now work for NGOs or the government, and remain engaged in community life. These women, however, were exceptional cases and there did not appear to be a general increase in participation of other neighbourhood women in defining priorities and taking action to resolve problems.

One problem is that there appeared to be very little regular communication between the female and male representatives and the women and men they represent. In addition, the representatives rarely seemed to meet each other, even though two of them lived next door to one another. Neither of the female representatives participating could name anything specific that they had met about recently. Both complained about a lack of support for implementing projects, and were reluctant to bring women together to meet when there were no resources or jobs to distribute. This is a problem for the CFDO, but also shows a need for more skills-building among representatives in mobilising their constituencies to come up with alternative solutions to solving their own problems. The needs and priorities

[46] Moser, C. *Gender, Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. Routledge: New York and London. 1993.

of the women and men are to some extent straight forward, as the previous discussion on community issues illustrates, but also show limited capacity to develop their own methods to achieve those goals beyond the usual courses and activities provided by NGOs.

Despite the official organisational bent towards participatory and process oriented social and economic development, Jamila, the neighbourhood community representative, explained that she makes decisions about new projects that should be taken up for the women on the basis of her knowledge of the community, but not necessarily on consultation.

There are significant challenges to the authority of women representatives, and other women who work on behalf of their communities. It is important that women, as well as male representatives, are enabled to deliver tangible benefits for their communities otherwise they lose face and will "become a shame" for their families. This is an important factor to consider in development initiatives, given the emphasis on women's participation for their own empowerment.

The sustainability of these initiatives in the post-Taliban era and their ability to deliver aid and longer term programmes in an inclusive manner will influence how projects such as the CFDO are perceived by the community. The ways in which the Fora work with the municipality may also be an issue as the government builds its own capacity for local governance.

Even in the post-Taliban period, there has been very little overlap between the municipality and the CFDO. The *kalantars* working for the municipality and the representatives (*nomayenda*) who serve at the neighbourhood level generally do not meet. They are effectively a parallel structure to the municipality.[47] The Fora are engaged in physical and economic development activities, which are issues the municipality should in theory now be addressing. The distinguishing factor of the CFDO's work, however, is their vision of development and the attempt to accomplish it through the mobilisation of communities. The vision of development for the CFDO includes women's empowerment, not simply income generation. It is the process of transforming the institutional values into structures and processes that support this implementation that will make the difference.

Box 8: Challenges for Women's Roles in Community Mobilisation

Seema, an NGO worker who had also been a representative through the Community Fora during the Taliban relayed a story about the shame she felt when she tried to start a project for women and its unsuccessful results:

"I rented a house and brought together around 50 women and set up a room for carpet weaving and suggested that the widows come and work. I was providing the raw material. There was an agency called ASAM. They told me that they were going to assist me. Then I established a carpet weaving shop and a sewing shop. In total there were 3 shops and around 150 poor and helpless widows came together. I went to ASAM and told them that I had established an association and it was almost 6 months that these poor widows were coming to work and asked 'Why haven't you assisted us yet?' I had to pay the electricity bills. Some people came and visited the location, but said that they were unable to help us, as no foreign agency had helped them neither. I had to endure the loss of electricity payment. I lost face in the community and had to keep a low profile for a month. Then in private I apologized to each one and explained the outcome of the false expectations."

[47] Interview with Islammudin Amaki, 6 April 2004. The research team visited the district governor, but were not provided any information on this issue.

Decisions and "non-decisions," informal influence, power and participation

Social issues

> "In the past we had a *jirga*. If there was a dispute, the *kalantar* and some elders from the community sat together in the mosque to see who has done a criminal act and decide how he should be punished. We also have the *jirga* now but no one respects it." *Mohammad Hussein*

Several of the participants in the study, particularly those from elite families, described detailed community processes for handling social issues, ranging from wedding and funeral arrangements to resolving disputes. The above quote from an elder illustrates that changes to the traditional system have occurred, although likely with an improved vision of the past.

For both women and men in some areas of Afghanistan the attendance of weddings and other social functions of neighbours and relatives is a serious social obligation. But in many cases, the poorer women the researchers spoke to felt that it can be shameful for them to participate in weddings. One poor middle-aged woman said:

> "If the poor people get married, they have no value because they don't have the proper dress and no one respects them. Yesterday I went to a wedding and saw my neighbours, and no one gave me any respect and no one talked to me, because I am poor. There have been two other weddings in the *gozar,* but no one invited me."

Another relayed:

> "I don't visit anybody and I am not keen to go anywhere. There was a wedding a week ago, and my husband wanted me to go, but I didn't. I don't want to go to weddings or other places unless we become better off."[48]

In rural areas, where many of the participants originally came from, organising social events — i.e., weddings, funerals, birthing ceremonies and religious ceremonies — were generally considered community affairs. There is less exclusion of poorer[49] people from such events in rural areas, whereas it was felt in Mazar that only wealthy people are able to have such affairs and do not invite their poorer neighbours. These events can provide women with opportunities to display their own talents, through participation in preparations for such events. This includes the possibility of taking on leadership roles in terms of decision making on who should bring what, who should contribute what and who should prepare what for a ceremony. These opportunities are more limited for women who are not invited to participate at all.

Participation in the social life of a community, in accordance with social and gender norms, and the resulting exposure it gives women and men to others, can be an important way to gain or maintain status. But there was very little opportunity for either women or men in the *gozars* to participate in community level activities simply for social purposes. This translates into limited opportunities

[48] This statement was made during a focus group exchange among three young married women, who were 16, 22 and 20. The exchange between the three displayed efforts to portray themselves as ideal women who did not quarrel with their husbands, who loved their husbands and whose husbands loved them. This young woman betrayed herself with this quote, and quickly noted that she doesn't want to attend weddings because she does not want her husband to be lonely when he comes home. Nevertheless, the logic of not attending weddings because of lack of proper clothing was a common sentiment among older women as well.

[49] See Wakefield, S., *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a Case Study in Panjao.* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: Kabul. November 2004.

for women to gain status, including not only poor women, but also those who are isolated due to *purdah* norms or the fulfilment of their household obligations.

There was a feeling among several of the study participants that due to the experiences abroad of many returnees and the exposure they have had to other practices, weddings have become larger and more expensive affairs.

Developmental issues

There are many NGOs working on development issues in Mazar, most of them working in some manner through the Community Fora. On neighbourhood level issues focused on development, the *kalantars,* with the elders, make decisions. The males from the community are said to participate. It was never communicated that the women participate in community level discussions or decision making.

None of the uneducated women knew what the community level issues were, saying "my husband never tells me." The women who expressed some knowledge of community level issues were educated women who had jobs and participated in the Community Fora. They expressed the need for more jobs, while those few uneducated women who expressed their opinions spoke of the need for clinics and schools.

While men participate in community discussions with traditional leaders and the CFDO, women only participate (at least in terms of their presence) in the Community Fora. Currently, women are said to represent 70% of the participants in the CFDO system, and are represented at all levels of leadership in its structure, though their level of active participation varies. Among those women who were involved with the CFDO, there was a certain amount of pride in being able to help their communities.

> "In our meetings we need people — we don't consider whether he is an *arbab*, poor, rich, man, woman, old or young." - *Female representative in District 10 community forum*

According to the CFDO Director, the three types of women who participate in the CFDO include 1) poor women who come to earn some income, 2) educated and wealthy women who want to help their communities, and 3) women who are from political families who want to spread a political agenda.[50] Political activities are not allowed through the CFDO. But as relayed by one female representative, many of the poorer women have become disillusioned with attending meetings because their needs are not met. They are often busy with housework as well as trying to find work outside of the home, and assign very little value given to the social aspects of the Fora, as discussed below. This is a barrier to their participation, because unless they are seen to be contributing to the household well being, their participation is usually restricted.

The structure of the Fora intends to encourage the participation of all kinds of people in the community through the holding of regular meetings. These are for the people to discuss problems and make suggestions about ways they can improve their lives. The board members then schedule another meeting to discuss these

[50] Interview with Islammudin Amaki, 6 April 2004, at UN Habitat office. The reference to "political" families means those who are associated with different factions rather than being politically active in the more traditional sense of the word. Because of the history of armed factions calling themselves political parties, with no benefit for the people, the term has generally had negative connotations in the Afghan context. The attempt to separate community development activities from political activities has also been an approach of the NSP, based on the Community Forum concept and approach.

suggestions. As stated earlier, in a separate meeting, the neighbourhood representatives make decisions on these suggestions themselves.

There is a gap between the rhetoric of opportunities for women in communities now and the actual improvement in the situation of women. It was common for the researchers to hear things like:

> "I do not know the issues of the community because my husband never shares this kind of information with me in the house. I am not interested to know about the community anyway."

In this case the husband does not participate in community life either, because he thinks it is a waste of time. They have not seen any benefit to participating for themselves or among their neighbours. This is a common expression among women who have very limited opportunity to participate, even if they did want to participate, including women who were not educated at all, and who had limited mobility.

Farahnaz, a 37-year-old Tajik woman with 11 children, told us that both she and her husband are uneducated and that:

> "I don't know about the *gozar's* problems and I have no interest in knowing about the *gozar's* issues. When you have money you will have everything in your life." And then, "All the people…only think about their own problems, not the other people in the *gozar.*"

This is likely related to the harsh years of war and in part an expression of hope that things will get better. We were told that women are now able to state their needs and priorities in Community Fora in a way that they could not in the past. There do appear to be greater opportunities, where girls can voice their desire to go to school and women can discuss their needs for jobs. But while these ideas are finally being expressed in a more public setting, which in the long run may lead to greater progress on these issues, the politics of the private sphere still dictate whether these are able to become a reality.

There is considered to be a link between levels of education "enlightenment" among both women and men and the freedom they have to participate in community development activities, at least among those who are educated. In response to a question about whether women participated in community decision making, neighbourhood representative Zuhal said:

> "Afghani women do not have any role in society. They are not educated and the men are also uneducated, so they don't want to give any authority to their women and then they can't do anything for their community…"

Women's participation in public life, particularly in activities related to development, is partly constrained by freedom of movement, as decided by their families, or in a few cases, how much they can take for themselves. This is linked to their workload: as noted above, many do not have access to any assistance with their housework, which is in and of itself be a form of control exercised by heads of household and often regulated by other women.

Women were able to participate in projects such as the WFP bakery project, which while conceived as a humanitarian project, provided some physical assets to the women and their families in addition to having a simultaneous social function as

has been widely documented elsewhere. Another example of how women's participation in public life can be acceptable, provided it has practical benefits for their families or increases their status among their neighbours, is seen with Seema:

> "At the community level, people have some understanding between each other and they talk about social and cultural issues….On cultural issues they talk about education, for example people say that we should give education to our children, both boys and girls, in order to give the society well known and well mannered people."

The next section further outlines the role social networks play in supporting women's participation in community life and decision making.

Section V: Themes in Gender and Local Level Decision Making

Social networks and support

As discussed earlier, overlapping layers of solidarity exist in any area and in order to understand the different experiences of community among different social groups and individuals, it is important to understand where the sources of solidarity lie. For this reason, some researchers believe that it is more relevant to look at social networks[51] rather than community per se. It is fair to say that within each of the *gozars* in this study, the social networks of the participants had been affected by war and displacement and this has different effects on men and women and the relations between them. The seemingly low levels of trust and reciprocity among neighbours, the distance of women and men from their natal homes, along with the *purdah* norms placed on women, meant that women's networks were especially small. Several of the men were unable to draw on the support of their brothers, and widows felt they had not been taken care of by their husband's brothers and were rejected by their own families.

This study did not attempt to gain more than a rudimentary grasp of the social networks of the participants, but it did enhance the researchers' understanding of the people's experiences of community, and their resulting access to and participation in decision making.

The researchers found it was very easy for a few of the women to make introductions to their neighbours: two were CFDO representatives and described themselves as having freedom of mobility; another saw herself as a very sociable person who was able to make friends regardless of where their family moved and appeared proud to make such introductions. Their networks may have in been in some way related to those of their husbands, but it was their own knowledge of their neighbours that these women highlighted as the basis of their acquaintances. But these were exceptional cases, and most of the female participants did not know or visit their neighbours unless they were related. This was also true for the men. However, many discussions of women's relationships outside their own households were generally quite a sensitive topic of discussion.

As discussed earlier in this paper, there were divisions in perceptions of inclusion and exclusion based on wealth, as well as gender, which may have prevented a shared sense of community among neighbours in the *gozars*. The few opportunities that poorer and uneducated women openly discussed for building their own extra-family social networks were related to assistance programmes. Again, this is likely partly due to the outsider status of the research team who were at times mistaken for representatives of an aid organisation. This included reference to the WFP bakery and pasta making projects, popular among women who had participated in them. This was both because of the assistance it enabled them to bring to their families, and because of the opportunity it provided to get out of the house and meet other women. One woman looked back fondly on her experience and her regular walks with four other neighbourhood women to and from the factory. They had developed a friendship during this time, and she said that they were still friends. But since the Taliban left and the project ended, nothing has come to replace it and they have not actually seen each other since. Their bond had been

[51] According to Robert Putnam, who has written extensively on social networks, the most important sense of belonging is related to our networks of family and friends. In addition to this are the connections made through work, religious institutions, neighbourhoods, civic life and other "weak ties". Putnam, R. Op cit, 274.

allowed when there was a purposeful situation surrounding its development, but once this had disappeared, there was no acceptable reason for them to meet.

Many of the women expressed isolation even from their own families, and widows in particular expressed frustration that their families did not help them more during the war years and since. One female head of household said:

> "Foreigners are better than our relatives and our people, because some aid comes from different organisations, like WFP who distributed the bread cards. But my neighbours never help me. When my husband died, even my own relatives did not come to help me."

Another widow provided an example where her female relative tried to prevent her own husband from assisting her:

> "When my husband died, every week, one of my relative's husband came and gave me some meat. One day his wife came to me and said 'your husband died and now my husband is helping you and you are a burden to us.' After that, every evening I put water in a pot and put it on the stove. When her husband came to give us some meat, I showed him the pot and said 'look I have meat in my pot.' I bought dried bread with tea for my children. I will never forget this until I die. She was my relative, her husband was a stranger for me, but she did not want her husband to help me."[52]

Poorer women expressed their frustration with their plight, and were aware of the difference between their own lives and those of the wealthier women in their neighbourhoods. A focus group of female headed households was asked about spaces where they meet other women, and what they talk about. One woman responded that at weddings:

> "There is nothing to talk about. Only those with new clothes go to a wedding and those without new clothes do not. My only hope is to have money and jewellery like those rich people. The rich are dressed in fancy clothes and the poor only can watch. I went to a few weddings, and when I saw that all others are in beautiful dresses and have jewellery, I decided not to go any more."

Further describing the rift between the rich and the poor, and describing the lack of access of the latter to decision making, one woman said, "They [*kalantar* and *nomayenda* from CFDO] never come to ask anything of us, because we are poor. If we were rich, they would come and talk to us."

This notion of broken social networks is not limited to women, who have always had more limited social networks than men who enjoy greater mobility and opportunity to expand their networks beyond family members. One older man remembered a time when neighbours met more frequently, and the downsizing of his own social network to one old and trusted friend who he meets on a regular basis:

> "We had late night meetings with friends during the Kingdom of Zahir Shah, then I got married during Daoud Khan's government. I stopped those late night meetings. Now we cannot go to see our friends late at night because the security is not good and if we come home late there are thieves everywhere along the way."

[52] This is, at the same time, an example of the indirect ways women may sometimes achieve their own motives without actual confrontation with their husbands.

The links between social networks and freedom of movement (discussed below) are also relevant for men, who remain concerned about security, and are under the control of their own parents and/or elder siblings until they either move into their own compounds or their elders are deceased. While new opportunities may be emerging for both men and women, there is a need to take into account the existing barriers and opportunities for supporting the emergence of new social ties, or strengthening those that already exist, by understanding existing social networks, bases of trust and solidarity. These cannot be manufactured, but should be better understood if women's participation in community life is to be encouraged. This should be viewed as part of a longer term development process that can build on the shorter term survival-oriented strategies that have been implemented in these neighbourhoods thus far.

Box 9: The Honour of Women's Work and Autonomy of Mobility

Seema's work with other women in the community, and her assistance to her neighbours during the Taliban was seen as a source of pride by her husband, yet was controlled by her husband where it was seen to be useless. He said:

"She has always worked with the people and has created jobs for the people through establishing pasta and blanket making factories. She has provided women with bread permits and has helped the poor….she has made me proud by abiding to the regulations of her agency. She has a kind of moral courage and can do something for herself….During the Taliban they harassed us and asked why my spouse was working. But she would courageously argue with them saying that if she was not supposed to work, were they going to feed our family? She would argue that the women and society would only benefit from her work."

Later in the same conversation, however, he said he did not allow her to participate in the Loya Jirga because he felt that she would not win nomination and that her participation in the process was unnecessary. This was related to the embarrassment this might cause to their family.

Being "free" to move

In most parts of Afghanistan, women's freedom of mobility and any resulting public exposure is limited to a considerable extent by local *purdah* norms. [53] This varies between and among ethnic groups, regions, lineages and even neighbourhoods and villages. In the *gozars* focused on in this study, different women had different levels of mobility — i.e. the ability to determine for themselves who they could see, when they could see them and why.

One of the reasons consistently offered by men for limiting their wives' mobility was that household responsibilities are most important and that unless these are taken care of, they should not be allowed to go outside. This emerged as both a matter of practical concern, as well as a rhetorical one seemingly linked more to cultural values than to practical household needs. This can be seen in the resistance of men to assist — or to discuss assisting — their wives with household work. Elder women in the household too have a great deal of authority and control over younger women in the household. As elsewhere, mothers-in-law had a great deal of influence on the level of mobility among younger women in their households, including daughters-in-law. Older women have the authority to constrain or support younger women's participation in activities outside of the home, including paid work. These time constraints and *purdah* norms prevent women from being able to get to know their neighbours and develop the kind of

[53] See Boesen, Inger W., op cit. and Hafizullah, E. *Politics of Development and Women in Afghanistan*. Royal Book Company: Karachi, Pakistan. 2002.

social networks discussed above. Such networks would help women to participate in events outside the household, and develop the trust and solidarity that is needed for mobilisation around developmental issues. This is a serious concern, as these reasons are also given as justification why girls cannot attend school. This will have long-term implications in terms of their participation and capacity in decision making as adults (see section below on gendered knowledge).

Interestingly, the desire of many younger married couples to live separately from their parents has contradictory effects on the mobility of women. For instance, it may allow more progressive husbands to give more freedom to their wives without the judgement of his family. On the other hand, it may limit the availability of assistance women have with household chores and prevent them from going out if there is limited availability of labour to help carry out work.

Even where women are already challenging gender norms and acceptable public behaviour, such as working outside of the home and working with men, their freedom to participate in activities beyond the home is linked to necessity or an assessment that their activities outside of the home benefit the community and their own family, and will not bring shame on their families.

Gendered knowledge

A common expression that has emerged in each of the field studies in this Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project is the idea that women are "without knowledge." This is a phrase that is also used for people without full mental capacities, and is concerning as a description of women because of the implications it has for whether women are considered fit for participation in household and community life, decision making and leadership. In Mazar, as elsewhere, this was an expression used by men to describe women, but also by women to describe themselves.

The difference in the *gozars* in Mazar, versus in the rural field studies, was that this description was more linked to lack of literacy and formal education. This was illustrated by a man who had one rural and one urban wife: "I never ask opinions from my wife because she is rural and doesn't know anything." She has also borne no children, which weakens her position in the household and the level of knowledge and experience that she, as a woman, is perceived to have.

This is related to the greater opportunities for girls' formal education and training opportunities in urban as compared to rural locations as well as the exposure that many people have had to more educated and professional women, some of whose assistance they have benefited from as discussed earlier in this paper. Nevertheless, in addition to *purdah* norms and more general gender norms, the assumption that women do not have knowledge and therefore are unfit to participate is common. Unfortunately there are often barriers to women's participation in adult education efforts as Zuhal, the CFDO representative, relayed:

> "One year ago, I wanted to establish a literacy course in the *gozar*. I went to my neighbours, two or three houses down, and I asked them if they agree for the women to come to the class. They told me that they had to ask their husbands. Then their husbands came. When they came to me their husbands said, 'It is not necessary for women to learn. Women should stay at home and do the housework.' They told me 'go away.'"

There were men who believed that women should be able to participate, usually those who are educated themselves and come from open minded and/or educated

families. However, this open mindedness seemed to come most often with an assumption that women need to have a formal education. This means that other forms of knowledge that women may have, that may also be harnessed to produce greater benefit for them, their families and their communities, are discounted. While many aid programmes are already geared towards traditionally accepted areas of women's responsibility, health and sanitation, these may also include other unexplored non-traditional areas. By contrast, men's lack of formal education was generally not given to the researchers as a reason for not participating in decision making or holding leadership positions. Nevertheless, the uneducated poorer men seemed to be at a double disadvantage in terms of participation in community life. The traditional leadership of the elders and the wealthier individuals in the *gozars* excludes younger men with fewer social ties from community level decision making. When men are excluded in this way they are unlikely to place value on the participation of their wives. This was illustrated by an uneducated woman who migrated from Tashgurghan (about ½ hour outside of Mazar) when she married her husband, who was 13 years older than she and also uneducated: "I never go to 'the institution' [CFDO] in the *gozar*. My husband does not want me to go to this kind of place, because he is uneducated."

The limits placed on women's participation in community life resulting from their perceived lack of knowledge, is therefore also likely correlated to the lack of education of their male relatives.

Furthermore, education, as opposed to knowledge, was a concern of many of the households, indicating one of the few explicit linkages people made between their own household level concerns and community level issues. Everyone mentioned education as an important asset, though there was more resistance to educating poorer children, for whom some perceived education to be useless because of the barriers put in place by a system that advantages richer children, and certainly for girls. But in some cases, the value of education was seen to have longer term effects for the whole community, as relayed by the husband of an NGO worker:

> "At the community level, people have some understanding between each other and they talk about social and cultural issues….On cultural issues they talk about education, for example people say that we should give education to our children, both boys and girls, in order to give the society well known and well mannered people."

This is a finding that would benefit from a much more in-depth investigation, considering the potential impact different perceptions of knowledge and the gendered nature of these perceptions may have on efforts to increase the participation of women, as well as some men, in community development efforts.[54]

External agents

In the context of this study, external agents range from the current and past governments and their representatives, to NGOs, and other actors such as this research team. The presence of external agents may have both positive and negative effects for the participation of women and other marginalised groups in community life and decision making. The role of external agents such as NGOs was both criticised (by *kalantars* frustrated with the re-channelling of aid through these

[54] Inger Bosen's recent report for AREU on the NSP found that in most of the Community Development Council's (CDCs) studied, women needed education to participate in community cooperation with men. Further the excuse that "women are not interested because they are illiterate" was offered by a large number of male CDCs, even where most of them were themselves illiterate. Boesen, I. *From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP)*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit: Kabul. August 2004.

organisations as opposed to them) as well as praised for helping with *gozars*' needs and interests.[55]

Mazar is, in a sense, a city made up of external agents and influences that come together at the *gozar* level. The shifting social dynamics of a population made up largely of migrants impact on the sense of community, trust and reciprocity, which has implications for gender relations. The influence of NGOs and other external agents has in some cases strengthened these dynamics, but in some cases may also weaken them. There is a perception that the old institutions are corrupt and inequitable, and this perception is due to people's direct experience of them as well as the emerging critiques evolving out of newer institutions that seek to replace them. Thus far, however, these newer structures have not replaced the existing power structures, rather they may be building on top of them, a dynamic that has gender implications with respect to participation in the definition of local development agendas, and subsequent access to benefits. While the newer institutions are attempting to create space for women and other marginalised groups to participate in the determination of what constitute "community" priorities and to act to address them, the household is the most significant institution for determining whether women will be able to access them and the scope and terms of their participation. Further, while *kalantars* and elders in these *gozars* are not trusted, and are not perceived to be helping to solve their problems they retain some amount of power and authority over decision making that affects the lives of the men and women living there.

Indeed "any newly-created space quickly comes to be filled with expectations, relationships, institutions and meanings that have been brought from elsewhere, and which impinge on how that space comes to be experienced."[56] The development of new institutions, and spaces intended to promote the participation of women can, however well intended, bring about new problems, hierarchies and even conflict — or simply reproduce the status quo.

[55] Beall and Esser discuss how "social networks and local level organizations are frequently embedded in asymmetrical social relationships. Often engagement with politics or government bureaucracy mean that existing hierarchies or inequalities simply get reinforced." As a result, barriers to the organization of more vulnerable urban citizens persist, and many of the poor urban communities assign "a high value on external agents and it is in this role that intervention by donors and NGOs can be particularly useful." Beall, J. and Esser, D. op cit.

[56] Cornwall, A "Spaces for Transformation? Reflections on issues of power and difference in participation and development." In *Participation—From tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*. Hickey, S. and Mohan, G., eds. Zed Books: London. 2005.

Section VI: Conclusion and Recommendations

From the Household to Community - Public vs. Private Decisions

This paper has illustrated the ways in which household gender relations and decision making processes on issues of importance can be indicators of the ways in which women and men participate in decisions that affect their lives. The institutions of the household and the neighbourhood also determine which issues can become "decisionable." Just as women's and men's participation in the community is enabled, constrained and differentiated by their household roles, responsibilities and norms, so is their ability to determine neighbourhood level priorities and participate in development activities.

On the other hand, the neighbourhood level institutions and leadership also play an important role in constraining or promoting the participation of different women and men. As this study has shown, there are at least two streams of institutionalised leadership, informal and formal, within the *gozars* in this study. The traditional leadership of the elders and the *kalantars* appears to be influential, despite the fact that no one expressed trust in them or felt they were helping to solve the community's problems. The strengthening of the CFDO structure, as well as past involvement of the Community Fora under the facilitation of UNCHS-Habitat, has enabled the emergence of more educated and capable representatives. Yet the poorer women and men in the study did not feel that they had been consulted or that participation in "the institution" held any potential benefit for them. As a result of these and a range of other factors, the household issues expressed differed from what participants thought of as community issues, even though many of their interests were similar. This is a matter that may also be related to the seeming lack of trust, reciprocity and solidarity within these *gozars,* or at least a lack of understanding about where these lie. There needs to be greater understanding of these dynamics in order to identify both the bases of inclusion and exclusion that influence participation in neighbourhood institutions and decision making.

It is notable that the gender specific concerns of women were barely raised at the extra-household level, with the exception of those women whose situation or characteristics were not the norm: widows, educated women and women working outside of the home. The effects of war and migration on household composition and availability of labour have been important factors in the emergence of women's acquisition of education and participation in income generation. Many of them simply had no other choice, and as a result, previous gender roles and norms and in particular *purdah* norms, have been in a sense re-defined to accommodate the reality of their lives. The existing spaces for women's participation at the neighbourhood level may not be appropriate for encouraging their solidarity simply as women, considering the various levels of difference outlined here, undoubtedly along with many more that have been overlooked in this short term study.

As this paper has illustrated, gender roles are indeed not static. Like culture, they are constantly shifting to accommodate the reality of people's lives. This was made more evident by the dramatic circumstances of war, and as norms can change to provide more opportunities (and often, increased workloads) for women outside of the home, they can also quickly shift back. This was the case for many of the women in Mazar, who had worked outside of the home when their husbands could

not find work, were killed or had migrated but who are now again required to stay at home as a matter of pride for their families. Indeed, the cultural norm[57] that men find the means to provide for the physical well being of their families, while women ensure the well running of the household and the socialisation of young children, was strong among all of the households looked at in this study.

It was significant that while the war years were difficult for women and their families, they also provided opportunities for women to make new friends and expand their social networks. The fond remembrance of projects like the WFP bakery project, which some ascertain is related only to their interest in receiving aid, appeared to also be closely linked to the exposure this gave them to other women. There is a perception among these women that there are now fewer opportunities for women to gather together. Although the previous gatherings were primarily for productive reasons, they also had social benefits and provided an opportunity for women to expand their knowledge about the wider community.

It is notable in these cases, however, that the extent of women's participation at the neighbourhood level also remains constrained by their responsibilities for the running of the household. This is the case for men as well, but it appeared that even where married women contributed to, or were the primary source of household income, they were still expected to carry out household chores. Men's assistance appeared more as a function of their own "open mindedness" and willingness to help[58] rather than out of a particular need for more hands helping in the household. In this way, women's time was considered to be extremely flexible.[59]

Finally, it was clear in this study that while the more educated and wealthy individuals in these *gozars* were enthusiastic about the concepts behind the various community development efforts, there is a divide between these and the less educated and poorer households. In the latter households, many of the men had little information about neighbourhood level issues and were not participating in decision making beyond being present in the meeting. But participation is about more than having a seat at the table. As a function of their own exclusion, they generally did not see the purpose of allowing their wives or daughters to participate in such initiatives either. There is a need for increased participation among those who are supposed to eventually lead the efforts to strengthen their own communities and build their own processes for identifying priorities and deciding how to address them. In the long run, this should result in a broader vision of development that reflects the needs and interests of the variety of groups that make up the communities. In the short term, this will require building the right institutions and processes to ensure that having a seat at the table is a significant step towards the realisation of a shared vision of development that accounts for the differences within the neighbourhoods.

[57] Generally speaking this seemed to be common for all of the ethnic groups in this study and for those from rural as well as urban areas, but this was true to degrees as this author maintains generalisation is a dangerous matter in terms of gender studies in Afghanistan.

[58] As noted earlier in the paper, the independent living of families from their parents and in-laws may facilitate greater cooperation between husbands and their wives, as well as a greater blurring of gender roles. This is because it also provides men greater independence in the way that they run their own households. On the other hand, in cases where living with the in-laws is actually a source of support for wives, this may worsen their situation and available time to participate in economic or social activities outside of the home.

[59] Feminist economists (e.g., Diane Elson) have discussed extensively the ways in which women's labour is often considered to be "elastic" in economic terms, essentially meaning that in many cases their labour is in endless supply. Since much of women's work takes place in the household, it is also often assumed to be free labour, and as such when women engage in paid labour it is often on top of these original duties.

Recommendations

This is a small scale study, but each of the case studies in this project raise issues that may be of interest to stakeholders who are working in Mazar, other urban areas and possibly Afghanistan more widely. The findings from each case study will be synthesised into a briefing paper that will focus on strategic level recommendations. The recommendations given below are intended to be more specific to organisations working in Mazar.

- **Provide more support for community development initiatives that have explicit strategies for creating space for the participation of different categories of men and women.** This does not only mean encouraging the physical presence of women and men in community meetings, a poor indicator of real participation, but ensuring that they are able to analyse issues, voice priorities and influence decision making processes that affect their lives.

- **Create more opportunities for uneducated and poor men and women to participate and exercise leadership in community level priority setting and project implementation.** This could include training of interested persons in the community, but also needs to include substantial efforts at creating an enabling environment for them to participate. Considering the evidence that women's household responsibilities do not usually decrease when they engage in economic or social activities outside the home, this should be considered a priority in project planning.

- **Ensure that it is understood who is intended to and who is actually benefiting from community development efforts.** In turn, ensure that women and men, especially the poorest, are defining their own needs and interests and benefiting from any efforts to promote them. Their interests cannot be simply understood or assumed, even by other members of their same "community."

- **Further strengthen the process for the selection of community representatives, and the monitoring of their activities, in order that they are made more transparent**. While the more educated members of the community may be respected and have knowledge that will help them to be good communicators, their abilities to represent and advocate the needs and interests of the poorest and uneducated are not guaranteed.

- **Strengthen the processes of communication and clarify lines of authority between male and female representatives**. It is not necessary for men and women to meet together, as this is often considered inappropriate (even if tolerated), but it is necessary that the needs and interests of each group are communicated to the other and that strategies are developed that incorporate the views of both sides.

- **Draw upon tools and resources that enable staff to better assess household gender relations and dynamics, and the impact these have for individuals in different kinds of households on participation in community decision making processes**. This would include analysis of the use of men's and women's time, to better ensure that the ways in which

both their participation is enabled, constrained and differentiated are taken into account.

- **Ensure power dynamics of local institutions are taken into consideration in project planning**. In Mazar the influence of the elders and the *kalantars,* while perhaps diminished during the years of war, still appears strong and these structures continue to exist alongside the newer institutions. These power structures are not necessarily supportive of changes to the status quo, and may prevent newer leaders and participation methods from emerging, particularly where it is seen to decrease or threaten their own power base.

- **Provide opportunities for women to gain practical knowledge.** Opportunities for women to advance their practical knowledge, and be seen to be contributing to the welfare of their households, other households and the community at large should be developed. This will require consideration of opportunities beyond embroidery, tailoring and carpet weaving, which are not necessarily sustainable or contribute to women's empowerment and status. These efforts should be paired with encouraging and increasing their skills in community participation.

- **Develop strategies to enable communities to manage conflict that may arise from intended social change and transformation efforts.** Development strategies to address inequities in access to resources, activities, opportunities and constraints between men and women in particular should recognise that conflict is an inevitable component of social transformation, and steps should be taken to enable communities to manage these conflicts amongst themselves. This includes both transformations of gender roles, responsibilities and norms as well as of community institutions and power dynamics.

Appendix I: Conceptual Background

A gender analysis enables a better understanding of the relationships that determine roles, responsibilities and rights in decision making that affect the lives of communities, families and the individuals living within them. It aims to increase understanding of the relationships between men and women, their access to resources, their activities and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other.

The operating definition of community used in this research is "a group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact with each other on a sustained basis, with organizations, networks, village institutions and inter-household associations that make up local civil society."[60] The focus of much of the development effort in Afghanistan today is on strengthening communities' ability to prioritise, plan and finance their own development in a participatory way. This is happening principally through the government's National Solidarity Programme,[61] as well as similar but smaller scale efforts by other aid organisations.

In Afghanistan, the focus on assistance to communities is enabling some innovative and visionary projects to emerge. For the first time all over the country, women, young people and other traditionally marginalised groups are being included in forums to determine their own development priorities. Many of these communities are participating to access resources, but also because of their impatience with the current inequitable status quo. However, the term "community" can be misleading in the way that it provides "an image of an undifferentiated and co-operative social group"[62] which may not be reflective of the complicated nature of the communities that are being worked with.

Another notion that helps us to understand gender relations, roles and responsibilities, is local concepts of rights to participate. These are not abstract rights, defined in a global setting, but rather rights as defined and understood by communities and the individuals within them. Applying a gender perspective to participation in community life, and accessing the processes of community decision making through the community development programmes of facilitating partners has been helpful. In general, looking at community development from a gender perspective can highlight the deficiencies in methods which are intended to encourage the participation of women and other groups who are often marginalised from the planning and implementation of projects. In practice, the needs and priorities of women and marginalised groups within a "community" can remain invisible, without a clear track for addressing overt or underlying power structures and dynamics: the needs and priorities of the community are often determined by those with the power and authority to define the scope and terms. In rural settings, this was much easier to identify than in urban settings, where communities have been more fractured and are less easily defined by physical location.

[60] Kabeer, N. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. Verso: New York. 1994.
[61] The NSP Operations Manual (Draft 2003) uses a technical and geographic definition for the rural community: "a village of not more than 50 families." Further it states that "a Development Council will be established for each community. Development Councils can not be established for sub sets of an existing village (e.g. a village cannot be split into its constituent political or ethnic/qwam subdivisions."
[62] Guijt, I. "Gender and Participation." *Development and Gender In Brief*. BRIDGE, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. 2001. Issue 9.

Some of the basic assumptions of this research are:

- In order for community development initiatives to succeed, the participation of women is necessary. This will require some degree of social change in communities.

- With any social change comes conflict. Development actors must be aware of this and have strategies for facilitating communities' management of that conflict.

- In order to improve community participation, and ensure the equitable involvement of all members of the community, a commitment to understanding the variety of gender relations in Afghanistan and addressing social inequities within communities is necessary.

Appendix II: Challenges and Caveats

While the research team assumed they would be able to visit field sites in several urban and rural communities, the choice of research locations was in fact severely limited by security constraints. In part because of the length of time spent in each community, about three weeks, the team was sadly unable to do research in any parts of southern Afghanistan. The team was advised that the more time they spent in each location, the greater the security risks would be. The researchers intended to conduct research in urban Herat, but was twice constrained by security problems in the area, and decided to work in Kabul instead. Initially the team planned to undertake research in Jalalabad and rural Nangarhar, but the security situation dictated that the team go north to Mazar and Samangan instead.

Travel restrictions were also a factor. As the team was working with NGOs, it was necessary that they follow the security guidelines of the partner organisations. This meant generally being required to finish work by early evening, limiting the researchers' ability to observe interactions between men and women in the household and participate in evening events. In both rural and urban areas, the research team spent a lot of time in the car, travelling to and from the field sites since they were not able to stay in the communities themselves.

Except in Kabul the research team worked in areas where their NGO partners were operational. Working with NGOs provided the team with background information on communities, introductions by entities known to the communities of study, association with credible and trusted organisations and access to up-to-date security information and guidelines. The researchers generally worked only in areas where the NGOs were comfortable for them to work. This meant that the selection of field sites was heavily influenced by the NGO partners, and their understanding of the purpose of our research.[63]

While this association with NGOs was extremely helpful, it also had many drawbacks: it was difficult sometimes for people to differentiate between the research team and the staff of the partner NGO, with people sometimes thinking that the research team intended to provide participants or their community with some aid. The researchers also found that local NGO staff at times felt that the team was there to evaluate projects, and as a result, hesitated to provide the team with information about the real challenges of their work, which would have enabled a broader reflection on lessons learned.

The team also had to deal with the fact that research is a fairly unfamiliar activity to most people in Afghanistan, and in most of the communities they worked in, people had no previous experience of it. Afghans were more familiar with outsiders being aid workers, soldiers or spies, than researchers. A lack of understanding of how aid is distributed hindered understanding of the purpose of the research team's work. The concept that the work was aimed at influencing policy and practice, rather than providing direct assistance, was difficult to explain. On a few occasions it was apparent that the community leadership did not fully trust the researchers. This had implications for the willingness of community members to trust them, although they were still able to have good interactions with some of

[63] In one field site in the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project, an NGO was hesitant to have the team work in an area because they felt it was too conservative and would not provide us with good examples of female leadership and participation at the community level. They instead directed the researchers to a less conservative area. Over time the team were able to clarify that they were just as interested in the areas that they found it difficult to work in, as those where they had had some successes.

their members in these locations. The current security environment combined with regional and local experiences of foreigners and outsiders, contributes to this lack of trust. The team felt that over time people would have a better understanding of their purpose and would open up more. While this happened with a few key informants, others became suspicious of why the researchers were staying so long. The team attempted to manage this by always explaining their purpose at the beginning of each interview, sometimes avoiding writing notes until after the interview, meeting people in their homes, one on one if possible, and always trying to be as friendly and respectful as possible.

Another challenge was the language barrier. As the research coordinator had only a rudimentary understanding of Dari, in which most interviews were conducted, the translation abilities of the research staff were very important. This was a particularly strong concern in Hazarajat, where many women spoke only Uzbeki, and the only translator available was too closely linked to the local power structure to maintain objectivity/confidentiality. Working through translation is challenging when working with cultural and social information, rather than numbers and empirical details. Fortunately the research assistants who worked on this project were fluent in Dari and Pashtu, and the male assistant was also fluent in Hazaragi which proved extremely helpful for communication in the Hazarajat. However, one study was carried out in an Uzbek area, which was extremely challenging for both cultural and linguistic reasons, and required the hiring of a local female translator with little relevant experience and confidence to do the job. Most of the men in this region spoke Dari, which facilitated the discussions with men.

Overall, the most important factor was that the research assistants understood the purpose of the research and could engage with participants alone. Given the constraints, the research team grew together over the course of the project and built up its capacity to engage in similar work.

This research project can easily be built upon and several issues that would benefit from further study are highlighted in this paper. Ideally, further research on this topic would be carried out over a much longer timeframe, with researchers living in the communities if at all possible. This is an agenda for a later time, when the security situation is more stable, but is something to bear in mind for the longer term research agenda.

Appendix III: Selected Households and Their Concerns, Responsibilities and Decision Making

Household	Description	He said	She said
Gozar 1			
Abdul Jamil Pari Gul 4 daughters 4 sons	A middle-aged Uzbek couple. Abdul Jamil was educated to the 6th class and is originally from Dawlat Abad. She used to work in a factory supported by the aid community and made several friends but now rarely if ever meets them. He would allow her to work, but says there is no work right now.	"The less important decisions are made by my wife because I am at work, but the important decisions, such as who should go to school and who our children should marry are made with the opinions and suggestions of the household members. Without this I think a house cannot survive for a long time."	"My husband has no problem with me working, as he thinks both of us should work."
Yusuf Khan Halima 4 sons 2 daughters	A middle-aged Tajik couple. He is from Kapisa and works in the office of the police. She has a co-wife but she lives in Kabul.	"I am the oldest son of my father and I don't need anyone's opinion – I can solve all my problems. I make all the decisions with my wife and tell the negative and positive angles of the topic, then we make a decision. For instance, we wanted to buy a carpet for the house. I wanted a handcraft carpet because it can be used for a long time. She wanted an Iranian carpet because she said we do not have enough money for an expensive carpet. We discussed it, and as you can se we have an Iranian carpet in our house. One of us must sacrifice and say 'you are right.'"	"If my husband wants to buy some thing like a T.V. or car, he asks me what I think. If I want to go somewhere, like my friend's home or a wedding party, and if I want to send my children to the school and courses I will ask him and we make the decision together….if he disagrees with me, at first I will try to convince him. Then if he still does not agree I will call the elder of my family and they try to make him agree with me."
Abdul Karim Seema 4 daughters 3 sons	A middle-aged Pashtun couple. He came from Ghazni when he was a teenager. He has been jobless for many years while his wife is an NGO worker and appears well respected in the neighbourhoods because of the assistance she has provided directly and has secured through connections with others as the street representative with the Community Forum.	"In our household I make decisions with my wife on important issues, for instance, house renovations. On less important issues, we don't discuss because everyone is independent to make their own decisions."	
Jamila 3 daughters 2 sons	A middle-aged Tajik widow who is a teacher and representative of her *gozar* for the Community Forum. Her sister, who is a doctor, lives next door and has provided her with both economic and social support since her husband died years ago.		"My husband loved me very much. He not only respected me, but was respectful to all women. We would always seek each other's advice in all decisions regarding issues like raising the children and the work I was doing outside of the house."
Gozar 2			
Zuhal Abdul Karim 5 daughters (1 living in Germany) 2 sons (1 living in Germany) mother-in-law	They are a middle-aged couple, of mixed ethnicity; she is Tajik and he is Pashtun. They came from Charbolak district, and migrated to Kabul during the Taliban. They met when they were both young teachers, and his	"We make decisions together, and all of the family members talk whenever there is a decision to be made."	"I have much more freedom than the other women in this *gozar* because my husband is open minded but he makes the final decisions and if we disagree, his word will rule."

	parents did not take a bride price because they were "enlightened." They are both teachers.		
Fatima Muhammad Gul 5 daughters (2 married) 2 sons	A Tajik couple, the husband is much older. He is a government worker, and Fatima stays at home. She is from a village near Kabul, while he is from Bamyan. She was educated to the 6th class and he finished high school. She is a sociable person who has lived in several neighbourhoods in Mazar and is proud of having many friends.	"We don't have anything in our hands, we are broke and with free hands you cannot make decisions."	"The important decisions are about daily activities, for instance, my son wanted to open a tailoring shop but the rent was too much and we could not afford to pay. We all participated in making that decision."
Safia Shakib 1 son 1 daughter	Safia and her husband are a younger Tajik couple, both in their late 20s. Her husband has been paralysed for two years, and though he now runs a video store, she was the primary breadwinner and care giver after his accident. They live in their own house, but in the same compound as his father with 2 other households. Her sister lives near and she draws upon them for support.	"We do not have any decisions to make, there are no main decisions. The children go to school. The daughter is in class 3 and she will go to school until she is 18 years old. She will be a doctor and then maybe she will be married. I cannot say anything about this now who will choose her husband, but if a girl chooses she cannot choose only by herself."	"The main decisions in the household are about how we can provide food for our daily needs. I always make decisions with my husband."

Appendix IV: Examples of Perspectives on Community Leadership and Decision Making

Household	He Said	She Said
Abdul Jamil Pari Gul 4 daughters 4 sons	"Decisions are made by the chairman of the street and the neighbours, whenever they want to make a decision they assemble in one of the houses. The meetings are usually called at night."	"Before an aid organisation distributed bread cards through the institution [CFDO], but now the government representative [*kalantar*] gets the cards, but doesn't give the people anything. He went to the aid organisation and said he doesn't want the Institution to distribute them. They switched it so that the *kalantar* distributes them. The *kalantar* still does not like the institution."
Jamila 3 daughters 2 sons		With regards to why she thinks people consider her a leader, she said "through my students and their families I became well known. They knew I was honest and very friendly with the students and when the aid came I distributed to others, and didn't take anything for myself..." "Education is the main thing, educated people know about god, human rights, and if aid comes and it needs to be distributed the educated people are honest, they want to take the opinions of the people."
Zuhal Abdul Ehsan 2 sons 5 daughters	"It is the elders who make decisions about the community with the *kalantar*. We live like brothers in this neighbourhood."	"Afghan women do not have any rights in this society. Because they are not educated, and the men are also uneducated, so they don't want to give any authority to their women and they cannot do anything for their community. My husband agrees with me being a leader because he is from an enlightened family."
Fatima Muhammad Gul 5 daughters (2 married) 2 sons	"At the community level, the most important issues are jobs, water, health problems. The *kalantar* and elder of the *gozar* make decisions with the participation of males in the community."	"The most important issues are jobs, water and health. The *kalantar* and the elders of the *gozar* make these decisions with participation of males in the community."
Safia Husband 1 son 1 daughter	"Every street has a chairman, if a person has a problem, he informs the chairman, he informs the people and they come to the mosque. He is selected by the people in the mosque. They chose him because he is well educated and talks very good, he can speak with all kinds of people in the government. The kalantar is not educated and cannot communicate very well. Everybody knows him, but does not know what he does."	"The main issue in the *gozar* is that there are no clinics. The *kalantar* makes decisions and the males in the community participate."

Appendix V: Excerpts from Life Histories

Abdul Karim

The following are excerpts from the life story of Abdul Karim. His life experience and perspectives were not common among the sample group, and certainly not for the average Mazar resident, but illustrate how upbringing, social context and status within the family and community impacts heavily on gender relations in the household, and beyond, in adult life. Abdul Karim is from an elite Pashtun family, and has formerly worked in a variety of jobs. He has now been unemployed for several years, making his wife, Seema, the primary breadwinner.

On parents and upbringing

"My mother had acquired home-based education and was able to read and write. She read books like the *Quran* and *Panj Kitab* [an Islamic book]. My father was one of those who acquired higher education in British India. As our family belonged to the intelligentsia, my parents were supposed to pay attention to the education of their children and make sure that we were acquiring the skills and knowledge to become intellectuals, like me, so we would serve society and be popular among the public.

My father was a scholar with a great personality, studied a variety of religions and was well versed in the law. People came to him for a variety of reasons. He was not a village chief, but as a scholar he was respected by all and considered to be a leader in our village. Unfortunately I was unable to succeed his position.

Whenever there was a conflict in our clan or community, my father would be invited for the meeting to listen to the arguments of the parties, deliberate on the issue, explain the legal aspects of the matter and finally suggest a solution. He would convince all parties and take a decision. My father was a tolerant man. He would never tell anybody that he or she was lying, although he would make this judgement for himself.

My mother was a smart person. My father was very polite in the home and always would talk in a low voice. He would consult my mother for everything. Besides going to school, she taught me religious subjects, which is an indication of her intelligence. My mother died when I was thirteen or fourteen, but as far as I remember, she was also very popular among the people. Some of the other women came to my mother to learn. At that time there was only one girl's school in the whole Balkh Province. My other sisters, who are also literate, studied with my uncle in Kabul. My mother studied with my father, who was a prominent warlord, and also with the local *mullah* in her home."

On marriage and decision making

"Several men asked my family for the hands of my eldest sister. One evening a family sent people to my father, and he told my mother that someone had come to ask for our consent to her engagement. My mother told him that he was very gullible, and that first she needed to go and see the house of the would-be fiancé and only after that they should take a decision, whether to give consent to the engagement or not. My father told her to act as she wished, not to involve him in the decision, and should anybody ask him about the decision, he would say that it was up to the mother of the girl. Thus the marriage of my elder sister was arranged.

After my mother passed away, the decisions about marriage were made by my second and third sisters, whose marriage arrangements were made by my father. My sisters were working as nurses. Only one has not followed a career. Our home-based education was based on mutual understanding and the inclusion of all family members, not on decision taking by a tyrant. Actually, the whole household order was based on collective decision making.

In our family, everyone respected the decision of the head of the household on the issue of marriage, as all decisions needed to be taken on the basis of consensus among all family members. After the death of my mother, the marriage of my five sisters was arranged by my father. When he was martyred, the marriage of one of my sisters, who was already engaged, was arranged by me. It was a family tradition that whenever a girl was to be engaged, my father would ask her whether she consented to the engagement or not. The girl would somehow show the signs, suggesting submission to the will of my father. I got the impression that he would not force his daughter to marry a man she did not want. The girl would implicitly make her father understand that it is ok, or she would say 'Dad, it is up to you to decide.' In our tradition, it is not acceptable for a girl to say that she is determined to marry this or that man. But the family will take into consideration the wish of the girl. The family will describe the character of the potential fiancé to the girl or her mother. For example, the level of his education and his good character, and then they will ask her whether she wants to marry the man or not. The ultimate voice was up to the daughter.

One important factor in our household is that all of the members of the family were educated. For each of my sisters, there were four or five men pleading her hand. I was young and single at the time, and I wouldn't ask my sisters about it because they raised me, but I could hear some whispers in the family suggesting which one of those men was good and which was not.

I was probably the sixth or seventh person asking for the hand of my wife. My sisters went to ask her family for our engagement. They went there several times, and finally an agreement between the parties was secured. My sisters asked my consent for the engagement, and once again, due to the fact that they were elder than me, I was unable to dispute their wish as everyone for me was like my mother. I repeated the common answer, 'It is up to you to decide.' My sister told me that should she marry and go, the door of my house will be closed and I would be living not in a family but in an empty compound. She suggested that I had no option but to marry someone. My other sister, who now lives in Pakistan, also got involved. They went to seek the consent of the family of the bride. They visited that family several times. Finally, I gave my sisters the authority to represent me. The family of Seema Jan wanted to research our family, as to who we are and to which clan we belonged. That took a while. They came to see our house and asked the neighbours. The family of Seema Jan are progressive people and they were trying to give their daughter to a man with good moral values and proper education, so that the girl wouldn't lead a life of desperation. That is why my sisters had to visit their home five or six times to convince them in the case."

On difference within ethnicity

"I do not agree with some prevalent issues among Pashtuns. For example, they sell their daughters, ask dowry for their daughters or exchange their daughters with cows and sheep. But in our clan, if one of our daughters marries a decent person, who shares our vision, we will only welcome that. We would give something away to charity as a blessing, only to wish for his welfare in a new life. The dignity of a

human being is too high to be exchanged. For example, the human being should not be treated as a slave and the personality, pride and human dignity should not be put at stake. The human being doesn't deserve to be sold. The rights of a human being as a creature of wisdom are supreme among all."

On women and work
"I am different from those who do not allow their wives to work because they are people with prejudices and a dark mentality. If our women want to work, no matter how rich we are, there should be no obstacles in their way. My wife is working and at the same time is bringing up our children and looking after the family.

None of our neighbours or family has said us anything to us about it and nobody dares to do so. My spouse is very serious, that is why nobody has got the courage to ask her why she is working. She has been working for the past few years. Before that, during the Taliban era, she was also serving the community. She has a deep understanding of different aspects of people's life. She has always worked with the people and has created jobs for the people through establishing pasta and blanket making factories. She has provided women with the bread permits and also has helped the poor.

She has made me proud. When women have a kind of moral courage, they can do something for themselves. During the Taliban era we were harassed by them, especially to ask me why my wife was working. They ordered me not to allow her to go out. But she courageously argued with them, asking them, 'If I am not supposed to work are you going to feed our family?' She argued that the women and society would only benefit from her work.

She also found work for the men, by informing the men that some projects were about to start, so that they could register for the work. She represented over 4000 families in our district by looking for work for them. She would pass the news to the men through their women. There may be others like her, but I don't know – everybody praises their own."

Jamila, School Teacher and Neighbourhood Representative

The following are excerpts from the life story of Jamila, a middle aged teacher and widow who serves as a neighbourhood representative with the CFDO. She lives with her three daughters and two sons. Her sister and her family live in a separate but adjoining household, and have been a regular source of both financial and social support for Jamila over the years. She is the daughter of a village headman (*arbab*) who set very different rules and standards of acceptable behaviour for his wives and daughters. Her perspective on her relationship with her husband also represents an urban and elite view on gender relations, which is certainly not representative, but is interesting to consider in terms of how this neighbourhood representative might relate to other women who have very different life experiences, resulting for instance, in less education and freedom of mobility.

On parents and upbringing
"My father was the *arbab* of our native village. He was very influential among the people, as he used to help the poor. He had many friends from each ethnic group including Tajik, Uzbek and Pashtun.

My mother had six daughters. Not having a son was annoying for my father, so he decided to marry yet another woman. In the year he got married, a boy was born to my mother and a girl to his second wife. My mother tried to keep the second wife pleased as she was afraid the second wife would curse her only son.

My father had studied religious subjects and was very interested in our education. When we attended school, the villagers would talk about us, saying that instead of giving his daughters to husbands, the *arbab* sent them to school. My uncle was also opposed to it.

My father was compassionate and always helped the people, but he never asked for my mother's advice. If the help concerned one of our close friends, then he would ask my mother for advice, otherwise my mother was not aware of the activities of my father.

My father was very interested in education. He was only rigid to his wives and I think such attitude had its roots in the culture and customs of the people, as our district was a very small district, and if my mother went out, the villagers would say 'look at the wife of the *arbab* strolling outside.' Because he was fond of education, he wouldn't pay attention to the comments from other villagers. My mother would say that she wanted one of her daughters to be brought up according to her choice and not to be allowed to cut her hair short. Contrary to the wish of my mother, my sister became a doctor. My father's restrictions on his wives were in place until both my mothers became old. My second mother has passed away, but my mother is alive and lives with my brother in our district.

In our neighbourhood I was the only girl going to school. My father would take me to the school, covered in a *borqah*. When I graduated, my uncles' wife and I participated in the concourse examination. She qualified for the teacher training college and I went to Kabul. My father was pleased to accompany me to Kabul and was very happy to see that his daughter had succeeded in being admitted to the faculty. He would come to Kabul twice a month to see how I was doing.

In the village we were living in, there were many restrictions. The women were unable to see the men and they would sit in a separate room. Those arranging a wedding, in case they were in hardship, would collect the money from the villagers. Those who had a funeral also collected money. At that time my father was well off and he would make the largest contribution.

The claims over land also were resolved through his mediation. If a girl was forced to marry a man against her will, she would come to my father and say that she doesn't want to marry this man.

But the relations between my father and mother were harsh. My father had full authority both inside the house and outside of it. When he decided to marry a second wife, he didn't consult my mother. My mother was not allowed to go out. She was not even allowed to visit her own father and sister. My mother was responsible for raising the children, cleaning the house and the hospitality for guests. My father would like to have properly prepared meals. If sometimes the soup was salty or without enough salt, he would start beating my mother. He treated both his wives equally. His second wife didn't have a great time either. She was not allowed to visit her relatives either. My father had given the freedom to his daughters.

Both of my mothers, sometimes with calm and sometimes with fury, would remind my father that they were not happy the way he was treating them. But for my father all this was nonsense. He wouldn't listen to the women and wouldn't give them much respect. He decided on everything alone. For example, during *Eid* he would purchase clothes by himself and wouldn't take advice from any one.

My mother is very old now. You talk to her, she is talking, but is unable to analyse. She does not make any sense and can't follow the topic. Nevertheless, my brother asks her advice. My brother's wife is my cousin and has much respect for my mother."

On marriage

"It is all very different from the life I lived with my husband. Me and my husband would work together and would express our opinions and listen to each other. He would always inform me of his intentions. We would arrange our schedules, so that the same time as I was about to leave, he would come home and I could go out. At that time there was peace and freedom in Afghanistan. If we needed to buy home appliances, we would consult each other. If it was affordable for him, he would purchase it; otherwise he would say that at the moment he was unable to afford it and will buy it in the future. My husband didn't have any prejudices and would never ask me why my sleeves were too short or why my head was bare. He was an extraordinary man.

I was in the second year of the faculty when we got married. My first child was born when I was a student. After I completed the faculty, I moved to my husband's home. He was an officer. We were living a very happy life. He was very friendly and loved me very much. He not only respected me, but was respectful to all women. That is why he always concerned with my happiness and we lived in harmony. We always asked each other's advice on all decisions regarding issues such as the raising of our children and the work I was doing outside of the house, for example going to school. We had a schedule. I would breast feed the baby, and go out and he would look after the child. Thus we spent nine years of our life in happiness."

Experience of war

"The revolution took place and the situation in Afghanistan started to deteriorate. Fighting erupted in Herat and Kabul. We fled Kabul and went to our native village and spent one and a half years there. As I told you, my husband was an officer and his car was targeted and hit by a tank and my husband was martyred. When he was killed my children were very little. I was traumatised by the news. We had spent such a happy time. When my husband was on duty I would count minutes looking for him to come home. When he was martyred, it was such a shock. When they brought his body, I was mentally traumatised, although I had a baby to look after. I would spend the night in the hospital and during the day would come to my home, because people were coming for condolences.

At that time I was young and this incident was unbearable for me, as he was the closest person to me and my only companion. After that I had a mental disorder for one year and was off from the school. After one year due to intense treatment and support of my sister, my health improved. At that time my father also was alive. Finally, after one year I went to work. I taught Social Studies, History and Geography. I loved my students and my students loved me too. They would listen to my lessons carefully and would learn it.

The principal of our school supported me when I was ill. He had decreased my teaching hours. The teachers would try to visit me often, to distract me from thinking about my late husband.

When my husband died my first son and second son were at 2nd and 3rd grade of the school. I was teaching at the same school. I was their teacher. When they graduated from the school, they enrolled in the faculty. My elder son was at the first semester of the faculty when the Taliban took power. The Taliban came to our home and took my elder son to the prison. It was the second mental trauma, because my sons were all my hopes. Although daughters and sons both are our children, in Afghanistan this idea has been installed in our mentality that we prefer a son over a daughter, because we regard the son as a hope for the future. I spent two nights and two days in hell. I would wear a *burqa*, although it was very hot, and would go to the prison every day and would spend the night crying. My sister is a doctor and one of her patients somehow released my son from the prison.

We spent three years under the Taliban oppression. There were many restrictions and the door of the schools also was closed. It was painful for me to see my children being illiterate, as I myself was an educational worker. So, I bought a lot of books and enrolled my children in the courses, although I was in hardship. With the advent of the Taliban the payment of my husband's pension also was stopped. I didn't have other income. My sons earned some money, and I would arrange for the expenditure of the money in such a way that all of them could take some courses. My two daughters are about to complete their English courses, only one book remaining to be studied.

Now the conditions are favourable and I am very happy. Two years after the transformations, I have acquired more patience. The door of the schools opened and my daughters are going to school and my sons are acquiring knowledge and that is very rewarding for me. My father has supported me during all this time. After his death my sister, the doctor, was very supportive of me, both in bringing up the children and household economy. We are six sisters.

Now I am working as a teacher at the school. The attitude of the teachers towards me is very good. I am very sociable and in the office or in other meetings I am always interested in interacting with people to know how are they doing, and whether they are happy in life. That is why I am very communicative and people also treat me well."

On participation in the Community Fora

"In our district, there are Community Fora. These Fora ask every neighbourhood to send a representative who is elected by the people. I am the representative of this neighbourhood. These representatives collect the information about the problems of the people and pass it to the Forum. The Forum reviews the problems and passes it to the higher institutions to take action to resolve them. What women are mostly demanding is the provision of opportunities for work. Here are many women who know sewing, embroidery and carpet weaving and are looking for a workplace. If there is a project from Habitat to be implemented such as pasta factory, coal distribution, and permits for subsidised bread and so on, I would be very pleased to help the people through."

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Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Charahi Ansari (opposite the Insaf Hotel and Popolano's Restaurant),
Shahr-e-Naw, Kabul, Afghanistan
Mobile: +93 (0)70 276 637; E-mail: areu@areu.org.af