

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
Case Study Series

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



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

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Table of Contents

Glossary	vi
Acronyms	vi
Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	3
1.1 The overall research focus and issues explored.....	3
1.2 Conceptualising and operationalising power, politics and women’s participation in development initiatives	4
1.3 Structure of the case study	6
2. Research Methodology, Site Selection and Context	8
2.1 Research methodology	8
2.2 Site selection	8
2.3 Ethical considerations.....	10
2.4 Balkh provincial context	10
3. NSP Guiding Principles and Women’s Participation	12
3.1 NSP in Khulm District, Balkh Province	12
3.2 Community context: How it supports women’s participation	19
4. The Women CDC Members: Then and Now.....	20
4.1 Changes: Personal level	20
4.2 Changes: Family level	23
4.3 Community-level changes	27
4.4 Valuing skills obtained from engaging in the <i>shura</i>	28
4.5 Conclusion	30
5. Conclusion	31
5.1 Factors that facilitated women’s participation	32
5.2 Lessons learned: Factors that hindered women’s participation	33
Bibliography	34

List of Figures, Tables and Boxes

Figure 1: Operational framework of the concepts used in this study.....	7
Table 1: Distribution of respondents in the study.....	9
Table 2: NSP policies and practices for promoting gender equality.....	13
Table 3: Transparency and accountability in the NSP operational manual.....	17
Box 1: The women’s <i>shura</i> and decision-making in the family.....	24
Box 2: Within the norms: Starting right, ending right.....	29

Glossary

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

Acronyms

AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CDC	Community Development Council
CHA	Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance
FGD	focus group discussion
FP	facilitating partner
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
MISFA	Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NSP	National Solidarity Programme

Executive Summary

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

Three provinces are covered in the larger study, namely Parwan, Kabul and Balkh. The Balkh case study is the third in the series and covers the NSP CDCs, with another study covering women's participation in microcredit.

The study used a qualitative research approach, collecting data from multiple sources for triangulation. The main method used was semi-structured, in-depth interviews supplemented by focus group discussions (FGDs), informal conversations and observations. Nineteen informal conversations and 36 interviews were conducted with 16 informants (each interviewed twice) representing male and female CDC members, their family members and community residents. Seven FGDs were conducted with a total of 31 participants.

Key Findings

A number of issues were raised regarding the community's solar power project, but overall, the project was perceived positively by the community. Above all, it made a difference in the lives of the women who participated in the women's CDC *shura*.

- In Shah Limmar, a conservative community in Khulm District of Balkh Province where the majority are Pashtuns and whose views of the divide between the private world of women and public world of men persist, women were able to participate in development initiatives outside their homes.
- Given an opportunity and venue to explore their capabilities and express them, women could go beyond the traditional role expected of them and have a positive impact in their respective families and the wider community.
- The women's *shura* created a space for women to take stock of what they can do for themselves, their family and the community. It enabled them to meet and discuss things that affected them at various levels in their lives.
- Role models (facilitating partner staff and women seen as active members in the community) as well as "champions" (e.g. community elders) from within and outside the community can act as triggers for raising awareness and facilitating changes in the way women see themselves, as well as how they are seen by family members and in the community.
- The role of the Shah Limmar elders cannot be discredited and both facilitates and hinders women's involvement in the NSP. Given the right orientation and understanding of a programme, the elders do play an important role in the process of change.
- A programme that has a built-in mechanism to include women in the process makes a difference. At first, this may be seen as a "token" or a mere gesture of compliance with the CDC, but it can serve as an opening for women to be involved in community activities. There is a need to sustain this initiative.

- The type of project in a community defines men's and women's involvement in its implementation. It also defines the roles and responsibilities women and men can take. The project's initial groundwork can be sustained during implementation; however, if the duration is brief, there is less time both to learn and then practice what has been learned.
- Women's involvement in the actual implementation of the solar power project was weak compared to the men's; thus, their project management skills were not honed. The training activities conducted in relation to the project did not make much sense to them and they retained little of what they were about.
- These changes in the women's lives, no matter how small, were seen as significant by the women themselves and were a start for them to move on and negotiate for greater empowerment. Thus, community activities such as those initiated by the NSP need to be sustained. Furthermore, the interplay of both facilitating and hindering factors of women's participation in NSP activities needs a closer examination.
- Identifying women who are natural leaders in a place where women normally do not play much of a role outside their homes can be tricky; thus, people from outside should work with insiders who have a sense of local context. However, a balancing act is needed regarding people who may act as "gatekeepers" in the community since they could overpower and dictate the whole process.
- The desire of women who are not exposed to activities outside their homes to participate in community activities should not be discredited. It is a matter of opening avenues for this desire to be tapped. The women's *shura* provided this avenue. Even though there were misconceptions about the NSP at the start, these women's wish to be active in the community was tapped with the help of the elders in the community who lobbied for women's participation.
- Family support for women to participate in the *shura* is important. The community elders helped women to gain this support.
- A programme's reputation can precede it, affecting how it will be accepted by community members. NSP's reputation facilitated women's participation in and the community's acceptance of *shura* activities.
- The positive perception of NSP among the women themselves was the main factor, other than the influence of the community elders, for involving them in the programme. The fact that women were sought out and invited to participate in the programme was a plus factor. For the first time, women felt their importance through being asked to be involved right at the beginning of the project.
- The changes that happened at the individual, family and community levels were brought about by a number of factors other than the introduction of NSP and the *shura*, but the *shura* provided the platform for these to emerge and be noticed by other people within the family and the community.

1. Introduction

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

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

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

1.1 The overall research focus and issues explored

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 Conceptualising and operationalising power, politics and women's participation in development initiatives⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 Structure of the case study

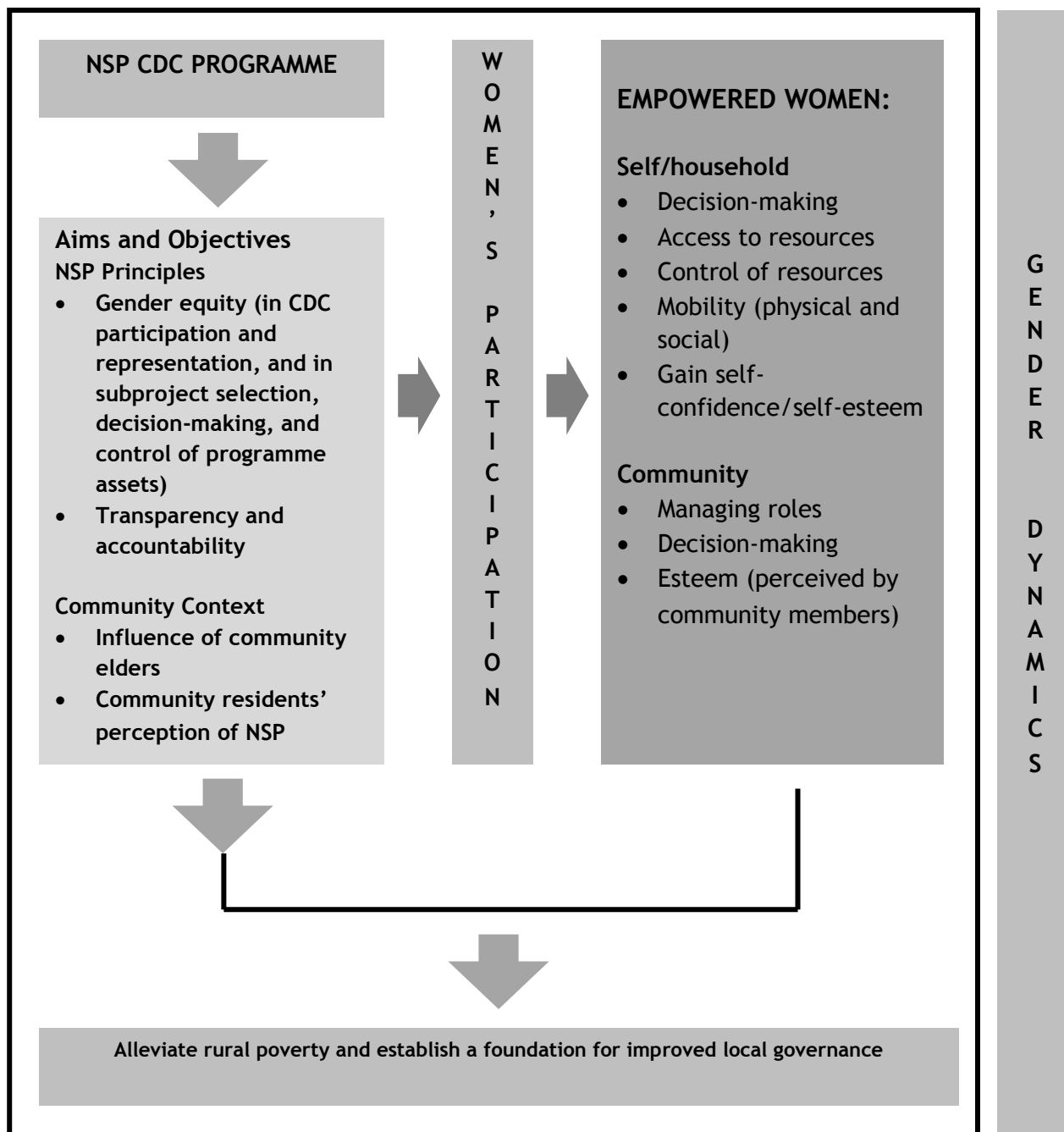
The case study is structured in line with the operational framework in Figure 1. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research methodology, site selection, ethical considerations and social and geographical contexts that help explain the data gathered and the dynamics of the community studied. Chapter 3 presents the NSP guiding principles of gender equality and transparency/accountability, and how they were operationalised during programme implementation at the community level. It also explores women's motivation for participating in the CDCs and the challenges they encountered in the process of participating. The facilitating and hindering factors of women's participation are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 4 focuses on the immediate outcomes of women's participation in their personal lives, their families/households and the community. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the findings of the study and their implications. It also reviews the answers to the questions/issues raised in Chapter 1 as well as the issues that need to be addressed further.

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

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

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

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



2. Research Methodology, Site Selection and Context

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

2.1 Research methodology

The main method used to collect data was semi-structured, in-depth interviews (IDIs), supplemented by FGDs, informal conversations and observations. A pilot study was conducted in Kabul to test and improve the research tools before field work started in Parwan, the first case study province.¹⁶

The first visit to the community of Shah Limmar¹⁷ in Balkh Province occurred on 26 May 2010 when the team conducted initial rounds to check the viability of conducting studies in various communities in Balkh. However, there was a security issue and the team had to postpone succeeding visits. Fieldwork in Kabul was completed first and then the team went back to Shah Limmar. Fieldwork for Shah Limmar was completed on 19 May 2011. The team sought permission for the study through a meeting with community elders. The team introduced AREU staff, the research, its objectives and methodology to the community. Expectations were also levelled off and a clear distinction made by the research team between AREU as a research organisation and other welfare/service delivery nongovernmental organisations (NGOs).

2.2 Site selection

The team took several steps to select an appropriate study site. These included: 1) asking permission from the governor of Balkh Province to conduct research in the area; 2) conducting a series of meetings with officials and stakeholders from the provincial and district levels (officials from the government, NSP and the facilitating NGO) on possible study sites; and 3) visiting communities to meet the village head, community elders and community members.

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

Taking these meetings, along with the information gathered in the office and on field visits, into consideration, the team selected a village in Khulm District. This is a community where the NSP has been implemented since 2006. Other than Khulm with 75 communities covered by NSP, the team considered three other districts with corresponding communities covered, namely: Sholgareh (113 communities), Chaharkand (60) and Mamool (25). However, it was Khulm that met the criteria set for site selection. The rest of the districts took longer to reach due to road conditions, Sholgareh had security problems, and Marmool did not meet the length of time the NSP had been in operation. Within Khulm District, seven communities were visited and after

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

¹⁷ This is a pseudonym of the community.

taking into consideration the same selection criteria for the district level, Shah Limmar community was selected. Aside from meeting the selection criteria, the residents of the community (Pashtuns and Arabs) were from groups that were not studied in the study areas already covered in Parwan and Kabul.

Household selection

Right after the community introduction, the research team spent several days going around the village and informally speaking with people in their houses, in the streets, on the farms and wherever they were available. The female research team approached women in their houses. These rounds of informal discussions helped build rapport and assisted in selecting study households.

Households with female members in the CDC *shura* were easily identified. There were four women who held elected posts and another three who were ordinary members and non-elected but were active in the CDC. Their households were identified so family members could be interviewed. The criteria to select households included: CDC officials and ordinary members, beneficiaries of the NSP community project, and non-beneficiaries (those who sold their solar panel or who opted not to avail of the NSP project).

In addition to the male and female CDC officials, members of officials' families and beneficiaries' households, and other community members were also interviewed to provide a perspective on whether changes occurred among the women who participated in the CDC and those who participated in NSP projects.

Distribution of respondents and interview types

The study interviewed a range of respondent types to obtain detailed information about the CDC's functioning, male and female CDC members' experiences, experiences of those participating in CDC activities, and the perceptions of CDC members' families and other community residents about changes among the female *shura* members. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents by sex and by type of interview. For the IDIs, CDC officials, women beneficiaries and members of their households were interviewed twice.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents in the study

Sex	Type of interview			
	Chit-chat/informal conversations (before and after the interviews)	IDI		FGD: 4 for women and 3 for men = 7 FGDs
		1st round	2nd round	
Male	6	12	5	12
Female	13	24	11	19
Total	19	36	16	31

A total of 67 women and men were involved; 36 as IDI informants and 31 as FGD participants. The categories of those involved were: NSP officials, ordinary members, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the NSP project, community members. Representatives of the NGO facilitating partner (FP) provided information on NSP practice in the village.

Of the seven FGDs conducted during data collection, four were with female participants and three with male participants. One was conducted for female CDC members and one for “whitebeards” among whom the majority were also members of the men’s CDC. Two FGDs apiece were conducted with male and female community members, and one more for women who had a CDC member in their households.

2.3 Ethical considerations

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

2.4 Balkh provincial context

Balkh province is situated in the northern part of Afghanistan, bordering Uzbekistan in the North, Tajikistan in the Northeast, Kunduz Province in the East, Samangan Province in the Southeast, Sar-i-Pul Province in the South-West and Jawzjan Province in the West.¹⁸ The capital city of the province is Mazar-i-Sharif, one of the biggest commercial and financial centres of Afghanistan. The province covers an area of 16,840 square kilometres. The main border crossing point is located 30km north of Mazar-i-Sharif, and the main access road to Uzbekistan links the province to a vibrant trade with the Central Asian countries.¹⁹

With a population of approximately 1,219,200,²⁰ Balkh ranks fourth in terms of population size among the 34 provinces in Afghanistan. The majority of the population is composed of ethnic Tajiks and Pashtuns, followed by Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmans, Arabs and Baluch. Two-thirds of the population live in rural districts while a third reside in urban areas.²¹ Balkh is the least agrarian-based province in Afghanistan. The majority of urban households derive their income from trade and services.

Community context

Khulm is one of the 15 districts of Balkh Province. Khulm has a population of 49,207.²² It is a one-hour (60 kilometres) ride from Mazar-i-Sharif with a private car. The road to Khulm is asphalted and it is accessible and easy to reach in spite of the distance. Shah Limmar

18 Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). “Provincial Profile: Balkh,” <http://foodsecurityatlas.org/afg/country/provincial-Profile/Balkh> (accessed 4 January 2012).

19 Regional Rural Economic Regeneration Strategies, “Provincial Profile: Balkh” (n.d.).

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

21 New Strategic Community Initiative, “Province Profile: Balkh and Mazar-i-Sharif,” <http://newstrategicsecurityinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/P33-Afghan-Policy-Page-Province-Profile-Balkh.pdf> (accessed 4 January 2012).

22 Central Statistics Organization (CSO) and United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), “Afghanistan: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile” (n.d.).

is around 10 kilometres away from the district centre. There is no daily bus service from the village, but the road is passable all year long. At present, the community has 1,000 residents, 60 percent of whom are Pashtuns; the rest are Arabs.

The community informants claimed that ten years ago, Shah Limmar was relatively better off economically than today. Recent droughts have affected the villagers who depend on their orchards and livestock for their livelihood.

At present, the local market in the village is still weak. The people in this community are conservative and men do not allow women to work. Children aged six to seven years old are now sent to school, but the majority of teenage girls are not in education; parents prefer that they stay at home and not be associated with boys either travelling to or at school.

With the economy weak and agriculture affected by drought, there are no jobs for the men unless they go out of the community and venture into Mazar. There are no jobs available for women in the community, and men do not also allow women to leave the community to find work. Since most of the women are also illiterate, there is little chance for them to find work even if they go out of the community with a *mahram* (chaperone) to find work. Young and middle-aged men are keen to go out of the country as wage labourers in Iran and Pakistan. However, a large amount of money is needed to give to "fixers" for their airfare and to obtain travel papers. They work as illegal workers since they do not have the required permits to work in these places.

The nearest preschool, as well as a government primary school, are inside the community (5-minute walk). There are no separate schools for boys and girls. There are no private primary, lower and upper secondary school nearby. This condition could be one explanation why most of the school-age children in the community only attend primary school, and less than half make it to secondary. There is one public health centre in the village. The quality of service it offered to the community was rated as "bad" by community residents.

No one in the community has had access to electricity before; nowadays, community residents have solar electricity from the NSP. They also have pipe-borne water and stand-pipes as a result of projects from NGOs operating in the area.

Currently, the community has no access to local and national newspapers. The community only had the national radio station as their source of information on national events. There are no public telephones nor public places to use the internet. Less than half of the population in Shah Limmar owns a mobile phone.

3. NSP Guiding Principles and Women’s Participation

The NSP was established in 2003 and is described as “the flagship national priority programme of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.”²³ The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) describes the NSP as a vehicle for promoting good local governance and empowering rural communities, including the poorest and most vulnerable groups. It aims to enable communities to “identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects.”²⁴ It is implemented through 29 NGO FPs and UN Habitat. The donors supporting the NSP include the World Bank, the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, the Japanese Social Development Fund, several European governments, USAID and the Government of New Zealand.

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

3.1 NSP in Khulm District, Balkh Province

Of the 29 FPs that implemented NSP during its first cycle, four operated in Balkh province: Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (CHA), People in Need (PIN) and UN Habitat. At the start of the study, the four FPs implementing NSP in Balkh covered 843 villages. The FP chosen for this study covered 273 communities in four districts of the province: Chaharkand, Khulm, Marmool, and Sholgareh. Khulm District was chosen with a corresponding village. The village chosen was one of 75 in the district where the NSP was being implemented.

Operationalisation of NSP principles in the study community

NSP implementation in Shah Limmar was part of the third roll-out to 6,800 new communities at the national level in 2006 under NSP I. The FP staff started their ground work during the last quarter of 2006. The NSP solar power project was completed in November 2007 and the project was handed over to the provincial department of Rural Rehabilitation and Development on 28 May 2009. The total budget from NSP was 780,000 Afs (around US\$16,200). Community members gave their own contribution of 86,736 Afs (around US\$1,800); thus, the total amount for the solar power project was 866,736 Afs (around US\$18,000).

As also raised in the Parwan Case Study,²⁵ the NSP Operational Manual²⁶ notes that, given Afghan traditions—including *purdah* restrictions that treat men and women differently and limit their interactions in public life—FPs need to make special efforts to ensure equitable access to and control over NSP resources for men and women in each community. How were the NSP principles operationalised by the FP during

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

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

25 Chona R. Echavez, “Does Women’s Participation in the National Solidarity Programme Make a Difference in their Lives? A Case Study in Parwan Province” (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

26 Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, “National Solidarity Programme Operational Manual.” (n.d.).

programme implementation and how do they affect women’s participation in the CDC projects and activities?

Principle: Gender equity

Table 2 shows how the principle of gender equity was reflected in the NSP and FP official documents (e.g. NSP Operational Manual) and how these principles were operationalised in the community where the study was conducted.

Table 2. NSP policies and practices for promoting gender equity

<i>Principle</i>	<i>NSP policies and practices: Operational manual</i>	<i>Operationalisation at the community level</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">GENDER EQUITY IN NSP PARTICIPATION</p>	<p>Gain early agreement with community leaders about ways in which women can participate in CDCs in a culturally acceptable manner.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the women’s perspective, the men were apprehensive of having a subcommittee for women. • There were some misconceptions on the part of the women in terms of having a subcommittee of their own. From the IDIs and FGDs, informants and participants thought that if they agreed to participate in the NSP project they would be brought to the US for dubious reasons. However, the NSP and FP staff explained to the village elders about the NSP. The village elders realised that women’s participation was important for the NSP to be implemented in their village. Hence, they were instrumental in women forming their own subcommittee since a mixed <i>shura</i> was not acceptable in Shah Limmar. They identified elderly and widowed women to run for election as officers. The FP staff also motivated women to form a <i>shura</i> of their own and discuss among themselves the problems they faced in the community. They also encouraged the women to help in coming up with solutions to the problems identified. • Male informants noted that the subcommittee for men and women gave both men and women the chance to talk to other members of the same sex in the community and share common experience. • Some male informants noted that, with the NSP, restrictions on women were “loosened.” Women were given importance since projects identified need to be approved both by the female and male subcommittee members in the <i>shura</i>. Both male and female community members noted that women were sought out in this project, unlike other prior projects where only men were approached by programme implementers.
	<p>Organise parallel meetings for men and women so that women do not need to mix publicly with men. Even if mixed meetings are acceptable, it may be better for women to hold separate meetings so they can feel free to participate and speak openly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women gathered in a local resident’s house, while the men had their meeting in the mosque. • The women were told by the FP staff to talk about community problems and try to solve them at their own level. • Women were happy to have their own subcommittee <i>shura</i> as they could talk about things that concerned them and laugh with each other, which felt improper with men around; moreover, if they were with men, they covered their face and could not sit in front of or beside them.

Principle	NSP policies and practices: Operational manual	Operationalisation at the community level
GENDER EQUITY IN CDC REPRESENTATION	Organise separate voting venues for men and women to encourage more women to vote.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the NSP staff came into the area, the people decided to form subcommittees for men and women. Each group then elected separate officers for their own <i>shura</i>.
	If there are cultural constraints to holding mixed-gender meetings, have the communities elect a male and female representative from each cluster and organise men's and women's CDC subcommittees. Explain that male and female subcommittees have equal standing in the CDC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NSP staff knew about the culture and tradition of the community, and that people were not comfortable with having a mixed <i>shura</i>. Therefore, two separate subcommittees were established. A female NFP staff member discussed with the members of the women's <i>shura</i> about the NSP while a male NFP staff member talked to the members of the men's <i>shura</i>. The head of the women's <i>shura</i> did not exactly have the same status as the head of the men's <i>shura</i>. The head of the women's <i>shura</i> did not have the authority to make decisions, unlike the head of the men's <i>shura</i>. The male family members of the female <i>shura</i> members influenced their participation in the <i>shura</i>. If a male family member of a female CDC ordinary member did not allow the woman to participate in the <i>shura's</i> activities, then she could not do so.
	Help communities identify methods for sharing information and coordinating joint decision-making between the subcommittees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There were male and female NSP staff who told the members of female and male <i>shuras</i> that they should consult with one another regarding the project to be implemented in the community. There is some confusion as to whether male and female <i>shura</i> members discussed matters together. Many of the female informants and FGD participants stated that the only time that the men's and women's <i>shura</i> members related with each other was when they were deliberating for a project in the community. After that, both parties no longer updated each other of their respective activities. The male informants and FGD participants, on the other hand, asserted that since the men and women members of the <i>shura</i> were all in one village, they did not have a problem meeting with each other (i.e. men with men, women with other women).
	Officers of each subcommittee should serve on the CDC Executive Coordination Committee, which finalises and approves (signs) all NSP forms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women were embarrassed to speak up during the CDC meetings. Furthermore, the CDC Executive Coordination Committee was not functioning as envisioned.
	Minutes of all subcommittee/committee meetings should be shared between groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information-sharing between <i>shuras</i> happened informally. What this means is that couples who were also members of their respective <i>shuras</i> shared information while they were at home. Regular meetings of both the men's and women's <i>shuras</i> only happened when the NSP staff visited the area and while they were still discussing the project for the community. No other meetings were held after the project was completed. The male informants stated that meetings only occurred when there was a specific need. There is a record book containing the minutes of the meetings of both <i>shuras</i>. Since they are of the same village, the head of the men's <i>shura</i> said that exchanging information is easy. In addition, the secretary of the men's <i>shura</i> said that both <i>shuras</i> talk about what has been done so far. However, it was perceived by both men and women that the men had more influence regarding the identification of the project to be implemented.

Principle	NSP policies and practices: Operational manual	Operationalisation at the community level
<p>GENDER EQUITY IN DECISION-MAKING AND CONTROL OF PROJECT ASSETS</p>	<p>Inform community leaders that at least one NSP-funded subproject should be prioritised by women and managed by the women's CDC subcommittee or by a project committee nominated/approved by the women's CDC subcommittee.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NSP/FP staff did not interfere in the selection of the project and instead guided the participants in terms of identifying what was needed. Although the women opposed the solar power project, they let the people decide on it. • The female informants and participants noted that they wanted a different project for the community, specifically a tailoring project for women. The female accounts revealed that the members of the women's <i>shura</i> accepted the men's proposed project because the village elders asked them to. Moreover, the men's <i>shura</i> members told the women that they should consider the future and the number of beneficiaries when considering a project, saying it should not only benefit the women but the community as a whole. • Although not their proposed project and despite their initial opposition to it, the women realised that the solar project was beneficial for them and for their families. They were able to work at night (e.g. doing embroidery) with the light provided by the solar power. • The treasurer of the women's <i>shura</i> did not have a particular task in terms of the budget allotted to the project. The members of the men's <i>shura</i> knew more about it. Nevertheless, the budget for both <i>shuras</i> was spent on the solar power project.

The village elders played a major role in establishing the women's *shura* and in involving women in *shura* activities under the women's subcommittee. Despite men's opposition, the move was pushed through because the village elders supported the idea. To allay the fears of men in the community as to what might happen to their young daughters, the village elders advised and selected older women to run for election as officers.

When the women's subcommittee was established, almost all of the men and women informants and FGD participants noted that women were able to interact more with other women in their village than before. The men in particular said that the restrictions imposed on women before were loosened a bit when the *shura* was formed. Women noted that within their own *shura* they could talk about things that concerned them and share things in a way they previously thought was impossible.

The second gender equity principle involves CDC representation. The NSP staff members were aware that residents in the area were not comfortable with having mixed meetings; therefore, two subcommittees were created, one for men, one for women. Both sub-*shuras* held their own election of officers, with the men's held in the mosque, and the women's at a house in the village. Female NSP staff talked to the women, while male NSP staff talked to the men. The NSP staff did not interfere with the election procedures for both *shuras*. They provided guidelines for how to conduct activities while community members carried them out themselves.

Both female and male informants and FGD participants acknowledged that the head of the women's *shura* did not have equal authority with the head of the men's *shura*. Still, it was the first time that women in the community were consulted and given the chance to participate in decision-making.

Male informants and FGD participants noted the exchange of information between husbands and wives who were both members of their respective *shuras*. This could also be one of their bases for saying that information-sharing between the *shuras* was easy, and that they had a good relationship with each other, even if this activity did not occur formally in meetings where both male and female *shura* members were present. Both female and male informants and FGD participants stated that meetings were only held if there was a need to meet.

Equity in decision-making and control of project assets between men and women was quite unclear, given the context of their respective subcommittees and how they arrived at the solar power project. First, the accounts of the male informants and FGD participants did not show that women were thinking of a different project specifically for women. The interviews with women revealed that they had other projects in mind. However, members of the women's *shura* went for the solar power project²⁷ because the village elders asked them to and the men discouraged the tailoring project that they wanted as this was seen to benefit only a few villagers. The men told the women that in considering a project for the village, the future and the number of beneficiaries should be considered.

The solar power project was the only one carried out by Shah Limmar under the NSP. The treasurer of the women's *shura* had little participation in the procurement of solar panels. When the solar panels were installed and households in the community made use of them, the female informants and FGD participants said that they were eventually

²⁷ Solar power subprojects are under the "Negative Menu" in the NSP Operational Manual Version V, meaning that they are now no longer funded.

satisfied with the choice of solar power as the NSP project in their village. They realised that it had introduced a number of new advantages in their lives, such as electricity.

Unlike the other communities studied in Parwan and in Kabul, the project implementation in Shah Limmar was quite brief. There was not much time for people to mobilise themselves and build a strong sense of community in the implementation of the sub-project.

Women’s involvement in the actual implementation of the solar power project was weak compared to the men; thus, their project management skills were not honed. The training activities did not make much sense to them and they could hardly remember what they were all about. The FP records list six one-day training activities conducted for women: office bearer, procurement, accounting, transparency, by-laws, and gender. One-day refresher activities were conducted for these trainings, except on gender and transparency. The men received the same training activities that women had and they had an additional training on project implementation and management. They too had refresher activities, except gender and transparency. Men could recall the training they have attended while women could not remember any of the training activities they attended under NSP.

In other study areas, there was more than one subproject implemented and women themselves handled their own subprojects. Project gestation and women’s and men’s participation in subproject implementation is thus an area that also needs to be considered.

Principle: Transparency and accountability

The principles of transparency and accountability are also stipulated in the NSP operational manual (see Table 3). The issue of project selection was the major concern of the subcommittees in this village. To repeat, female informants and FGD participants noted that they did not propose solar power as their project and preferred sewing machines for them to earn money making clothes. As the treasurer of the women’s *shura* put it, having sewing machines would allow women to earn their own money, thus lessening their need to ask men for money.

Table 3: Transparency and accountability in the NSP operational manual

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

This situation could have some implications in terms of the women's knowledge about the money allotted for the project. In terms of both the budget and how the solar panels were purchased, there is a clear difference between the men's *shura* officers' knowledge and that of the women's. To illustrate, below are the accounts of the treasurers of both *shuras*:

We have a budget of 10,000 Afs for each family, and each family added another 1,100 Afs from its own pocket. Then some traders came to our community, and they exhibited their solar products to our people. When they asked what kind of solar we wanted to buy, I selected the best one. That time, the engineers who were present laughed and said that we did not have enough money to buy [what I chose] since it was too expensive. Then I told the engineer to help us in the selection. Then he calculated our money and compared it to the different types available until he found a match for our budget. Then we selected that kind of solar for our community.

Haleem, 60, M, men's *shura* treasurer

*I do not know. Every family gave 1,100 for this project...We also gave money for the solar...I do not know how much money is in the women's *shura* and also how much money is in the men's *shura*.*

Homa, 60, F, women's *shura* treasurer

The head, the secretary, and the treasurer of the men's *shura* also said that there was no separate budget for the men's and women's *shura*. There was just one budget and this was meant for the families in the communities. Only the assistant head and the secretary of the men's *shura* were able to state that the total amount of money was about 800,000 Afs. None of the women's *shura* officials attended training in accounting, procurement and contract management, operations and maintenance and monitoring. However, the assistant head and the secretary of the men's *shura* had training in accountability and transparency. They noted that their training in accounting and procurement taught them to ask for receipts when buying something using the *shura*'s money.

The concern regarding accountability and transparency could also be examined through the manner in which both subcommittees interrelated. According to one of the family members of the male CDC officials, accountability means members of the *shura* informing the people of their activities and decisions affecting the community. The members of the male *shura* informed the research team of having conversations with women's *shura* members, but it was not clear whether these conversations or discussions were conducted formally, like in a meeting. It became more vague when the head of the men's *shura* articulated that they knew about the other *shura*'s discussions and decisions by talking to family members. With the officers of the women's *shura*, only the secretary mentioned that both male and female *shuras* reported their activities and decisions to each other. The other women officers stated otherwise.

Considering the case of the women's *shura*, one could not blame its secretary for stating that its existence was only for compliance since nothing was ever in their control and they had no authority. Nevertheless, the women were appreciative of the opportunities to interact with other women in the village and the FP representative when they became members of the *shura*. This in itself made a difference in their lives.

The men's subcommittee kept a very good record of the money received from the FP and how the money was spent. A complete documentation of the expenditures was recorded in the books that were readily available to the public. It also reflected the contribution of each household to the subproject implemented in the community. It clearly met the

provisions that the CDC maintain records of income and expenditure for cash and in-kind contributions and the CDC financial records be available for public inspection at all times. However, all of these were recorded and kept by the men's subcommittee; the women's subcommittee had no knowledge of how money was received, kept, spent and recorded.

3.2 Community context: How it supports women's participation

What aspects of the community might have facilitated women's participation in CDC activities? There are two major conditions in the village that allowed the birth of the women's *shura* and encouraged the participation of women in CDC activities. First was the village elders' support for women to create their own subcommittee and elect their own officers. Furthermore, the treasurer of the women's *shura* articulated that even if some men or families in the village were opposed, they could not go against the will of the village elders.

The second facilitating factor for women's participation in their *shura* was the positive perception of some female informants of the NSP. The NSP offered the opportunity for women to participate and be involved in community activities that were not open to women before. The fact that they were sought out at the beginning of the programme and the FP staff talked to them made a difference to how women perceived them.

For the male informants and FGD participants, the NSP was one of the unifying factors in their community and it did not come from outside of the country since fellow Muslims brought it to them:

At the start...of the shura, some people opposed women's participation... because some people doubted what women could do. But when they saw that the shura stood for the integrity and unity of people, their minds changed and they did not continue their opposition. They are happy and they encourage women's participation in the shura's activities.

Bashir, 47, M, family member of women's *shura* ordinary member

We knew that the women and men who came to our village and talked to our men and women were Muslims and were giving us good advice. The people of our village knew that they were not against our religion, we are Muslims and we know about good and bad teachings.

Jabar, 74, M, family member of female beneficiary

As to the participation of younger women in the female *shura*, interviews with female CDC officials and their family members revealed that there were reservations regarding the intentions of the programme at the beginning and some Pashtun families discouraged young women from going out of the house to join the *shura* activities.

This section has presented the NSP principles of gender equity, accountability and transparency in relation to how they were operationalised at the community level. There now follows a presentation of the impact of women's participation in their *shura* on various aspects of their lives.

4. The Women CDC Members: Then and Now

This section discusses the effects of women's participation in their *shura* on different aspects of their lives. Interviews with men's and women's *shura* officers and members, their family members, beneficiaries, and community members were analysed to see if there was a relationship between women's participation in the *shura* and their empowerment. Outcomes on women's empowerment were viewed on three levels. First was the personal level, with questions on: 1) knowledge and skills; 2) attitude and behaviour toward other family members; 3) attitude to serve the community; 4) confidence-building; and 5) self-esteem. The second was the family level. Women and men informants and FGD participants were questioned on: 1) decision-making in the family; 2) power relations and authority in the family; 3) access to and control over resources; 4) extent of mobility; 5) family members' attitudes toward the woman participant; and 6) family violence. Finally, questions regarding empowerment of women at the community level were addressed: 1) women's social status; and 2) the community's attitudes toward them as they engaged in the *shura*.

4.1 Changes: Personal level

Knowledge and skills

Women who participated in the *shura* were seen to have become "wiser" in the words they used and the way they talked to people. All female and male officers of the *shuras* as well as their respective family members noted these changes, especially among women *shura* officers. The skills they learned were more of an offshoot of meeting other women and exchanging ideas and knowledge. One female family member of a *shura* officer explained that her mother learned a new skill from participating in *shura* meetings. Her mother has learned to milk their cow properly and earned an income out of a good business in making yoghurt. Another example of knowledge gained was the information linking women to the market of their embroidery.

The change in the women's knowledge was highlighted in the answers of the officers and their family members. While two male family members of women's *shura* officers noted that even before the NSP was introduced into their area, these women were inherently knowledgeable, there was also an acknowledgment that, in spite of this, they were not consulted on the decision-making process in the family and more so in the community. It was only after they were seen as capable of making decisions during the NSP sessions that family members trusted them with decisions in the household:

If she did not have good knowledge, she could not raise four sons and two daughters. Also, she is managing the household affairs of her daughters-in-law while they are living separately. She has always been a knowledgeable woman.

Rahim, 65, M, family member of women's *shura* treasurer

While my mother was clever even before, my father didn't consult with her. It is only now that he consults her. That time, my father partnered with his brothers in a business and because of that he was always consulting my uncles and he did not consult my mother.

Hashmat, 19, M, family member of women's *shura* assistant head

The male *shura* officers also affirmed this claim, while the women themselves said that they also began sharing their insights on community concerns.

The distinct change in knowledge that male informants and FGD participants saw was the way women's *shura* officers did specific roles attributed to be done by women rather than by men such as taking care of the house and rearing children. This change was also noted among the ordinary *shura* members.

There wasn't any specific training for the shura members, but...all the female staff from the FP were guiding the women of the shura in different areas of life, such as having good relations with family members, accommodating and [being] flexible with their family economic situation and not wanting their husbands to provide more things when finances were tight, for wives not to fight with their husbands over small issues, and to raise their children with good discipline.

Rasheed, 61, M, men's *shura* head

She learned from the [FP] female staff about how to relate to family members and people in the community.

Rahim, 65, M, family member of women's *shura* treasurer

Female *shura* officers also came to understand the value of women discussing issues in the community and activities that would benefit them. The 60-year-old head of the women's *shura* expressed this view as follows:

Because we are illiterate women, we don't know about anything except the skills we need to perform our housework. You know, before the NSP, we women did not gather to talk about things that concerned us. Now we understand that we women should sit together and talk with one another about [these] issues.

Dil Jan, 60, F, women's *shura* head

An ordinary member of the *shura* further claimed that due to her desire to learn about what was happening in the community, she asked her daughter to teach her to read and write.

This newfound knowledge of both women's *shura* officers and ordinary members was noted by other family members. An 18-year-old female family member of one of the female officers observed that the women started solving problems together and were advising each other. Male family members also noted that they learned new words and ways of dealing with visitors to their village. They observed that the women learned this from talking and meeting with the female FP staff. The family members also noted that these women had started listening to the radio to learn what was happening in their society; there was now a visible quest for information among women:

They charge their mobile phones and people also listen [to] the radio at night and learn about the news. It is good to listen to the radio because you get to know what is going on with our country and what other people are doing.

Bakhtawar, 30, F, family member of women's *shura* head

After the NSP, Mahjan tries to listen to the radio. When Mahjan hears something new from the radio she shares it with us too. Mahjan has always listened to the radio since she became a member of the shura. She seems to have developed a hunger for news.

Shahida, 18, F, family member of women's *shura* secretary

Further, an interesting observation from male community members was that both female and male members of the CDC had also become interested in sending girls to school.

Attitude and behaviour toward other family members

It was a common observation that even before the coming of the NSP, the women who participated in the *shura* had good relations with the other members of their households. The assistant head of the men's *shura* and some of the male family members of these women officers added that there was an extra value, because as women discussed among themselves about having good relationships within their households, and further as women learned about human rights, relations within the family became more respectful.

There were also changes that were noted that were not attributed to women's participation in the CDC. The reasons given were stepsons who used to maltreat the woman establishing their own households and no longer living with them; other changes in living arrangements; or that the female *shura* member had most of the authority inside the household because the other wife of her father was younger than her mother.

There were interesting revelations though on the attitudes of the women toward other family members, especially children. Two male family members of the officers of women *shura* and a male community member noted that the women encouraged the children to work and earn an income, and the women also found it necessary to send them to school. This was the influence of being exposed to educated people when the NSP was being implemented (e.g. social workers and engineers of the of the FP implementing the NSP in the community).

To serve the community

Women were asked why they joined the *shura*. While the discussion in the earlier part of this paper showed that the village elders had a major role in women's participation in the *shura*, some male family members affirmed that some of the women officers joined because they wanted to serve the people in the community and the NSP gave them the opportunity to do so that had previously been unavailable to them:

We learned that in our village something can happen to and for women. We women should sit together and talk about the issues in our village. Before the NSP, women did not talk or discuss about village issues. Now we villagers have learned that if the government or the NSP wants to have project, we women can express our ideas to the outsiders.

Bobo Gull, 55, F, women's *shura* assistant

Confidence-building

The confidence level of the women's *shura* officers and members varied. There were women's *shura* officers whose confidence increased as they continued talking to the FP staff who visited the village. However, there were also women officers and members of the *shura* who already have enough confidence even before the NSP staff arrived in the village:

My mother's courage and knowledge [was already high] even before the NSP was introduced to our community. My mother...studied at [the] mosque and she can recite [the] holy Quran...she has studied some other religious books. She thinks clearly and she can make good decisions whatever she does. But the improvement is now, she can talk very well with the men and women when there is need because she has participated in the meetings and learned how to relate and deal with people.

Hashmat, 19, M, family member, women's *shura* ordinary member

Self-esteem

The changes in the women officers' and ordinary members' self-esteem were not directly mentioned in the accounts of both the men and women informants and FGD participants. However, there were noticeable statements that implied that these participants gained self-esteem with the coming of the NSP. To illustrate, the women *shura's* treasurer said that they could easily inform any government representative or NGO that they had a *shura* with their own *shura* head separate from that of men. The accounts of both female and male family members could also reflect possible improvements in women's self-esteem when they articulated pride in having knowledgeable women in their community who: 1) could talk to other people and were respected by everyone; 2) teach women tailoring in order for them to earn money; and 3) give advice to pregnant women on how to keep both the mother and baby healthy, as illustrated in the account below:

My wife is an illiterate woman, but she uses common sense and the knowledge she gained in helping other women. When you are not educated, it means that you are nothing. But still my wife is very good and is helping the people and is supporting them through her work. What she has learnt from NSP and also from clinic, she uses to help others. For example, when women from our village give birth...she assists them because she had training in assisting women to deliver their babies and in taking care of pregnant women.

Rahim, 65, M, family member of woman's *shura* officer

4.2 Changes: Family level

Decision-making in the family

The answers of most male and female informants and FGD participants on women's decision-making in the family varied between the past and the present. There were female informants who said that women never took part in the decision-making on family matters in the past and the present, even if they now had their own *shura*. The head of the women's *shura* also articulated that among Pashtuns, it is forbidden for women to engage in decision-making because men are seen as the head of the family. She had come to believe that it was good for men to take care of decision-making. Some male informants admitted that they did make the decisions, but consulted their wives or other family members before doing so, with their wives able to make decisions for the family when they are not around.

However, even with the claim of women being forbidden to engage in decision-making, female informants claimed that there had been changes in women's participation in family decision-making when the NSP came into their area and women had their own *shura*. Box 1 below provides the views of two women officers on this aspect.

There were also female informants who noted that in their families, men and women decided together. These women expressed that this was better than deciding on their own because making decisions is a complicated process:

Always I decide with my husband. Even before the NSP, I decided with my husband and so too, now...It is difficult to make decisions alone.

Gull Bobo, 35, F, women's *shura* ordinary member

Hence, the influence of the NSP in the role women have in their families when it comes to making decisions was not sweeping; there were changes for some women while there

Box 1: The women's *shura* and decision-making in the family

Before the NSP, I did not have any money. Now, I have earned money and bought clothes, skirts and dishes. I have also gained authority because my husband is not working and my sons do not give me any money..Now, with my earnings I decide what to buy in the bazaar and I bring home a lot of things. Nowadays, I tell my husband and my sons what is right and what is not right. Now, I have a voice at home. I have also decided that my younger son will marry a literate woman. I went to her house two or three times. One time, my husband asked why I was eager to go out of the house. I said that I decided that my son should marry a literate girl. My husband smiled and said, "After the CDC project you have gained a lot of courage because now, you decide for yourself and you do not even speak to me on these things." I said, "I have gained a lot of courage and I am active and I have realised that I can decide for myself. Now, [I] have confidence in myself and I have other skills, all because I make good yogurt."

Homa, 60, F, women's *shura* treasurer

Before the NSP, women thought everything was dependent on men...I think it's good for women to think about their lives and make decisions within their families. As you see in the village, most of the women do embroidery and earn some money that way. Now, some women have authority in their families and make decisions with their men. Before the NSP, men said women accepted their word.

Dil Jan, 60, women's *shura* head

were none for others. There were also families who consulted each other in making decisions both before and after the NSP was introduced in Shah Limmar.

Power relations in the family (authority)

Similar to the discussion on decision-making, the inquiry on power relations in the family received varied responses. Still, significant differences in insights can be observed from the answers given by female and male informants. Only female informants noted that authority over family matters had changed from five or seven years ago. The secretary and the treasurer of the women's *shura* and family members of *shura* officers, including an ordinary member of the *shura*, explicitly said that women now had authority over matters that concerned their families. All of these informants said that men used to have all family authority in the past.

However, some informants claim that these changes were not solely because of the coming of the NSP or the establishment of the women's *shura*. For the treasurer, exposure of some family members to other countries when they migrated during conflict made them change their views on women's authority in the family. For a female ordinary member in the *shura*, she said that she had gained authority over her household when they lived separately from her in-laws.

The assistant head of the women's *shura* said that she had gained authority on particular matters of the household after the NSP in the areas of entertaining guests, deciding on meals, and doing the *seyali va shariki* (the social obligation of visiting neighbours with gifts on significant occasions such as births, weddings etc.).

Access to and control of family resources

Female and male informants still had diverse answers on whether there were changes in women's access to and control of family resources upon participation in the *shura*. The

female family members of the treasurer and assistant head of the women's *shura* noted that in the past, it was always the male family members, either their husbands or sons, who had full control of the family's money. After the women participated in the *shura*, however, they could decide on what to spend their money on, especially once some of them began earning.

There were nonetheless female and male informants who articulated that even at present, the husband or man of the household had full access and control of the resources of the family. The 30-year-old family member of the women's *shura* head declared that this was because the man was the one earning for the family, meaning that fathers or husbands decided on what to do with the family income.

Whenever my husband...earns money he gives the money to me to keep in the house, and I use that money to buy the things we need. My husband is a very good man. For several years my husband lived in Iran. There was no-one in house except me. When I earn money, I don't spend it money on household expenses; I always get that from my husband. I use the money that I earn to buy clothes and gold for myself and my daughters.

Gull Bobo, 35, F, women's *shura* ordinary member

Extent of mobility

The concept of mobility has always been, and even to some point exclusively, translated into the ability of the women to go to the bazaar without being accompanied, especially by men. This is supported by the responses obtained from the female and male officers and *shura* members. Even if these women officers and *shura* members were able to attend meetings without being accompanied, this was not mentioned when they were questioned on the extent of women's mobility.

People in the community also recognised the new role women undertook at the CDC, as the head of the CDC expressed:

It is true that now people know me as the head of the women's CDC. In the past, people knew the name of Dil Jan as Muhammad Gull's wife. Now people call me the head of the women's CDC. Other women are known in their own right as CDC members and not as the wives or mothers of anyone.

Family members' attitudes toward CDC members

With regard to family members' attitudes toward CDC members, the lives of the women who joined the *shura* have not changed much. From seven years ago until the present, many of the female and male informants attested that these women who participated in the *shura* were already well respected and treated in their families. Bakhtawar, a 40-year-old female family member of the head of the women's *shura* had this to say:

I feel very happy about my mother-in-law and I am proud that she is a very intelligent woman in the community and people know her as the head of the CDC and everyone listens to her. All young and old people respect her.

Bakhtawar, 40, F, family member, women's *shura* head

The account above summarises the situation of other officers of the women *shura* and it implies that the coming of the NSP in the village did not necessarily have the same effect on how family members treated women who participated in the *shura*. One explanation for this could be that these women were already from households where gender inequalities were not that prominent. Except for Mahjan, the secretary of the

women's *shura*, these women led better lives than the other women included in this study. Mahjan noted changes in terms of the attitude of family members toward her after she joined the *shura* (a contention supported by one of her family members):

Before the NSP, we had no electricity and at night we used the lamp, which did not give a good light. When the lamp oil ran out, we needed to ask someone to buy oil to light the lamp. One time, I told my son that there was no oil in the lamp and asked him to buy oil from Khulm City. He answered, "Where would I find money to buy oil for the lamp?" I became upset with him and gave him the money and asked him to get the oil, but my son refused because it was already late. He told me that he would buy the oil the following day. On another day, the same thing happened with my stepson. My stepson said that the lamp did not belong to him and that I should buy the oil myself. Always, the oil caused problems among us. Now, it is better for us because there is no need to buy oil and this is no longer a cause of conflict in the household. With the availability of solar power, I listen to the radio and I learn so much from listening to the radio. I [also] give my household members advice with what I hear.

Family violence

The issue of the past existence of family violence and the question of its decrease or increase relative to the present resulted in conflicting answers from female and male informants. There was a male family member of an ordinary member of the women's *shura* and a male family member of an NSP beneficiary who stated that family violence did not exist among the families in their area. They admitted to arguments within families, but not to family violence. However, the *shura*'s officials, both female and male, revealed that family violence did exist, but had decreased, saying that the NSP had helped reduce the incidence of family violence in their community:

When my husband saw that others were not being cruel to women, he also stopped committing hurtful acts within our family. Also, my sons saw that other sons helped with the household tasks, and so they help us in the house. The NSP staff also advised people during meetings to have good relationships and be patient with one another. [They] also encouraged the women to go out and talk with other women and learn from each other. My husband also sat in with the FP staff and told us what he heard during the meeting. [If] there is a wedding party or someone gives birth...I should go to be with other women and learn something new.

Homa, 60, F, women's *shura* treasurer

Yes, of course, [the NSP] has had an effect. When there was no fuel in the house for the lamp, wives were telling husbands to bring fuel from the bazaar. Sometimes, it caused problems in the house, because when men did not have money to buy fuel they didn't bring any and this caused arguments. Now, we do not have the problem in our families because we do not need to buy fuel.

Haleem, 60, M, men's *shura* treasurer

*It absolutely helps. When there are some issues or problems, we solve them quicker through the *shura* members. It has helped families as well. The NSP has benefitted the village. It had affected about 70-80 percent of the families in terms of solving problems and reducing family violence. For example, when women fight, they usually fight because of issues involving their children. But after the NSP, they have realised and listened carefully to what [the] FP staff say since they have advised about what people will do in a volatile situation that usually ends in a fight.*

Ali, 50, M, men's *shura* secretary

4.3 Community-level changes

Women's social status

Many of the female and male informants and FGD participants attested that there had been changes in the social status of women in their area. Ordinary *shura* members, both female and male, and their family members noted that women now related with each other much better than before:

The women did not relate well with each other in the past...But when they participated in NSP, they were able to relate better with each other, both within their families as well as with other community members, especially with other women.

Sadiq, 65, M, men's *shura* ordinary member

Lots of changes happened to the women after the NSP. They have better relationships with one another. Before, some of the women did not say hello to each other. Women did not have enough courage [and were too embarrassed to speak out]. Now, if you look at the women, they have good relationships with each other. When some women learn new things, they share them with other women in the community.

Ali, 50, M, men's *shura* secretary

People also appreciated the courage and openness that women now possessed after they had attended *shura* meetings and discussed matters concerning the village:

The shura was good for women, it opened their eyes. Now they have mobility, they have the courage to talk, they can go to the bazaar and they understand what people say...Women's behaviour with each other has got better too, they go to each other's houses and they have very good relations. They could talk, but as I know they have got more experienced and learned new things from other people, especially the women who were coming from offices.

Rahim, 65, M, family member, women's *shura* ordinary member

Most of all, women realised that they needed to take part in community affairs for the betterment of their lives:

When the FP social worker came to our village to talk with women about the CDC project and other things, women listened to what she said. The women learned from her and requested tailoring and livestock projects for women. Before the NSP, women did not know how to demand something for women in the community, even in their family. Although the women's project was rejected by men, the women understood why the solar project had to be selected. Before the NSP, women were not consulted in the community and when men wanted to do something, they just discussed it among themselves and then went ahead and did it—both in their families and in the community. Before the NSP, men did not care and did not pay attention to women's words. After the NSP, women understood that [they need] to talk about things in their community. Now, most of the women say that they wish they could have a tailoring project.

Amena, 45, F, women's *shura* ordinary member

Some of these changes in how women saw themselves and how they were perceived by the people in the village were attributed to the coming of the NSP.

Community attitudes toward those engaging in the women's *shura*

The responses of both female and male informants and FGD participants reveal that community members were not at first in favour of women having their own *shura*. Eventually, as they saw the changes in the way women managed their lives, families, and the way they interacted with other community members, they became happy that women had engaged in the *shura*.

To cite an example, the secretary of the women's *shura* stated that people in their area generally felt that women should not go out of the house and just take care of affairs inside the home instead. However, they then had a positive experience of women's participation in the project in their community. From then on, they never had objections to women joining the *shura*. Mahjan also explained that her personal experience of participating in the *shura* was an empowering one:

My family is happy with me. I served [in the shura] and I worked very hard. I have also gained courage after the NSP. I have learned how to interact with the people in the community and how to look for them in their houses. Also, now our whitebeard and other elders respect me...and they say that I do tailoring and I go to the area office. When something happens in the village, the whitebeard and the elders will call me and tell me what happened. They trust me because I was able to handle the responsibilities given to me in the past. And now, they want me to help them.

Mahjan, 58, F, women's *shura* secretary

The narratives of Homa, the treasurer of the women's *shura* and her female family member also reflect how people in their community, especially the men, changed their views of women and their participation in the NSP. She did not directly state that community members opposed women's participation in the *shura* before; however, her statements, "Our people did not interfere with the elders' word because our village elders allowed the women to participate in the CDC," and, "People cannot interfere with the government and the elders' word," reveal enough about resistance from community members. Nonetheless, she mentioned that it was the first time people had seen women holding positions in their village:

Our people accepted our elders' decision to allow women to participate in the NSP CDC. Women took part in the CDC project and formed their own subcommittee according to their suggestion. After the NSP project, the old men in our community were happy with the women's participation in the CDC. The old people said that it was very good for the village women; a lot of women gained courage.

However, there was an emphasis on male FP staff interacting with male community members and female FP staff interacting with female community members. Hence, it is still important for implementing organisations to have corresponding male and female workers at the community level. It was acceptable for community residents that, as FP staff came to the community, the males interacted with male community members, while the female staff talked to the women. The box below contains their statements.

4.4 Valuing skills obtained from engaging in the *shura*

The women in this community did not have the tailoring or literacy courses that other women in the other two study communities took as subprojects upon establishing their own subcommittee. Only one project, solar power, was identified for the whole community

because of its cost. No other subproject could be funded since the solar panels used the whole budget for the community. Furthermore, the community had to supplement the fund as it was not enough to buy solar panels for each community resident. Solar panels were distributed to community members who gave their share of the cost in purchasing them. Nevertheless, as women *shura* officers and members participated in NSP activities, they developed some skills, one of which was getting information. Shaima, a 55-year-old female family member of the women's *shura* secretary said that Mahjan (the secretary) now listened to the radio in order to share new information with other people. Sabera, a female family member of the women's *shura* treasurer also shared that Homa (the treasurer) did not know how to properly milk their cow. She learned how to do it by talking to women who were also actively participating in the *shura*. Now, their family has enough milk from their cow.

The behaviour of the women in our village has changed a lot. As I said before, if some people from an NGO come to our village and call a meeting, the women of this village are ready to see them, no matter whether they are men or women. For example, my wife is now ready to talk with you and discuss some projects with you, if you have some projects. It is all because of the NSP.

Bashir, 47, M, family member of women *shura* ordinary member

Box 2: Within the norms: Starting right, ending right

People didn't prevent their wives because when women from the NSP FP came, they talked with women in the village and when men from the NSP came, they talked with the men. No-one prevented the women from talking to the outsiders at that time [Usually male family members do not allow women in their households to interact with people from the outside of the community, especially men].

Moben, 41, M, community member

At that time when women came, they sat with women and the men sat with men. This was the reason that people didn't have negative feelings.

Jamil, 40, M, community member

Now women are seen in a positive light. For example, women didn't have good relationships with others in the past, but now they have good relations and they are perceived positively, especially those who are *shura* members. Women who go out of their homes were perceived as not "good women" in the past. Nowadays, they are seen as good women [since they are doing volunteer work] and other women respect them a lot. The *shura* members were respected because they were the key members of the *shura* and they also informed other people about its activities. They informed other women about something the NGO had said. Before the programme, it was not clear which women were clever and which ones weren't; who was good and who was bad. When the programme came, their abilities were shown to others, especially when meetings were held.

Jamil, 40, M, community member

It is safe to say then that these women gained interpersonal communication skills after they were exposed to the activities of the *shura*.

Furthermore, they learned to aspire for their children as they decided to send them to school. With their interaction with the FP and NSP staff, they realised that it was valuable to have an education. Since they were too old to go to school, they wanted their children to acquire the education that they lacked.

4.5 Conclusion

The coming of the NSP in Shah Limmar benefitted the people in the area in spite of some issues being raised. The majority of the female and male informants and FGD participants expressed their gratitude for the programme and the FP staff.

As to its specific effects on women, both female and male informants and FGD participants claimed that women who attended *shura* activities were far better off than those who did not. At the personal level, the observable changes on women were: 1) they now listened for new information and shared it with other women; 2) they learned the value of interacting with other women as well as other people; 3) they now engaged in income-generating activities such as embroidery and tailoring; 4) they now saw the importance of being aware of what was happening in the community and the other communities around them; and 5) they were more aware of the value of education and were now sending their young children to school, both girls and boys. Even the FP staff interviewed said that the women who engaged in the *shura*'s activities had become active in the community.

At the family level, joining the *shura* made family members realise the potential that women have. They saw that women are capable of handling responsibilities in the family that are not just related to household chores. Women can earn an income and can participate in community affairs. With men's and women's awareness of the rights and capabilities of the women, family violence in some families had also decreased. Furthermore, women had more access to and control of the family's resources once they started to earn money.

At the community level, since people's reactions to the NSP and the *shuras* were positive, women's mobility within and outside the village improved. As women gained confidence and knowledge, their status in society also improved. It is also interesting to note that women, and people in the village in general, were now open to sending their children to school.

The feedback from all the female and male informants and FGD participants shows that they were quite surprised at seeing women in positions in the community and even engaging in discussions involving community matters. However, with their positive experience with the project, acceptance of this new phenomenon did happen in spite of the initial resistance.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study on women's participation in the NSP in Shah Limmar tell us that if given the opportunity and the venue to explore their capabilities and express them, women can go beyond the traditional role that is expected of them and have a positive impact in their families and communities.

The women's *shura* created a space for women to take stock of what they could do for themselves, their families and the community. The first test of women's *shura* validity was their involvement in the selection of a project for the village. Although there were issues on this, the effects of women's engagement in their own *shura* are impossible to ignore. There were other issues with regard to women's decision-making power and role in the implementation of the project compared to that of the men's subcommittee; however, these issues do not detract from the changes that occurred in women's lives as a result of their involvement in the *shura*. Attendance at the *shura*'s activities made women realise that:

- They were part of the community and that they too had a responsibility to it;
- Being community members, they should take part in decision-making on community events;
- If they had a skill that they thought would benefit other women, this should be shared; and
- They could come together and discuss projects that would benefit women locally, especially if there were NGOs that would be coming to their area.

It also made men acknowledge the rights of the female members of the community. Despite the issues on the selection and decision of the project for the community, men sought the opinion of women.

Having their own subcommittee enabled women to interact with each other, meet, and discuss things that affected them at the personal, family, or community level. The *shura* also gave women the courage to ask questions, even from people who were not from their area. The women in the community cooperated with each other, helping or assisting each other in family events.

The *shura* was a vehicle for women's mobility within and outside the community. It can be gleaned from the answers of female and male informants that the *shura* facilitated the change in women's mobility, especially once the women developed good relationships with each other. They could now visit each other's houses and even go to the bazaar and other places as well. Young women could not go to the bazaar alone, but they could go with other women.

The groundwork conducted in the implementation of the NSP in the area facilitated the changes that happened in the lives of people, particularly the women in Shah Limmar. However, one of the shortcomings identified by a few of the officers of the *shura* and of the FP staff was that the solar power project implementation was quite brief and there was not much community activity to involve both women and men or mobilise them into action for community endeavours. The gestation period of the project was too brief to train women and men in project management. However, the creation of the women's *shura* in this case gave the women the opportunity to do something more for themselves and for their fellow women. The solar power project, although initially not favoured

by the women, enabled them to embroider and sew at night. Although this has actually increased the work of women at home and may double if not triple their burden, the women found this to be a positive change in their lives. Some of them earned their own money that they could spend on their own, meaning that they no longer needed to ask men for money to meet their own needs and those of the household. Finally, women who joined the *shura* learned the value of education, and had started to send their children to school.

This level of transition in women's lives needs to be sustained since women previously did not have much authority in terms of project selection for their community. Their participation in the project implementation was minimal compared to that of the men.

Nevertheless, these transformations in the women's lives are giant steps. The changes, no matter how small, are but a start for the women to move on and negotiate for their greater empowerment. Thus, community initiatives such as the activities initiated by the NSP need to be sustained. Furthermore, the interplay of both facilitating and hindering factors of women's participation in the NSP activities needs a closer examination.

5.1 Factors that facilitated women's participation

- The decision of the elders to encourage women to form a subcommittee of their own as well as convince the men to allow the women to do so. If the elders had not been open to involving women in the NSP, it would have been an uphill battle for women to participate in the programme.
- The respect that community members have for their elders. At first, the people, especially the men in the area, did not agree to women being involved in the programme. They were even adamant against women talking to outsiders, even if these were female FP staff. However, their deference to their elders led to the establishment of a women's *shura*.
- Older women as officers and members of the *shura*. The elders were conscious of who should compose the women's *shura*. The selection of older women addressed the fears of the men in the community. In a way, the elders' intervention facilitated the changes that happened to the women involved in the *shura* (e.g. the granting of certain rights and freedom in the areas of decision-making, access to and control of resources, mobility, and authority). It would have been a different picture and much more negotiation would have been needed if young women had been chosen.
- Women with pre-existing authority as officers. The interviews with the women officers of the *shura* revealed that they already occupied certain roles in the community. For instance, the treasurer of the women's *shura* was a health worker even before she became an officer.
- Women's desire to be of help and to participate in community activities. Even though there were misconceptions of the NSP at the start, these women's wish to be active in the community was immediately galvanised when the elders insisted on their attendance in its activities. It can be assumed that if the women were not interested, they would not have had ill feelings toward the project selection.
- Support of the women's families. There were objections at the start, but the family members of those who involved themselves and participated in the *shura* gave their support when they saw how the women had changed with the coming of the NSP.
- Positive perception of NSP. The fact that women were sought out and were invited to participate in the programme made women realise for the first time that they

could contribute to community-building. Information that the community residents obtained about NSP from the radio was positive; hence, there was a positive anticipation of what NSP could do for the community.

5.2 Lessons learned: Factors that hindered women's participation

Factors that hindered the women's participation in the *shura* were only present when the NSP was introduced to Shah Limmar. These factors were: 1) the misconceptions of what would happen to women who participated in the *shura*; and 2) the hesitation of the male family members regarding their women talking with male FP staff. Both were addressed before the men's and women's *shuras* selected and decided on a project. However, there was a stronger fear of allowing younger women to participate in the *shura* due to misconceptions of intent as well as the fact that younger women in the family were busier with housework compared to the older female family members.

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