Case Studies Series

GENDER AND LOCAL LEVEL DECISION MAKING:
Findings from a Case Study in Panjao

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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About the Author

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)

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

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Glossary of Hazaragi and Dari Terms

Afghanis (*Afs*) – the official Afghan currency (one dollar = 43 Afs)
Aghil – village, sometimes considered a "hamlet" or "sub-village"
Akhund – elder with some religious knowledge
Arbab – local leader appointed by the *uleswal*
Beg – rich landowner
Dogh – sour milk drink
Eid – Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan
Gilem – rugs made using a weaving technique
Hashar – communal reciprocal work
Hazaras – a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan
Hazaragi – language of the Hazara people, a dialect of Persian
Kalantar – community elder
Khana doodee – smoky house, or household
Khondan – singing songs of the prophet
Madrassa – Islamic school
Manteqa – a relative term, with meaning depending on the context, loosely translating to "area" or "place"
Moharram – the Arabic month that honours the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson
Mullah – Islamic cleric
Naan - bread
Namad – felt carpet made by women from sheep's wool
Naqes ul aqal – one with little knowledge
Nazr – religious and social ceremony
Pashto – language spoken by the Pashtun ethnic group
Pashtun – ethnic group
Purdah – separation of women from men; literally "curtain"
Qaryadar – village chief
Quam – from Arabic, meaning people, nation, tribe, group and indicating a solidarity group
Quran – the holy book of Islam
Qwam - solidarity groups that have a common male ancestor, such as lineages or tribes
Sayyed – descendent of the Prophet Mohammad through Fatima
Seer – seven kilos of grain
Shura – traditional council of elders
Takhiyakhana - mosque
Tayefa – from Arabic, referring to lineage group
Tayefa Mulkhdur – lineage group with land
Uleswal – district governor

Glossary of Gender Concepts and Terms[1]

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

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[1] For a useful resource on guidelines related to gender equality, see "DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality." Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: Paris. 1998. For Afghan context, see also Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. *Report of the EC Rapid Reaction Mechanism Assessment, Afghanistan, Gender Guidelines*. European Commission Conflict Prevention and Crisis Management Unit. April 2002.

[2] Kabeer, N. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. Verso: New York. 1994, 304.

[3] Uphoff, N. *Local Institutional Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases*. Kumarian Press: Conneticut. 1986.

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

[5] Kabeer, op cit.

[6] See Moser's Triple Roles Framework, 1989, and the work of economist Diane Elson.

[7] Moser, op cit.

Section I: Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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[8] For further discussion on the causes and consequences of this bias, see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. "Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-first Century". In *Nation-Building Unravelled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*, Donini, A., Niland N., and Wermester K., Eds. Kumarian Press: Bloomfield. 2004.
[9] See Appendices I and II for information on the conceptual background to this study.
[10] It was agreed with each NGO partner that findings would be considered and integrated into their programming and that AREU would work with them to identify appropriate ways to feed the findings back into the communities of study.

This case study explores these themes within a small rural village in Panjao district, Bamyan province. The study was conducted in June 2004.

Summary of Findings in Panjao

- **Local level gender roles, responsibilities and norms determine the types of decisions that different men and women are entitled to participate in, and have influence and control over.** The eldest women are said to have control over decisions related to the household, including the distribution of work to younger women, while the eldest men are said to have control over decisions that take place outside of the household.

- **Household composition, combined with personality of household members, are important determinants of how decision making takes place.** For this reason, the descriptions of men's and women's roles given by participants are not always an accurate reflection of how decision making processes are actually carried out. This is due to local gender norms[11] which deem it generally inappropriate for women to participate fully in community life and take leadership positions.

- **Women's movement is relatively unfettered for reasons linked to certain productive responsibilities, and may also be for other economic reasons.** It is however restricted for occasions considered to only be social with no productive benefit.

- **Local perceptions of the levels of knowledge held by different men and women may be important determinants of the acceptability of their participation in different types of household and community decision making.** Women are generally perceived to have no knowledge, providing an important constraint to their participation in public life. This perception is linked to the norms around women's participation in public life that limit their freedom of movement[12] and access to information.

- **The persistence of the rhetoric that women have "no knowledge", may be an important strategy for those with power to ensure that those without it do not challenge assumptions about appropriate sets of behaviour.**

- **Women's and men's authority seem to expand with the absence, illness, or infirmity of older household males.** There were examples, particularly of women who embraced these additional responsibilities, who had confidence and increased their status among other women.

- **While women and men meet together in certain circumstances, women do not feel comfortable to use their voices in these settings.** They come together in the mosque *(takhiyakhana)* and other social spaces, and are able to meet together as the Village Organization (VO), but women's participation is primarily symbolic.

- **There is a perception that local community leadership – both male and female - and institutions *(shura)* have been weakened, however they are still influential in community level decision making.**

- **Neither local level institutions nor the VO are perceived by villagers to address social issues, and while there is some evidence that the old *shura* used to, it does not anymore.** As a consequence, there is no institution seen to be helping the villagers to solve problems of a social nature.

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[11] Gender norms are linked to religious norms, including those dictated by expectations that women should be secluded from men (*purdah)* and that male honor is attached to women's behaviour *(namus)* and upholding of *purdah*.
[12] This freedom of movement is limited by *purdah* norms and is strongly linked to the preservation of family pride.

- **While landless men saw themselves as powerless to influence community level decision making, landless women were able to be influential among the women.** There were likely at least three lineages in the village, one with land, one without and the *sayyed*.[13]

- **There was little trust and solidarity among the villagers, creating an obstacle to fully inclusive community participation.** This was due in part to the high proportion of landless in the village, who are considered to be transient members of society.

- **There are apparently no institutions that deal with the particular concerns of women.** Due to social norms that deem it inappropriate for household and personal issues, particularly conflicts, to be raised in public, women do not frequently raise gender specific problems nor do they discuss them, at least to outsiders.

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[13] *Sayyeds* are are considered to be direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammad through his wife Fatima.

Section II: Background on Study

Description of Methodology

Partner Selection

For each field study, AREU chose NGO partners based on their experience of working with communities, their interest in improving their work with women, their capacity to facilitate research and their ability to advise on security.[14] The case study in Panjao was supported by Oxfam GB. They were chosen because of their experience in the region and their strong organisational commitment to principles of participation, community driven development and gender equality. One of the objectives of the research is to provide insights into appropriate entry points for promoting the increased participation of women in decision making processes that affect the welfare of women, their families and communities as a whole.

Field Site Selection

The research team looked for diversity in their overall field site selection[15], and within the field sites to the extent possible. The choice of field sites was limited to those where facilitating partners ran projects. The community of study in Panjao was chosen on the basis of socio-economic profiles collected by Oxfam, as well conversations with key staff in the communities[16] they work with. The research team looked for a site where a Village Organisation (VO) had been established and where women were involved.[17] The researchers were told that there was a mixed *shura*[18] in this particular area and were interested to see

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Box 1: Village description

The primary field site for this case study was the village of Obtoo, located in a region of central Afghanistan known as the Hazarajat. Obtoo is off of a bumpy single track road that runs through the *Dare Ghorghori* valley between Panjao and Yakawalang.

Oxfam established a Village Organization (VO) in Obtoo four years ago. It once had a traditional *shura* that met regularly but the system was disrupted during the war and in the mid 1990s the *arbab* (village headman) left the area. Oxfam sought to build on the traditional *shura* when they established the new VO.

There are about thirty households or smoky houses (*khana e doodee)* in the village. All services, including a health clinic, shops and schools are a few hours away either by foot or donkey ride. There are two Oxfam trained midwives in the village.

The main economy is agriculture, primarily irrigated wheat and animal husbandry, though the latter is not as significant as it used to be. The villagers are mostly landless, and even those with land have no more than a few *jeribs* (one *jerib* equals 2000 square metres). There are three pairs of cows in the village, and villagers use them in rotation and exchange. Those who have no cows have to pay to plough their land. Some families have sent sons to Iran to work, and while people complained of the lack of assistance provided to them by migrant family members, the level of remittances was not explored.

Panjao and surrounding areas have been impacted at different times by the incursion of *kuchis*, *mujahidin* and the Taliban. The proximity of the village to Panjao, may have influenced the villagers' attitudes towards outsiders, and it has been said that the region's negative experiences with outsiders has contributed to a more conservative and closed atmosphere.

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[14] The partner organisations for the Gender and Local Level Decision Making Project were as follows: DACAAR (in Robat Sangi, Herat), Save the Children and the Community Forum Development Organization (in Mazar e Sharif), AfghanAid (in Hazrat e Sultan and Khoram, Samangan), Oxfam (in Panjao, Bamyan) and UN Habitat (in Kabul).
[15] This diversity was sought in terms of geography, ethnicity, economic status and education levels.
[16] For a discussion on on the difficulties "finding community" in this context and more generally see below.
[17] Village Organisations have been established by Oxfam, in an effort to formalise existing informal community institutions with an emphasis on trying to empower the poor to participate in development processes.
[18] The term *"shura"* was used by Oxfam staff and villagers to describe both the Oxfam initiated VO and the more traditional local *shura*. In fact, these institutions overlap a great deal. This paper will indicate where use of the term *"shura"* refers to the traditional institution.

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how men and women were involved in decision making. The research took place primarily within the village of Obtoo.[19] A secondary site near to Obtoo called Qale Nau was also studied because of the close social ties between the elders of the two villages.

Participant Selection
The research team initially met with the community leadership as pointed out to them by the partner NGO. A VO meeting was arranged, and the researchers were introduced to the community in this relatively formal setting, gaining the permission of the elders[20] to continue the field work over the course of several weeks. This initial VO meeting included one male or female representative from each household in the village and was a good way to spread the word about the researchers' presence and explain their research objectives. As the village was small, the research team attempted to interview at least one person from each household. They started by interviewing elder men and women, and asked them to introduce the team to other people in the area who they have helped or who have helped them. In reality the researchers were limited to those who had time to talk with them as many of the villagers were extremely busy with their daily work. The team returned to those participants who had illustrative stories to tell in terms of gender relations in their households and at the community level - and who were willing to speak with the researchers.

Research techniques[21]
The research was carried out by a team of three: one female American team leader with extremely limited Dari; one female Afghan research assistant with fluent Dari and Pashtu; and one male Afghan research assistant, with fluent Hazaragi, Dari and Pashtu. The same team carried out the research for all but one of the case studies.[22] In general, the male assistant held discussions with men and the female assistant held discussions with women. The team leader alternated between the two over the course of the study. Given the nature of the questions the researchers were asking and the potential for people to assume that the team had some aid to provide, they were particularly careful to not raise expectations. The researchers attempted to clearly state their intentions at the beginning of each meeting. The work is exploratory in the sense that specific areas of inquiry were defined within each field site based on participants' responses to more general questions about household and village or neighbourhood level issues and priorities.

The basic research methodology used in Panjao was as follows:

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

- **Observation and participant observation** was intended to allow the researchers and participants to slowly familiarise themselves with each other and as a method to check the validity of what was said, versus visual observations. This was undertaken throughout the field studies in order to contribute to the findings from other techniques. The research in Panjao used participant observation much more than in other locations simply because of the heavy workload and resulting time constraints of the villagers. In one example, while the two female researchers interviewed an elderly man, the male researcher irrigated his field in order to free

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[19] The names of villages and villagers have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.
[20] The term "elders" is a term of respect that refers to a social group, primarily made up of men, determined not only by their age, but also experience of life and standing within the community.
[21] The team spent approximately 2 ½ weeks in Hazarajat in June 2004.
[22] This is with the exception of the case study in Robat e Sangi, Herat where a different national female assisted with the research.

his time. The team benefited from spending time in people's homes, in their fields, in the mountains and by "helping" participants with their chores.[23]

Data Analysis

Notes from all interviews and observations were written up and discussed at the end of each day. The interviews, life histories and focus groups were coded according to a codebook of themes developed during the first study in rural Herat which enabled a rough form of narrative analysis to be carried out on the data. All issues of concern to the participants were viewed from a gender perspective.

Context

According to a baseline study prepared by Oxfam for the UN in 2000, Hazarajat is home to some of the poorest people in Afghanistan, and has some of the most mountainous and least agriculturally productive land in the country.[24] The people who live in this region are primarily from the *Hazara* ethnic group, most of whom are S*hi'a* Muslims, and are an ethnic minority in Afghanistan. In 2000 only about 17% of people were able to meet their own food needs and have surplus to help their neighbours. Panjao is generally considered to be the coldest district in Bamyan Province and one of the coldest in the Hazarajat region.

The report points out that the area was relatively unaffected by the war, until the Taliban entered the Hazarajat in late 1998. However, it has always suffered from the war's indirect effects which led to the increasing impoverishment of its people. The landless, which made up about 22% of the people in Hazarajat in 2000, have been particularly vulnerable, but are followed closely by the landed. Livestock prices dropped in 1997 during the Taliban's blockade of the area, and have never fully recovered. Despite the perseverance of a few NGOs, including Oxfam, fewer aid organizations are active in this area compared to other parts of the country, and the provision of aid is often driven more by accessibility of the populations rather than their needs.[25]

The first attempts by outsiders to document the social and cultural life of the Hazarajat were made in the late 1800s by the British. At this time the area had only recently been opened to outsiders by the government sanctioned forceful occupation of *Hazara* land by Pashtuns. Around this time, attempts were made to create tribal lists that break down the *Hazara* "tribe" by blood descent groups, but they are considered by today's scholars to be incomplete and potentially inaccurate. Researchers familiar with the region believe that blood ties have largely broken down as a result of central government policies to settle people from other parts of Afghanistan in the region. They argue that affiliations are now constantly shifting, depending more on social representations and values than on any more easily verifiable facts.[26]

There has been little work done to understand gender relations in the Hazarajat. While Mousavi writes elaborately on the social and political awareness of the *Hazaras*, and their increasing interest in social equity and justice, there is little written to explain how pervasive this ideology is throughout the Hazarajat (particularly as compared to *Hazara* populations in urban areas). Little is known as to whether this ideology on social justice extends to principles of gender equity. According to the baseline report, which largely interviewed men, "Panjao was seen as closed and conservative, a general feature that did not only relate to the situation of women." Interestingly, there is a perception that *Hazaras* are freer in their gender relations and that the mobility of *Hazara* women is much greater than that of the other ethnic groups. This small scale research attempts to shed some light

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[23] While this certainly assisted with the research and the team were grateful for the participants' willingness to let them participate in aspects of village life, the researchers did at times feel that they were burdening people and attempted to prevent this further. The technique takes a delicate balance of patience and perceptivity.
[24] Johnson, C. *Hazarajat Baseline Study – Interim Report*. Strategic Monitoring Unit (for the UN Co-ordinator's Office): Kabul. March 2000, 1.
[25] Johnson, op cit., 6.
[26] Monsutti, Allesandro, "The Impact of War on Social, Political and Economic Organization in Southern Hazarajat", Unpublished, 2004.

on this premise, which the author would venture has more to do with outsiders' interpretations of visual indications of freedom - such as less frequent use of the *burqa* - than it has to do with more substantive issues, such as participation and autonomy in private and public life.[27] The apparent freedom of women in Hazarajat may be related more to economic need rather than liberal attitudes; the tough geography and poverty of the area requires that women take on responsibilities outside the home in addition to traditional household tasks.

Finding "community": *manteqa, qwam, aghil* and *tayefa*

The cultural norms that dictate how men and women should behave and relate to each other are likely to differ between communities. It is accepted that the definition of communities and the boundaries that define them are fluid as well as subjective. Researchers on the Hazarajat region, like Monsutti and Glatzer[28], have identified multiple, and sometimes overlapping, forms of solidarity groups (lineages, larger tribal sections, hamlets, *manteqa* [area]). Because of the research team's interest in working at least initially through the Oxfam VO as an example of a community development project, they used the area that this VO included – an *aghil* - as the starting point.

View of Obtoo

From there they sought to get a sense of where people's solidarity lay. This was important because the definition of "communities" by external actors can be based on false assumptions about where solidarity lies, and often do not account for the difference of experience among and between men and women. In addition, as with culture and gender norms, forms of solidarity shift and change over time to accommodate the context.

One interesting question, although not within the scope of this research, is whether there may be different notions of gender relations within different spaces of solidarity. This should be an area of interest to actors seeking to engage in development initiatives that aim to work in a participatory manner. This would be of particular interest to initiatives that seek to work on a very local level as well as area based initiatives, and that eventually will wish to link projects to the district level. For example, in one community the researchers visited with Oxfam the VO included not just one but several area villages to ensure that enough people would benefit from it. It was not clear how the villages were linked, whether they shared a sense of solidarity and where there were differences and similarities in gender relations. Women-specific initiatives, such as women's centers - established by NGOs, UNIFEM, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) and other groups - that seek to engage women from different areas would also need to take this into account.

Of course any notion of community implies not only inclusion, but also exclusion. In order for there to be any degree of solidarity around identity, there also need to be opposing identities that make up other communities. The trust and solidarity in the area looked at in the case study probably extended beyond Obtoo, certainly throughout the valley, and likely

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[27] The "private" sphere is often referred to as women's domain with public space being considered the domain of men. This distinction has lent itself to simplified understandings of access to decision making processes. It is a somewhat artificial divide, that is determined by that which is visible when decisions that affect a community are made, but that does not take into account the relationship between how decisions are made at a household level and what gets decided on at a community level. Also as Grima points out in her work on Pashtuns, every interaction with another individual is determined by established expectations in that kinship tie, giving different meaning to the concept of "private" depending on socio-cultural context. Grima, B. *The Performance of Emotion Among Paxtun Women: The misfortunes which have befallen me*. University of Texas Press. 1992, 71.
[28] Glatzer, Bernt. "War and Boundaries in Afghanistan: Significance and Relativity of Local and Social Boundaries," in *Weld des Islams*. Leiden 41: 3. 2001, 379-399.

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due to war, migration and displacement even beyond this. For instance, people commented several times on their solidarity with "all *Hazaras*." Yet even within the small community of Obtoo, there was marginalisation on the basis of gender, age and economic status.

In trying to understand the boundaries of community, the research team initially inquired about the concept of *qwam* (referring to solidarity groups that have a common male ancestor, such as lineages, tribes, ethnic groups) based on lineage. But it was found that this term had no significance in Obtoo. While in many rural areas "the society structure is tribal or arranged by lineages," other forms of social connections between individuals and groups exist and may not be readily apparent to outsiders. The notion of social networks, which examines the basis of these connections, allows one to see that Afghan society is structured along more flexible lines than are usually acknowledged.[29]

Indeed, as Monsutti points out this can mean different things to different people, and that it is "not due to conceptual vagueness, but expresses the fact that the relevant identity depends on the context and the supposed knowledge that people facing each other attribute to one another." In other words, people in the village may have assessed the research team's level of knowledge, and represented themselves and relations within the village – as well as to other villages – according to this assessment.[30]

Even within Obtoo, it was found that men and women had different perspectives on community and whether they were a part of the community in the village. In a room that included two younger landless men and two elder landed men, the research team were told that villagers are distinguished by their *tayefa*.[31] A *tayefa* was described as a relative group, with many households living together. In Obtoo, these divisions coincided with being landed, landless or *sayyed*.

Box 2: Introduction to key participants in this study.

Afghan Gul is a middle aged landless woman with six sons and five daughters. She is effectively the head of the household, as her husband (Muhammad Hassan) is old and unable to work. She is considered to be "courageous" by other women in the village and is responsible for managing the financial aspects of social functions organised by the village women.

Yassine is a *sayyed* woman in her early twenties with one baby. She came from a wealthier village in a neighbouring valley, and has strong views about the situation of women in the village. She is interested in being educated and admires the situation of urban women which she sees as better than hers.

Sahar is a middle aged woman with ten children. She is married to Hakim, a landed migrant worker who is the VO representative. She acts as a representative in his absence.

Muhammad Hassan is the husband of Afghan Gul, and has not worked for the past six years because of heart problems. He can often be found in the mosque, praying with other older men.

Bashir is likely the largest land owner in the village and is an elder of the community. He has wide social networks and is able to gain assistance from other members of the Obtoo community.

Rahim is the brother-in-law of Sahar, and the brother of Hakim. He is the de facto representative of the VO in the absence of the brother, and was often seen travelling from one social function in the valley to another, indicating the extent of his family's social networks.

Interestingly, when women were asked they were much less certain, and described their *tayefas* as the villages they grew up in. This could be related to women's general uncertainty when talking to outsiders, but also to the fact that men and women share different social spaces, and thus are likely to have different perspectives on the same issues as well as those particular to their situation. On several occasions landless men

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[29] Pers. Comm., Alessandro Monsutti, 20 October 2004.
[30] It is difficult to say what this was. The composition of the team included one *Hazara* male, but he had not grown up in the Hazarajat and knew as little of local norms as the other team members.
[31] A *tayefa* translates into a clan or a tribe. Mousavi, S. *The Hazaras of Afghanistan: An Historical, Cultural, Economic, and Political Study.* St. Martin's Press, Inc. October 1997, 238.

referred to themselves as transient, and not bound socially to the rest of the community. One man who had lived in the village for five years stated: "I do not know about community decision making, because I am new here." His mother, on the other hand, enjoyed a level of respect among the women and was a key participant in social functions that women were involved with. By contrast, community leaders did not discuss any differences among community members in terms of their social ties or participation in community life. This likely reflects the reality of power dynamics within the village and the area more generally. It is also likely to some extent, a reflection of the villagers' perceptions of the research team.[32]

Understanding the composition of a community, particularly in terms of defining the differences among its members, likely impacts a great deal on development initiatives. During a brief visit to Tagaborg with the Oxfam team, the research team observed a VO in an area that was more wealthy than Obtoo. The women were much more outspoken in this village, and in fact held the male representative accountable for failure to address the main concerns of the villagers. When the research team enquired why this village seemed more active, they were told by the Oxfam Team Leader that it was because the village was made up of more landowners than in Obtoo. In fact, he relayed that it had been much easier to organise VOs and implement community development projects in areas where there are more resources and landed people. This is presumably because those without land may pick up and leave at any time in search of cheaper land, and as a result are less included in community decision making.[33]

There are of course positive and negative ideas of difference within communities, and the example of the *sayyeds* appeared to be seen as a positive one in some respects. *Sayyeds* are considered to be direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammad and have traditionally enjoyed high status in *Hazara* communities, regardless of their personal wealth. Judging primarily from observation, it appeared that the *sayyeds* in the village were respected. One day the research team observed an elder from a neighbouring village greeting a *sayyed* male by kissing his hand. When asked why the man had kissed his hand, he said "we are *sayyed* and we are from the Prophet Mohammad's family and they respect us and kiss our hands." *Sayyeds* have traditionally played an important role in conflict resolution because they do not belong to *Hazara* tribes, but their social position has not been without conflict. For instance, there is a general tendency for *sayyed* women to be forbidden from marrying non-*sayyed* men.[34] This was voiced by an Oxfam staff member as a source of prejudice and division within communities that was harmful to the community and needed to be addressed.

The research team had hoped to learn more about the social networks of the participants in the community of study, but it was difficult to do this as systematically as hoped, in part because people were so busy. Both male and female villagers generally described good relations between Obtoo and neighbouring villages. They exchange their daughters in marriage, attend each others' funerals and weddings, participate in monthly *nazr* together, help each other to make *namad,* spin each others' wool, and share *aghil* news between their respective villages. In practice, it is the closest village, Shina, with which women as a group have the closest relations because they are more easily able to travel there and vice versa. In addition, Shina has no mosque of its own and so they sometimes join Obtoo villagers in their prayers. While the mosque is an important social and religious meeting space, this was not in and of itself indicative of close relations. In Qale Naw, a village with which Obtoo has both blood and social ties, the women said that the upper village joined them in the mosque for *eid* and *mahram* ceremonies, but also stated that they did not talk to them and were not like them.

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[32] Perhaps when speaking to a foreigner who could be coming with aid, it was felt that division of the social structure along economic lines – those with greater need and those with less – could be advantageous.

[33] Conversation with Oxfam Team Leader during village visit to Tagoborg, a wealthier area than Obtoo.

[34] As with all representations of solidarity and marginalisation, it is possible to find cases of *sayyed* women being married to non-*sayyed* men.

Section III: Household Level Decision Making

As in other field sites, when participants were first asked about the issues that they face as households or individuals, differences were de-emphasised. People often said "we are all *Hazaras*, and we are all the same." It is important to understand the reasons that people may represent their communities or the individuals within them in this way, but not to assume that this is an accurate representation. Communities are not homogenous anywhere, and by engaging in discussions with members of the various households in the village the research team were able to identify some of the diversity present in Obtoo; particularly in terms of gender roles.

The research team asked participants about:

- The main issues and problems that arose in their households;
- How their households go about making decisions about these issues;
- Who participates;
- How they are expected to participate;
- Who makes the final decision; and
- What happens if all members of the household do not agree with the decision.

In general, participants raised household level problems rather than more personal issues. This is telling in and of itself. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the research team were not always able to ask more personal questions directly, but rather talked around different topics that seemed to be of particular relevance to the study, and which participants were most willing to discuss. In this way, the researchers established a rapport with key people and eventually certain themes emerged (see Appendix for information on each of the households).

Although there was more or less a general consensus among those interviewed on gender specific norms, roles and responsibilities at the household level, the behaviour observed did not always match the rhetoric, providing a glimpse into the potential openings for women and men to challenge norms and assert themselves in sometimes unexpected ways.

The Household as an Institution: Gender Roles, Responsibilities and Norms

Perceptions of acceptable behaviour in households, with respect to participation in making decisions that affect the household, are shaped by cultural and social norms. It is therefore important to understand how gender determines roles and responsibilities. The research in Panjao, as well as in other communities, has shown some differences between rhetoric and reality leading to a relative fluidity of participation in decision making. Gender roles, like culture in general, are not static; rather they are constantly shifting and changing to accommodate the realities of people's lives.

The household[35], or *khana doodee,* in Obtoo, is made up primarily of extended family units, for instance including a husband and a wife, their children, son's wives, unmarried daughters and a husband's living parents.[36]

The household is probably the most important institution within the community, and is where gender norms, roles and responsibilities are established and adherence to them is

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[35] See Appendices for an overview of household issues, and detailed examples of women's and men's perceptions of their roles in decision making.
[36] The physical structure of the houses in this field site was generally quite small, considering the number of people living within each. They varied in shape and size, but most had a guest room directly through the front door, a hallway with a small area for animals to sleep and a multi purpose kitchen area that also served as a guest room, storage area and space for animals to eat. The houses all had very poor ventilation, due to few windows and open fire, with the exception of the wealthiest person who was able to have a guest room separate from the kitchen.

monitored. Generally the oldest family member is responsible for the management of the household and ensuring its well-being and reputation within the community. If both parents should die, the oldest brother becomes responsible for the care of any unmarried sisters or brothers. If the mother outlives the father she may gain authority within the household, but there may also be disputes between her and daughters-in-law or even with her sons over who has primary responsibility for the welfare of the household.

Women

There was consensus among both the young and old men and women that women's domain is the household. This is where the majority of their responsibilities lie, and therefore it is accepted that this is where their life experience and scope of knowledge lies. For this reason, according to both men and women, elder women have more scope to participate in household level discussions. It was observed that they also had more room to manoeuvre in terms of self-expression and taking personal initiative to participate in public life. As discussed below, an individual's perceived level of knowledge is an important determinant of how they are expected to behave; for some knowledgable individuals therefore, behaviour that does not meet norms would not be considered shameful. This notion of *purdah* norms is something that dictates what is and what is not considered shameful for not only the woman, but also for her family. [37]

While there are varying roles and responsibilities among women, it was understandably the women and not the men who reported these differences. The men we spoke with simply said that women did housework and weeding, whereas women detailed tasks that take place in the private sphere (e.g., cooking, baking bread, making a fermented yogurt drink (*doqe)*, taking care of children, cleaning the house, and animal husbandry) as well as activities that seemingly take place in public (weeding and going to the mountains to collect grass for animal feed). Many of the older women spin wool for income[38], and others participate in an Oxfam embroidery project.

Women in Qale Naw

The more limited description of women's roles and responsibilities by men is likely due in part to the general discomfort most of the men had when discussing women - particularly in front of other men. Men spoke more freely on this topic when other male villagers were not present [as will be discussed later in the paper]. It could also be due to an undervaluation of women's work in the household which is common in most parts of the world. The unpaid productive household work of women, younger and older, married and unmarried, in Obtoo are crucial inputs into the productive work of other members of the household even if they are often undervalued by men and women themselves.

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[37] While there is a dearth of information on this topic in the context of Hazarajat or among *Hazara* communities, various resources on this topic have been written about other parts of Afghanistan. One very interesting account is Klijn, F. *Water Supply and Water Collection Patterns in Rural Afghanistan: An Anthropological Study*. Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR): Denmark. 2002.
[38] Women command 10 *afs* per kilo. One woman "rents" (*kareya)* the wool from the upper village, brings it back to her village, spins it into yarn, and then bring it back to the upper village for them to sell. This is done with those who own and have sheared their sheep, spin the wool, keep some of it and give the rest back to the sheep owner. Many of the older women were spinning wool constantly during the team's visit. They had obtained the wool from the next village up in the valley, Shina, with which they appear to have close socio-economic ties.

A few women elders clarified that it is essentially their responsibility to distribute work among younger members of the household – including young sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and their husband's unmarried sisters. Generally younger women were tasked with taking care of some of the more difficult household tasks, including childcare, grass collection, weeding, washing clothes, cleaning, cooking and baking bread.

While many of these are considered to be household tasks, some of the most time consuming do not actually take place in the household. This includes washing (that takes place in the waterway in front of the village) and grass collection (which takes place in the surrounding mountains). Nevertheless, while it is not appropriate for women to go to the bazaar, it is expected that women should travel daily into the mountains for hours, either by themselves or in small groups to find grass for their animals. This flexibility of gender norms needs to be further understood, but seems to reflect the necessity to adapt some local gender norms in practice even though the *purdah* rhetoric would prohibit such activities.

On one occasion, two female members of the research team accompanied a woman to the mountains and found that while it is hard work and extremely time consuming, it may offer social benefits in terms of the relative freedom of the experience. It was clear on a few occasions that the younger girls, who generally travel to the mountains together, sometimes prefer to do this difficult work than stay in the house under the watchful eye of older women. The research team observed one interaction between Afghan Gul, a middle aged woman, and her daughter, where the latter was assigned to stay at home and clean while her brother was to go collect grass in the mountains. The daughter stomped her feet, exasperated, and asked why she could not go to the mountains instead. Her mother did not back down and she quickly, but grudgingly accepted the decision.

Men

Men are responsible for providing food, shelter and clothing for their families by whatever means they have. This can include farming their own land if they have it, farming others' land if they do not, or doing day labour outside of the village when this type of work is available. The male responsibilities for cultivating the land include ploughing, irrigation and harvesting wheat. During the time of research, most able bodied men were busy irrigating fields with the exception of those who were doing day labour and those with others working their land (elders with young help and landed). They use simple tools, which makes the task both time consuming and labour intensive.

A few families reported having sons living in Iran, and though the level of remittances may be significant, this was not discussed with the research team in any great detail.[39] One father whose son is living in Iran said of him "I hear that he earns a lot of money over there, but he doesn't support or help his family. He is married without asking our opinion with a girl from Tagaborg [a neighbouring area]."

Another responsibility that was brought up regularly was going to the bazaar to shop for household items decided upon by the women of the household, such as tea, sugar, rice and clothes. As with women, men's responsibilities are also defined partly by their age and perceived levels of experience and knowledge. An example of this is Afghan Gul's reference below to choosing her eldest son to do the shopping, as he knows best how to do it and has the best connections.

Children

One of the most important responsibilities of both men and women is the socialisation of their children. The household is the first place where appropriate behaviour for girls and boys is established. While in reality, children learn about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour through a variety of interactions with other villagers, and observations of others

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[39] The Oxfam Baseline report suggests that access to remittances decreased in the late 1990s because of restrictions on movement in and out of the Hazarajat. Other reports debate whether or not remittances were important at all.

in their community, it is seen as women's responsibility to ensure that their children are raised in a way that does not challenge the family honour.

The social upbringing of children was not referred to as often in Obtoo as in other locations studied during this project. This could be because of the lower level of outside influence in the area compared with areas closer to or in urban locations; in areas where there is more inter-mixing among social groups there is a perception that this will lead to negative influences and more emphasis is placed on protecting community norms.

Based on interviews and observations, it appeared that boys and girls help out with similar household chores when they are young. The team observed boys, as well as some girls, shepherding. The research team were told that around the age of seven, roles and responsibilities start to be divided by gender, with boys beginning to help their fathers with farming and girls helping their mothers with household tasks.

Despite the range of chores that children help with, which include virtually all of the areas of responsibility of their parents, the only specific responsibilities mentioned explicitly were going to school and studying their books.[40] It did not seem important what the children actually did, provided that they complied with the demands of their elders. In other words, generally the children's contribution to the productive work of the household was unrecognised. Though this is by no means a parallel, perceptions of the contributions of children to household well-being and the contributions of women may have something in common. The perception is that both women (particularly younger women without many children) and children have limited life experience compared with men. This is related to the more general theme of knowledge and decision making, which is discussed later in this paper.

Inter-changeability and dependence of Roles and Responsibilities

While people spoke of separate roles and responsibilities for men and women, and different sets of behaviour that were appropriate for each, in fact there was some degree of cross-over and much interdependence. We observed men, women and children engaging in activities that were presented as part of the domain of others. For instance, children going to the mountains to collect grass, girls and boys taking care of animals and doing other housework; a husband taking care of his small baby while his mother made a *namad* and wife washed the dishes and cleaned a rug; and an elder woman earning income – usually represented as a male responsibility – by spinning wool. These are examples of roles and responsibilities being inter-changed due to the availability of labour, and also show the interdependent nature of many household activities. Each of these functions requires input from other members of the household and cannot be accomplished alone.

Realities of Household Life: Gender, Power and Participation in Decision making

A gendered analysis of decision making looks at the institutions that determine what is "decisionable" and who gets to participate in, control and influence decisions. This analysis most logically begins at the household level, where gender norms are upheld. This is necessary for development planning and practice because of the central role these rules and norms play in determining the terms of women's and men's engagement in community affairs.

It was further important to look at the roles and responsibilities in the household, because people are usually only included in decisions that relate to their areas of responsibility. It is these areas that they are "allowed" to have some level of information and knowledge about. This means that it is less likely that women will have influence or control over decisions that take place outside of the household (e.g., the sale of land) and men have

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[40] Given how far the schools were from the village, and the relatively few opportunities for children to use their education, it was interesting to us that all parents voiced an interest in educating their children, both boys and girls, to a point. They were however frustrated at the lack of resources they were able to provide their children with (i.e. pens, books and clothes for school).

less power over household decisions (e.g., which household items to buy). While there are strict rules of sex segregation between men and women on a rhetorical level, the examples above show that in fact there are very few subsistence oriented, social or economic activities that take place in complete isolation, or which are strictly male or female responsibilities. The extent of this varied among the households, related at least in part to the composition and assets[41] of each of the family unit.

When asked initially about the main issues that arise within households, and how families go about solving problems, most of the participants said that the families sit together as a whole and discuss them. The process, however, and levels of participation in and control over decisions differed between households. The male head of household was usually the person cited for making the final decision. In nearby Qale Nau, a young *sayyed* woman explained:

> "In all of our families, the elders make decisions. We don't discuss daily household chores like baking bread and going to the mountain, because women know what to do. We just talk about the main issues – how to make money and provide food". Then she said, "sometimes I will share my ideas with them, but not always. If my idea is good, then they will take it, if not I will accept whatever they decide."

Distribution of Work
The distribution of work among members of the household was reported by most of those interviewed as a key area of decision making. They considered this to be a major responsibility, as well as a common area of decision making as it happens on a daily basis. In a perspective that was shared by many, Abdul Mohammad, the most educated man in the village said:

> "Women have control over decisions in the household, for instance how to show manners to the children and dividing work among the children. For instance, that one child should bring fire wood and one of them should bring grass for the animals and one should work on the land."

However, there were exceptions to this viewpoint. For instance both Sahar (the wife of the VO leader) and her brother-in-law stated with pride that they had primary responsibility for this type of household management. In this case the male head of household was rarely present, and while he was still technically responsible for the family's welfare, his wife and brother were left to manage. In the case of Afghan Gul, her husband was old and infirm while she was the primary breadwinner in the household. She was clearly in charge of the distribution of work among her children. In these two cases it appeared that disagreements over decision making roles on the distribution of labour had to do with the personalities and the abilities of the people within the household.

In another example, Yassine, a woman in her early 20s who lives with her husband and younger unmarried sister-in-law said:

> "It does not matter if my sister-in-law prefers to work on the land or take care of the baby, because she does whatever I want her to do…because I am older."

During a visit to Yassine's home, the research team observed her scolding her sister-in-law and ordering her to take care of household tasks.

Decision making on this issue did vary according to the type of work, however, in that while women may have more control over the division of unpaid household work, the distribution of paid work was made by older men. This is likely to be the result of women having far less mobility and exposure to information about work opportunities outside the village.

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[41] Assets are generally considered to be the different types of resources and capabilities (human, social, natural, physical and financial) that individuals can call upon to support their life.

Expenditures

Households in Obtoo have a variety of expenditures. Primary outgoings appeared to be household items, debt repayments and the rental of land. Since women's domain and responsibilities are related to the household, the purchasing of household items was an area where women's control was undisputed. This includes items such as clothes, tea, oil, sugar and rice. However, while women have control over deciding what should be purchased in the bazaar, men actually do the shopping and are therefore able to change these decisions in practice if they wish.

The process, as described to the research team, involved families sitting together to discuss what they need to buy, how much money they have to purchase it and who (among the able males) should go to the bazaar. There was said to be greater influence by the males over the purchasing of clothing because of the greater expense involved. In Obtoo, a village with relatively little difference in terms of wealth, a similar process was described by most families. In a village with greater economic stratification, the process would likely have differed more widely between households.

Expenditure related to the rental of land and houses was an area of concern and consideration for landless families who are constantly on the look out for cheaper land and housing. The research team were told that both men and women in the household have a role to play in decisions on this issue. A common view was that held by villager Muhammad Hassan who stated:

> "My wife, oldest son and I sit together and make decisions on daily needs like clothes, tea, oil, sugar and rice. Sometimes we make decisions on land, because this year we are renting land for 6000 *afs* or 150 *seers* of wheat. It is very expensive, so we try to find cheaper land. We discuss together how we can take other land, and how we should find money to pay the landowner and repayment of debts."[42]

The repayment of debts, due largely to expenditures for bride price and weddings, can also be included as an area of household expenditure, as it is a huge cost for families.

Marriage

Marriage in Afghanistan is an important strategy for consolidating power within a kin group and forging ties between them.[43] The selection of a spouse for a son or daughter is extremely important across ethnic groups and geographic areas. This is no different in Obtoo, and several families told the research team that this was the decision that was weighing most on their minds. This was a particular source of anxiety for a couple of families that wanted to find brides for their sons. Bride price, essentially a one-time offering of money or other productive resources given in exchange for a new bride, is an enormous expenditure for many Afghans.[44] Everyone in Obtoo seemed to recall the bride price that was paid for their own marriage and those of their children. The marriage process was described by both men and women as one in which all family members participate, even though potential brides and grooms have little say in who they will be married to and when.

Unlike other field sites looked at in this study, there was a feeling that it was somehow inappropriate for neighbours to know that the family of a potential groom was looking for a bride. However, when the researchers inquired as to whether there was competition for

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[42] 6000 afs is approximately US $140 dollars. One *seer* is equal to seven kilos of grain.

[43] This varies among ethnic groups and othe social groups in Afghanistan, and is a social arrangement that may be altered by powrful groups seeking to consolidate their power. For a much more detailed discussion on marriage, politics and power in Afghanistan, see Tapper's discussion on the relationship between marriage and strategies for obtaining important household resources, such as land in Tapper, N. *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 1991, 288.

[44] Brideprice is usually paid in installments, and is paid in advance of the wedding. In some cases this leads to older men marrying much younger women, such that it can take a long time to put together a brideprice and some families see the marrying of their daughters as an opportunity to increase their economic status.

brides, they were told that this was not the case. Villagers told the research team that they were discrete when searching for a bride because if other families found out they would "laugh at them." This was a common way of expressing reactions from fellow villagers when acting outside of the prescribed roles and norms, and the shame this brings.[45] Some people described a system where a discrete third party, related to neither the groom nor the bride, advises the family on potential brides.

There may be informal ways in which parents are influenced in marriage decisions by the potential bride or groom themselves. There are ways in which a girl may express her displeasure with a marriage proposal, but this is not a favoured way to deal with the situation and as such is usually avoided. A more in depth study would allow for a better understanding of the local norms and customs governing decision making on marriage.

In this patrilocal society where newly married women move to the household of their new husband's family, the marriage of a son ensures that a daughter-in-law will be gained. This is an important event for both the father and mother of the groom, and is generally thought to increase the mother's status. The new bride helps the mother-in-law, or oldest female in the household, with her daily chores and household responsibilities. Ideally, new brides are not supposed to travel far from their households in order to visit their family or for other reasons. This is partly because of their duties in their husband's home and partly due to cultural and religious norms that place constraints on the mobility of young women. Many of the women in the village had originally come from other villages, and were now too far away from their families to be able to visit them without their husbands.

Within Obtoo, many of the men told us: "we are all *Hazaras* and we will exchange our daughters to any of them." This included within the village, the neighbouring village and even as far away as Kabul.[46] However, in practice all of the women the research team came into contact with or heard about were from the surrounding area, with marriages occurring between cousins.

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[45] In the team's first meeting with the villagers, the men came in first and sat down, followed by elder women who confidently shook the researchers' hands, before sitting down on the opposite side of the room from the men, hanging their heads down low, and showing reluctance to speak during the entire meeting. Only the next day did the team learn that some of the women had wanted to tell the researchers about their views on the problems in the village, but were too embarrassed to speak in front of the men for fear of being laughed at.
[46] Monsutti notes that endogamy is high within *manteqas* with approximately 70% of marriage in the Central Highlands occurring inside of the *manteqa* and 30% occurring outside. Monsutti, op cit., 6.

Section IV: "Community" Level Decision Making

Study participants were asked about the main issues that arise in their community, and which institutions,[47] individuals and/or organisations resolve them. The process of community decision making is bound up with local perceptions of tradition and culture, which also determine what issues are considered to be "decisionable," or appropriate for discussion outside of the household and relevant to the welfare of the community as a whole. Perceptions of tradition and culture also determine which issues are not allowed to enter the public sphere and which are therefore "non-decisionable." Inherent in these dynamics are the inclusion and exclusion of certain social groups as determined by those with more power and authority. In this village, women, the landless and the young were generally marginalised.

This section of the case study looks in particular at the ways in which women and men influence agendas, relative to each other, and the bases of power and authority that enable them to influence or control certain types of decision making. We found that while by all accounts the leadership of the elders and traditional social institutions have been weakened over the years, these actors are still influential at the community level.

Village Leadership and Institutions: Male and Female Perspectives

As in other field sites, the men and women largely agreed on the main issues of concern to the village as a whole. These included technical requirements that are often addressed through NGO projects, for example the prevention of floods, the installation of a well and sanitation system, and the building of better roads, a health clinic and a school.[48] There was a perception that this set of issues, categorised below as "developmental," only in the sense of infrastructural development and to distinguish these from the social issues which may enable or constrain participation in dealing with these issues. These can usually only be addressed with external assistance. The implementation of NGO projects and the distribution of work among the villagers (*khondan*)[49] were therefore central community issues.

There may be different reasons why villagers raised the same set of issues when asked about community level issues. One may be that many external agents (and therefore potentially the research team conducting this study) are seen as potential aid bearers. The community needs that were described were of a type addressed by aid organisations, and which are believed to require more money and skills than people feel can be harnessed from within their community. Since community needs had likely been agreed upon on several occasions, it would not be likely that those with diverging views would express them openly. Another reason may be that community decision making is generally the responsibility of only a few individuals (i.e. male elders); these people are responsible for determining what constitutes a public community issue, and which issues are not allowed to enter the public domain, as discussed below.

Both men and women told the research team noted a lack of local institutions to address their many problems. As Afghan Gul stated, "no one group is helping to solve our problems.

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[47] This entailed identifying with participants the persisting norms and behaviour that serve collectively valued purposes. See Uphoff, N. *Local Institutional Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases.* Kumarian Press: Conneticut. 1986.

[48] The one different concern expressed was by a man who raised women's literacy as a priority village level issue. This was interesting because for women it emerged only as a private and individual issue, and was relayed by only a couple of the younger women in the village. In a village across the valley, the team observed a mixed *shura* meeting in which an elder woman advocated loudly for literacy courses while a younger woman advocated for sewing and embroidery courses in front of a group of men. An interesting discussion ensued in which the elder woman, who had been to Kabul, voiced an opinion that literacy was a much more valuable skill for women probably due mostly to her exposure to more educated and urban women in Kabul

[49] This is probably linked to the targeting of villagers for assistance. For instance, in a neighboring village, Oxfam had tried to target the most vulnerable in the village, but there was disagreement on this criteria within the village as they felt they were all vulnerable. Instead the villagers decided that they should all be involved, and as a result they distributed the work evenly among all villagers.

There is the VO but it does not help to solve these problems." When they talked about the types of issues facing the village and who makes decisions about them, it was the male elders that were consistently mentioned. In fact, villagers mentioned several different informal institutions when it became clear that the research team were not only interested in the more formal and externally initiated VO.[50]

The village elders play a powerful role in determining what is and what is not appropriate for public discussion according to a set of established local norms, values, traditions and customs. They also determine the nature of participation in such discussions and decisions, for instance who does and does not have voice. However, their knowledge lies with social issues, including disputes, which the community has traditionally dealt with, rather than with development issues such as making improvements to infrastructure or building schools. This is likely due in part to their limited access to physical, natural and financial assets which might enable them to deal with such problems without external assistance, as well to a lack of experience dealing with more educated persons such as those working with the NGOs. While elders do still seem to play a part in the management of community-NGO relations, [51] there did seem to be a weakening of their authority on such issues.

In each of the other neighbourhoods or villages looked at in this study, while the people may not have been pleased with their religious leadership, there was a local *mullah* (Islamic cleric) with community level responsibilities. The researchers quickly became aware that religious leadership was lacking in Obtoo and in the valley as a whole. We were told by an elder *akhund*[52] from neighbouring Qale Nau that they lost their status here during "the revolution" (i.e. the Russian invasion). They were not considered to be trustworthy because in the past they told people not to steal or kill fellow Muslims, while people believed that they had done both. Since interpretations of Islam are the basis for many of the key principles that underpin the organisation of society in Afghanistan, this lack of religious leadership probably has impact on the way this particular community functions.

Both Obtoo and Qale Naw do however have *akhunds,* elders who have had some exposure to Islamic books. According to the *akhund* from Qale Nau, his role does not extend further than reading verses from the *Quran* at ceremonies, weddings and funerals. He did not believe that anyone expected anything of him, and thought that other villagers "laughed" at him because he did not do formal training at a *madrassa* (a religious school). In fact, the research team learned that this *akhund* was quite influential in his own village, as well as in Obtoo, though determined that this is due more to his status as an elder and a landowner, rather than as the *akhund*.

One important institution is the local mosque *(takhiyakhana)*, where men and women from the village, and sometimes from neighbouring villages, come together for prayer and other gatherings. In contrast to other parts of Afghanistan, women and men pray together in the *takhiyakhana* during a weekly ceremony called *nazr*. Though its primary purpose is religious, *nazr* also has many social functions. Since at other times, it is mostly the male elders who discuss extra-household issues, this event provides an opportunity for information sharing among a wider range of people. It appears to be an important space for villagers to raise issues that need to be discussed and addressed by the community.

The description of community decision making that takes place in the *takhiyakhana* provided by the *akhund*, Bashir, is illustrative of the use of local space for community discussion as well as some of the power and authority dynamics at play:

"At the community level we make decisions about how to get good roads, health clinics and schools because right now we have to travel very far from the village. We discuss these

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[50] A further examination of the existing informal institutions would help development actors to situate their programmes, within the local context, with an integrated understanding of the relationships and processes that make up and sustain these institutions.
[51] For example the description of the elders' role in securing drinking water for the village.
[52] The team were not able to obtain a definitive definition of a*khund,* but understood this to be a man who has studied Islamic books and who takes part in religious ceremonies by reciting prayers, though does not have the same level of social and political influence as a *mullah*.

issues on Friday nights [*nazr* night], and on *mahram* days when everyone is in the village. Everyone has the right to say their opinions, but we respect the elders the most. The final decisions are made by the elders. For example, we didn't have drinkable water in the village, so one Friday night we sat and discussed this issue. We joined with others, and eight representatives from the valley went to the Oxfam office to discuss this issue with them, and then Oxfam built a well here."

NGOs have proposed new ways of working in the villages that build on traditional leadership and institutions, but also strive for greater transparency in decision making and the increased participation of traditionally marginalised groups. As the "new" *shura,* the VO appeals to some villagers' desire to have a more inclusive set of rules and behaviour. There is reason to believe, that to some extent, the traditional leadership of the elders has been eroded due to external influences over the years. These may range from outside aggression, to central government attempts to exert influence, and even development actors. For instance, the experience of corruption and violence under the influence of *qaryadars*[53] and local commanders may be to blame for this break down of traditional leadership and trust, along with the transient nature of the village population due to migration for work.

Oxfam's Baseline Hazarajat report points to the qualities of leadership that community members look for in the VOs:

> "The people chosen as *shura* representatives were described as 'middle people' who were not landlords or wealthy traders, but also not poor people as they were seen as likely to leave the village. Other characteristics of representatives were people that were 'clever' which often meant some education, and mostly they were older."

Even though Oxfam is now experimenting with having female representatives as counterparts to

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Box 3: Women's Role in *Nazr*

Nazr is a religious and social ceremony that takes place in the *takhiyakhana* (mosque) on a weekly basis. In Obtoo and the surrounding villages, *nazr* was descrbied as having several roles. It is a religious, as well as social gathering where everyone in the village is expected to participate, though participation is measured more by physical presence rather than use of voice.

In preparation for *nazr*, the women sit together and decide who will bring which kinds of bread – for example, bread without oil (*patir)* or oily bread (*surkh nan)*. They eat dinner at home, and then come together in the mosque to pray and sing (*khandon*). After that, they share out the bread they have made for the occasion. Any left-overs are divided up and taken home.

Once a month, all of the villages in the valley are said to participate in a special *nazr*. This was mentioned in the context of where discussions about community level issues take place, and where villagers got information about valley wide issues.

The description of *nazr* given by the *akhund* (see below) of Qale Nau differed somewhat from that of the women, who described the more social aspects of the monthly *nazr*. They explained that it is hosted by one or two of the villages in the valley on a rotating basis. The male villagers meet under the tent, and the women sit outside. It is a time to pray and eat, and discuss issues that concern the valley, as well as for socialising. The research team witnessed one such *nazr*, which took place about one and a half hours walk up the valley from Obtoo. There was a guest *mullah* for the *nazr*, a relative of a nearby villager who had recently returned from Iran. As he spoke inside the tent with the men, the women sat outside, along its edges, listening to the words of the *mullah* through a loud speaker.

The third occasion on which *nazr* was said to be held is the annual *Mahram,* a large annual ceremony celebrated by *Shi'a* Muslims to honor the martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. The ceremony lasts for 12 days. One night before the *Mahram* begins, the villagers come together in the *takhiyakhana* to decide who will provide food for the 12 *Moharram* days. They write the names of all the families on small pieces of paper. They pick out twelve pieces of paper at random. The families whose names are picked should each provide food for all the villagers for one evening.

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[53] During Zahir Shah's reign, *Qaryadari* was the common system used to impose and collect taxes to give to the district governors. A *Qaryadar* was considered to be a bridge between ordinary people and the district governors.

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the men in other VOs the way this criteria has been applied to women is not clear. The research team were told that "community mobilisation is done through establishing *shuras* that empower the poor to have a voice, including women."[54] It was clear, however, that any efforts to increase women's leadership by encouraging the selection of a female representative to the VO in Obtoo have so far not been successful.

It would be prudent to examine in greater depth why this might be, including the extent to which the principles of democracy and participation and inclusiveness have been accepted and understood among the villagers. For instance, a female Oxfam staff member relayed that in a different village it was stated that female representatives should:

> "have some knowledge and be a bit educated. Sometimes they need to write applications for Oxfam and so they should be literate if possible…..they should have land because if they are landless they may move to other villages and then the time we have spent to train them is gone".[55]

This criteria, informal as it is, would be an enormous barrier for most women in an area where all women are uneducated and illiterate, and most are landless. This is particularly true if some women with land are not permitted to participate in community functions because of *purdah* norms.

The male representative in Obtoo did meet the criteria mentioned in the Oxfam report, at least on a rhetorical level – he was seen as being honest and kind by those who were willing to discuss his virtues and why he had been selected. He also fits one of the unspoken criteria of being a landed individual. However, since even the landed do not have that much more wealth than the landless, he also worked as a day labourer out of the village. For this reason, he was rarely physically present in the village and the research team was unable to interview him directly. They did, however, speak with his wife and his brother on several different occasions. In his absence, his brother Rahim takes on the role of de facto *shura* leader. This transfer of representation was explained in a matter of fact manner that implied that it was perfectly natural for Rahim to take on these responsibilities in his brother's absence:

> "My responsibilities are more than the others because my elder brother who is the head of the *shura*, is not at home. So I should work on the land and go to the weddings, *nazr*, and funerals of the people, because I am elder. If I don't go, the people will mind. If there is some work in the village I should look after that as well….if there are some decisions made in the village, and my brother is not here, I go instead. Like when Oxfam workers come they will ask for my brother and if he is not in the village, I will do his work and act as the chairman of the *shura*."

In general, the people we spoke to were clear on the qualities of good male leadership. These are, "he should be honest with the people" and "should see everyone with one eye"(a common expression in Afghanistan that refers to treating everyone fairly). One thing that became clear during discussions with villagers, however, and which is reflective of the historical social structures in Hazarajat, is that representation does not equal power to make decisions. Although other male members of the community may be present, the actual control over decision making in the *shura* was still attributed to the elders and landowners.

With respect to women's ability to be leaders, various perspectives were expressed, but the dominant view among both males and females that "women don't have complete

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[54] Pers. Comm., Shah Wali, Oxfam, June 2004.
[55] Pers. Comm., Oxfam staff member, June 2004, during field visit to VO in *Tagaborg*. During this visit in a very lively exchange, the research team witnessed the selection of a female representative. This occurred, apparently spontaneously, and resulted in the selection of an outspoken female elder who had returned from Kabul obtaining the status as the women's representative.

knowledge *(naqes ul aqal)[56]*" and "we don't have in Islam that women should be leaders." Whether this was actually mostly rhetoric or reflective of hardened beliefs remains a question. In one case while a younger man relayed this perspective to the researcher with confidence in front of other men, later when alone with the research team, he stated: "in the previous interview I told you women cannot be leaders. I was kidding. Women can be leaders, they should be honest, kind, she should feel the people's pain and she shouldn't take bribes." As discussed elsewhere in this paper, it was sometimes unclear whether such statements were reflective of men's desire to seem "modern" to the research team, or actually reflective of an alternative discourse. Only more in depth research would capture the true meaning of such statements.

When the VO leader was absent, his wife, Sahar, played a community mobilising role. The research team observed her performing emissary tasks, for example when the research team arrived in Obtoo it was Sahar who introduced them to the villagers and set up their meetings. According to the Oxfam Team Leader, she regularly conducted such activities. As one of the most mobile women in the village, she was able to carry out this role. Sahar did not appear too shy in front of other villagers, including the male elders or her younger brother-in-law, with whom she lived. The team was told that women want Sahar to take on a greater role on their behalf, because she is active and has courage, her husband is head of the *shura* which has positive effects on her social life, and she is able to make decisions about her daily life without asking others. For these reasons, other village women consider her to be powerful and think that she is in a position to help with their problems. However, she was not interested in taking on this role; although she appeared to enjoy her high status, she was not necessarily interested in using it to help other women.

She was perceived by other women to be one of three strong women in the village. According to these three women, the characteristics of a good female leader are: a woman who is "active and courageous", and has good social relations; whose husband is in good standing economically, has a good social position; and who is between the ages of 45-60. All three of these women had good social ties within the village. The wife of the *shura* leader came from the family of a rich landowner (*beg)* and had some of her own assets (for example, sheep given to her by her father and a sewing machine). The second was a landless woman whose husband was old and unable to work. She had her own opinions, was sociable and active in the village, and had taken part in trainings provided in Panjao. She used the knowledge from her training in the village to the benefit of other women which gained their respect. The eldest of the three noted proudly that because she is an elder she feels the women respect her and listen to her and accept her decisions. She was pleased with this status, and with her influence with the other women in the community. She was also seen as generous, because when other women needed help with special occasions she came to their aid. All three women had relative freedom from their husbands, primarily for economic reasons, and all had outgoing personalities.

During the second week of the study, a male elder, and then a few of the women more explicitly, told the research team about a time when there was leadership among the women. Ten years before, the wife of the *mullah* was considered to be a leader of the women. This was a period when the *mujahidin* were active in the area, and just prior to the point when the Taliban arrived and the village *arbab* fled. The women discussed issues related to land and social problems with this woman, and she would hold an assembly of women to try to solve their problems.[57] The women in particular described this type of leadership as being stronger then than it is today:

> "In the past, the younger women always accepted what the elders told them to do, but now the women don't listen to the elder women like they used to. At that time, women discussed their household problems with the elders, but now they don't

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[56] This was an expression that was heard in all of the research sites, and which deserves much more in depth study to identify the links between this and women's lack of participation in public life and decision making. See further discussion in the section on "Gendered Knowleldge."
[57] See section on dispute resolution below for more detail.

share them because they think it is for them to solve their own problems. They can make decisions about their own lives and problems."

These expressions of frustration should be examined in greater detail, as they are relevant to the perceptions of the kinds of leadership and institutions that women and men can conceive of. If women were more involved with mobilising other women and decision making in the past than they are today, this is significant and needs to be studied in further detail. These statements may also be in part related to the relative opening up of the area, the breakdown of traditional households and a lessening of control over young people, some of whom now have more exposure to life and alternative livelihood options outside the village.

Decisions and "Non decisions", Informal Influence, Power and Participation

The institutions mentioned above set the parameters for the kinds of issues that are allowed into the public domain to become actionable. There are power dynamics inherent in determining rules and norms within a village, and the appropriate behaviour within them. In this village, as in others, holding the power to participate in and make decisions that affect the welfare of others also means having the power to *not* decide. It is often these "non-decisions" that can keep the interests of marginalized groups, such as women, out of the public realm. There are, however indications that women sometimes use informal influence to assert their interests.

Developmental Issues

All the community level problems that were relayed to the research team, with the exception of a few specific disputes, were problems that are often tackled by NGOs. The issues raised with the team, as outsiders, did not represent the full range of community problems. The issues raised were those that members of the community did not feel empowered to deal with themselves, or which they did not feel the community elders could not solve. These issues are discussed in VO meetings and also more informally through meetings of the elders and in the *takhiyakhana*. The VO has relatively formal roles and responsibilities for its all-male leadership, including a representative, an assistant representative and a secretary. All are middle aged men.

As explained by the male members in the community, decision making around VO issues still involves the traditional leadership of the elders albeit with the participation of the whole community. A chosen representative then communicates what has been agreed to Oxfam staff. The scope of issues dealt with by the VO is limited not only by cultural norms, but also by the mandate of Oxfam, which can only engage in a certain set of development projects. It is the NGO that makes final decision on any proposal made by the villagers.

The general consensus among the men was that decision making happened like this:

> "At the community level, men make decisions on having a school in the village and having good seeds for agriculture. We sit together in the *shura* hall and we have a writer who writes these issues and takes the fingerprints of the villages, and then submits it to the NGO. Whatever the men decide on the community issues, women also agree."

As this description suggests, in practice, the concept of full participation does not apply to women. While small groups of women meet together regularly in *hashar* (reciprocal work such as making *namad* rugs)**,** and to help each other prepare for social occasions, they do not have much of a voice in development matters. This may change now that opportunities for income generation are being supported by Oxfam in the area.

They are not used to meeting either amongst themselves or with men to discuss community level issues. According to the elder females in the village, women have never participated in the traditional *shura*. There was a feeling that women are not equipped to participate in

the *shura*, because they "do not have knowledge" and the women themselves accepted that position. Women, both young and old, told the research team that they did not participate in VO meetings because "we would be laughed at."

Women, therefore, do not have any public or official role in the VO and they are not decision makers on the key concerns of the community as laid out to the research team. Again, the perception that women do not have knowledge – particularly about issues that are not directly related to their responsibilities in the household or social functions – appears to be an important constraint. As a result, issues were portrayed to the research team, undisputed, as the concerns of the community as a whole when in fact they were likely the concerns and opinions of a specific group of men.

In addition, the researchers observed that it is considered shameful and inappropriate for women (and men for that matter) to voice opinions about issues that, in the eyes of the community, do or should not concern them or are the domain of those with a higher social status. The gender dimensions of these issues emerge when the gender specific responsibilities discussed at the household level are examined. For instance, women collect water, are responsible for household hygiene and also arguably have an interest in schools, clinics and roads, yet these issues are seen as the domain and responsibility of men.

> **Box 4: An Example of Women's Participation in a Neighbouring Village**
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> In neighbouring Qale Nau, *akhund* Mohammad Hussain told the team that in the VO, women make decisions on "what is linked to them." For instance, Oxfam came and asked women whether they wanted to be involved in a *gabian* weaving project, which has been implemented in other villages in Panjao and would give them and their families some income. According to the *akhund*, the women discussed the possibility and agreed to ask for this kind of project to be established. Women in the upper village were interested in learning new skills such as sewing.

Several men in the village stated that "women do not have problems," likely because any problems they do have should be handled in the household and not made public. No community level decision making processes that deal with the express concerns of women or other groups with marginalized voices were mentioned to the research team. This is likely due to certain gender and cultural norms which prevent people from expressing their views to outsiders. The same norms can be an effective way of controlling those issues which are able to be considered and acted upon and those which are not. It may also have to do with a general lack of time, space and opportunity for women to reflect on their general situation and the lack of power to raise problems with those who control decision making. This is a phenomenon often linked to the situation of marginalised groups when changes in their situation would require extensive social change.

The research team were told only that if women have a concern, they tell a female Oxfam staff member, who then tells the Oxfam Team Leader. However, it was not clear to what extent this strategy was used by the women, and given the limited capacity of Oxfam staff to visit each of their villages on a regular basis, this is unlikely to be a dependable method for women to raise and discuss their problems.

It can be surmised then, that the scope of issues considered to be relevant at the community level, remains narrow. This would not necessarily be an issue if the concerns of women (and other marginalized groups) are taken into consideration and addressed in alternative ways, but this did not appear to be the case.

The representation of issues and how they are addressed is also linked to the type of assistance that NGOs are perceived to be able to provide. For instance, when the researchers asked a group of women, including Sahar (the wife of the *shura* leader), if they were happy with the *shura* or would like to see it run differently, they said "it is good – we don't know how else we can meet or what else they can do." However, when they heard of embroidery projects and *gabian* weaving, they were very interested to participate.

Social Issues

While none of the women acknowledged any role in community level decision making when asked specifically, many of the men spoke of women's roles in traditional functions. For instance, when there is a wedding, women sit together and the elder women decide how much money is needed to buy gifts for the bride, such as chocolates, dresses and shawls. If a death occurs, the women meet and collect money from each of the households to assist the bereaved family with the funeral. They also have a strong role in making *gilems* and *namad* and preparing for *nazr*, all of which have social aspects.

According to Bashir, one of the village elders, *nazr* is one of the few public fora where women participate:

> "At the community level women have control over decisions related to *nazr*. They tell their husbands 'we want to make a *nazr* tonight' and so the men should come together in the mosque. There is a curtain in the middle of the mosque between the men and the women. The *mullah*[58] will talk about some social problems or tell the messenger's stories, after that the women bring their *nazr* dishes."

However, thus far while women play a central role in organising *nazr*, their participation during the actual ceremony is limited largely to a symbolic role. The participation of women, as well as other marginalised groups, such as the young and the landless, is virtually non existent in the actual discussions that take place during this community event.

The participation of women who are unmarried, or newly married with young children, is severely constrained by gender norms and practical considerations. Their household duties, as often delegated by elder females or males may not afford them the time to participate.[59] Further, social norms dictate that their household responsibilities are more important than this kind of participation. Therefore, in practice, the perception that "everyone participates" is misleading because it often excludes groups without power to challenge social norms, such as young women and the landless. For example, among a group of women from each of the households in Qale Nau, weaving gabian, the research team were initially told that "everyone participated" in the valley wide *nazr* held the day before. But upon further questioning, they found that one young woman had wanted to go, but because she had to take care of her baby she was not able to. Her uncle's wife stated that "her mother is sick and her brother and sister work on the land, so there was no one to help her."

> **Box 5: Women's views on nazr discussions**
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> In Qale Nau, the research team asked the women whether community issues were described in *nazr*. While they disagreed at first, it was eventually explained that women do hear what is being discussed on the men's side of the mosque where men discuss both developmental and social issues. Asked whether they sometimes wanted to say something to the men, one younger woman stated "sometimes we want to say something to them, but we can't – we can only discuss it with our husbands at home. If I discuss with my husband and he goes and tells the other men, then there will be fighting…they will ask 'why is your wife saying these things'?"

A different example of the constraints on younger women participating in public life was illustrated one day when the research team approached a group of about eight young females who were in front of the *takhiyakhana* making *namad*. The researchers had interviewed one of the young women in this group on the second day of their field work and tried to speak to her again. She was not happy to speak with them and when they said they were interested to speak with some of the other women in the group, she told them that there were no women in the village to speak to, saying they had all gone to the mountains. The research team sat with the group and helped to make the *namad* for some time, before trying to speak to the young women. They were extremely shy and were not able to talk

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[58] Sometimes the *akhund* was called a *mullah,* despite the fact that people did not perceive him as a true *mullah.*
[59] This could be only a few years older, it only matters that the woman distributing work is older than the one receiving the orders.

with the researchers. The research team were told later that the young women did not feel comfortable speaking because the research team were older than them. This made it clear that the presence of older females in the group made it impossible for them to venture into a discussion. Gender roles are indeed strong in the village, but the age factor compounds these roles so that a younger woman is much more constrained in her ability to speak out and have an opinion than elder women. The rules of *purdah* and the shame that results from non-adherence to them is particularly strong for young women. In addition, young and unmarried women are not considered to have any experience of life, in local terms, and therefore are denied a voice.

Disputes

Interestingly, disputes did not come up as readily in conversations with men as with women. The elder women mentioned land disputes, or general "fighting between villages" which according to one woman is always resolved by the elders with the *akhund*. Dispute resolution at the community level is still primarily the responsibility of the elders. The research team were told however that in the past, likely due to the commonness of land disputes, that conflicts were handled by the *arbab, kalantar* (community elder) and the *beg*.

There was very little discussion of current disputes, and the research team did not explore this further.[60] However, the team were given information about traditional dispute resolution among women and men that were enlightening as to the type of disputes that occurred in the past, some of which it could be ascertained are likely to be happening in the present. According to the villagers, there is a difference between the way that disputes are handled among women and the way they are handled among men.

One of the elder women in the village, who appeared to be highly respected, explained that women were never involved in male disputes and were never consulted. However, when asked about how the situation of women has changed over the years, she spoke about the days of Zahir Shah (the former king), and stated that women did not have a role in *external* dispute resolution, but:

> "At that time, the elder women had more influence and control over the women in the village than they do now. If there was fighting between neighbours, the elder women would stop the fighting. If *nazr* was needed, the elder women would make decisions about this. But now the elder women don't have this kind of role. Now the women do not listen to them. Now there is a democratic system and they don't have to listen to the elders."

This kind of statement appeared to talk down the role of elder women and perhaps indicated a frustration with the lower level of control they now have. This view contrasted with the opinions of younger women, but could indicate changes in opportunities for women to be involved, which should be further explored.

As described earlier, about 10 years ago the mullah's wife played an active leadership role among the village women and mediated when disputes arose. Women came to her to discuss problems such as land disputes, social affairs and struggles among neighbours. She was considered to be strong and her decisions were respected – she would reportedly "beat" people who did not obey them. If she had difficulty resolving an issue, she would seek the advice of the village elders. No one has taken this place formally today, although during the research team's stay in Obtoo there were several incidences in which people went to Sahar (wife of the VO leader) and asked her to mediate.

Most women did not see the benefit of taking on leadership roles in a more official way. The reasons for this are illustrated in the reaction of one more prominent woman in the village to handling disputes; Sahar explained that she was not interested in taking on a formal dispute resolution role because she would be caught in the middle of people's fights

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[60] The team got the sense that the high degree of solidarity among the community against the outsiders led to very little leakage of information about the type and extent of disputes in the community.

and the women would not like her. In general, women are expected to avoid conflict as it is shameful for them to be involved in a disagreement, particularly between families. It stands to reason then that if it appears that a conflict cannot be solved, women would not want to be involved. This may be the same for men, who have seen how bad conflict can get.

This reluctance to get involved in dispute resolution could be linked to the types of issues that it is acceptable to deal with at the community level, where more conflict may be present than is evident to outsiders. For example, failing to uphold one's end of the bargain – or the perception of doing this – can lead to disputes. One such instance was observed during this study, when Afghan Gul had gathered some women together to make a *namad*. She had a full group the first day, but on the second day two of the women did not appear. Instead of speaking to them directly, Afghan Gul stood in the middle of the village and loudly accused them of not turning up. Instead of speaking to the old woman directly, the two women then went to Sahar – the VO leader's wife – and complained that the old woman had said these things. In turn, Afghan Gul complained to the research team that she had overheard the two women complaining to Sahar and she was now offended that they had not come to speak with her directly. This is an example of the limits of elder women's authority. A cycle of shame and be shamed seemed to have begun, and there was no one to resolve it by the time the team left the village.

The disputes among men were not discussed, but as the *uleswal* from Panjao stated "they will first try to solve the problems in their communities, as is the tradition, but if they cannot solve them they may come to me." As he put it "the community decisions are not guaranteed to be final, whereas the *uleswal* has official orders and my decisions are respected." This is likely an exaggeration to some extent. It appeared that local disputes were kepy local and that in only extreme circumstances would they go to the *uleswal* or communicate such cases to outsiders.

Section V: Themes in Gender and Local Level Decision Making

Several themes emerged from this investigation into household and community decision making in Obtoo. Some of these offer potential openings for development actors who are addressing the empowerment of communities, and in particular, women and other marginalised groups.

Social Networks and Support

Within the village, members of the *tayefa mulkhdur* (those with land) seemed to have the steadiest social network in place. They are able to depend on people in the village to help them with their work, because of their landed status and resulting ability to provide work for landless villagers. Bashir, a landholder who said he had built his house in the village 35 years ago, received visitors from the whole valley and was able to get transport to Kabul for medical treatment when he needed it, as he did when the research team were in the village and he became ill. Two other landed men in the village told the research team that they know every village in the valley and would go to each others' funerals, weddings and for *nazr*.

By contrast, the landless in the village were in the most precarious situation, as they felt that they might need to move at any time. One family who had lived in the village for 15 years explained that they are always on the look out for cheaper land and housing and would leave as soon as they found it.

The social networks of women are inextricably linked to their families, but also to their mobility. In this respect, it is not surprising that the elder women interviewed during this study had more extensive social networks and support than the younger women. They spoke primarily about the women in their own village, and are in regular communication with each other and the younger women in the village (i.e. after marriage, the younger women have more contact with elder women than with each other). As a rule, elder women may depend on each other for help with their work, but also on the younger women who are expected to obey them.

The elder women also looked forward to occasional visits by women from nearby villages such as Shina (which can be seen from Obtoo). Their contact would be primarily for practical reasons, for example if the upper village needed to use their flour grinder, and would turn into social visits within these practical functions. A major expression of women's participation in community life in Afghanistan is known to be through gift exchanges and other ceremonies that "cement kinship networks and are central to building the social capital that binds communities together."[61] During these visits, women would find out about important developments in the other villages, for example weddings, funerals and disputes. They explained while making a *namad* that "we are villagers, and we help each other if we have some work, even from Shina (an upper village), we can call anyone to come and help us."

The research team were only able to speak with one younger woman at any length, but observed interactions among the younger women and girls, and the elder women. Before girls marry, they have regular opportunities to interact with other young women beyond their immediate households when making *namad* rugs and during trips to the mountain.

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[61] Kandiyoti, D. *Integrating Gender Analysis into Socio-economic Needs Assessment in Afghanistan*. United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM): Kabul. 2002, 13. In a discussion on brideprice, Nancy Tapper raises how the "exchange of productive resources, especially of land and animals, and valuables, form a sphere in which the equivalence of various items has more to do with the social relations between givers and receivers than with market values." Tapper, N. *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 1991.

While no one explicitly said that they enjoyed this work, as mentioned earlier we could infer from our observation on the mountain that this activity gives young women the opportunity to talk and joke with each other in ways that may not be acceptable in the village. The same was true to an extent with the *namad* making, but under the watchful eye of elder women.

Men, in particular the elders and married men, spoke of their social obligations to attend weddings, funerals and religious ceremonies in the valley. On several occasions we met Rahim (the brother of the VO leader) coming from or going to a wedding, funeral, or shopping trip because he was the eldest male in the household in the absence of his brother. He explained that he has many more responsibilities in this regard.

Being "free" to move

Compared to many other parts of Afghanistan, women had relative freedom in Obtoo, primarily to walk by themselves or in small groups to gather fodder for their animals. There are a variety of factors that lead to this mobility, including the relative unlikeliness of coming across outsiders in the course of their daily work; the lack of grass for animal feed close to the village; and the need to gather as much animal feed as possible given that the area is covered in snow for the majority of the year.

Box 6: Yassine: Illustrating links between knowledge, wealth and mobility

Yassine is only permitted to go outside the village to visit her widowed mother once every two or three years. She told the research team that the only family member she is permitted to visit regularly is her sister, who also lives in Obtoo (and whose husband is her husband's brother). She was able to visit the elder women in the village as she wished. At first she acknowledged that "it is not our custom for young and middle aged women to go from one village to the next." But then explained that mobility comes with education: "You are educated, so you can read and write. If I were educated I could be like you…it is good that you can read and write…you can become a doctor or a teacher and you can go anywhere…" In an expression of her perception of the lives of urban women, she later said "If I were educated, my husband would let me go outside because he knows I would help other people – now he knows if I go out I can to nothing to help except for talking and socialising with the other women."

Yassine also talked about differences between her village and Obtoo: "That valley is better than this valley. They visit each other more, and are all related. The people are also richer than they are here, so they visit each other all the time. Here people are too busy, and don't have time to visit each other." She expressed envy that the elder women in the village received women visitors from other villages. When asked whether there are people she would like to visit, that she cannot, she said, "I have no relatives in other villages, but some of the women from the other villages come here to visit women in this village and I have met them. Sometimes I would like to go visit them as well…in this village only Sahar and Afghan Gul have freedom – the other women don't have permission from their husbands to go anywhere. Sahar's husband is not at home, and Afghan Gul just goes from one to the other. Aziza also has a lot of freedom because she is alone and doesn't have anyone to help her with her work". When probed further about what reasons her husband gives her for not allowing her to visit other women, she said "he says this without any logic or reason – he just says you can't go. Sometimes he says that it is written in the *Quran* that women cannot go outside. I am uneducated and so I must follow his orders."

The categorisation of grass collection in the mountains as housework highlights both the strong cultural norms that dictate the behaviour of women and girls, as well as how they are malleable according partly to the needs of families. These factors are likely considered against the extent to which *purdah* can be maintained within these functions. The freedom of movement therefore appears to be the result of economic necessity and not suggestive of a more liberal atmosphere. For instance, a four hour walk to collect grass is considered normal and acceptable, but a girl or woman may be unlikely to come across strangers during this time. On the other hand, a trip to visit a friend or relative outside of the village, where she would likely encounter strangers, is something that needs to be cleared with a male relative and requires a male escort.

Another factor that may provide an enabling environment for women's mobility, is the remoteness of the area and the distance from other ethnic groups and outsiders. Often, the mobility of women is linked – at least rhetorically – to perceptions of whether it is safe for women to go outside alone, with younger women more restricted than older women in this respect. The impact of the presence of external agents, such as aid organisations, on women's mobility is not known. Some of the older women reported a relative lack of freedom of movement as compared with Zahir Shah's reign, because there is now perceived to be less security than at that time. Their mobility is probably also linked to the ethnic homogeneity of the region which remains today, though there have been increasing contacts with outsiders since the relative opening up of the region in the late 1880s when the government had a policy of sending Pashtuns to claim land in the region.

It is no surprise that questions on mobility resonated with the youngest woman the research team were able to speak to at any great length – Yassine - a woman with aspirations that transcended the usual experiences of women in the village, valley and country as a whole.

Perhaps predictably, there seemed to be a difference in the perception of women and men on this issue. Men often stated that "women have changed from the past" because now they have more mobility. On the other hand, women spoke of greater limits on their mobility now than in the past and said that even if they wanted to visit the doctor they could not do so without their husband's permission. Therefore if someone was sick and did not have a husband or elder to ask, they would not be able to go to Panjao and their health would be compromised. There may also be a gap in understanding between men and women, in terms of the types of freedom that men think that they have and the types of freedom different women would like to enjoy. For instance, in Qale Nau, *akhund* Mohammad Ali stated that, "Before women had permission to participate in weddings and funerals that were in this village, but now they can participate in weddings and funerals outside of the village. Also the girls can now go to school." Yet, this was not given as an example of greater freedom of movement among any of the women. In fact, it may not even be an accurate representation of the situation of women but rather more due to a desire on the part of the elder man to appear more "modern" and liberal than other villagers to outsiders who they likely perceive to be more educated and knowledgeable than local people.

Encounters with external agents and experiences of migration abroad may also be a factor in this representation of women's freedom of mobility. For example, exposure to women NGO workers, teachers and doctors who are able to travel for work purposes may provide examples of women who are able to simultaneously help their families and others, and retain a certain level of honour for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, in reality limits on their mobility prevent them from participating in social life outside their village. As a result they are not exposed to as much information as those who travel outside of the village (i.e. men), and they depend on information flows from male relatives. This may not be something that all the women would wish to change, though it was clear that at least among a few of the younger women, it was a hope they had for their futures. It is another area for further inquiry, relevant to the constraints and opportunities on women for participating in community mobilisation and development projects.

Gendered Knowledge

On a few occasions, the researchers were told by men that their team was free to speak with the women – but advised that as the women did not know anything, the researchers would be wasting their time. This view was also expressed by one elder woman and the team heard on several occasions that women are "without knowledge." Even on occasions when women voiced clearly articulated thoughts to the team, they would close by telling the researchers that they do not know anything. This is powerful rhetoric and can be an important strategy for those with power to ensure that those without it stay in that position and do not challenge assumptions about appropriate behaviour. This dynamic is an important theme that has also come out strongly in other field sites among men of different status.

This assertion about knowledge seems to be rooted in the fact that women are seen to be inferior to men in Islam. But it also seems linked to the fact that young unmarried women and married women without children, or with very young children, are seen to have a limited set of life experiences when compared with that of men. This is an important quality for the marriagability of a daughter, but also presents practical concerns for those wishing to involve younger women in development initiatives. They are seen as confined to the household, with less access to information than men who are engaged in social and economic activities that bring them into contact with men from outside of their household and village. Within the household, it would be possible to increase women's access to information through the use of radios, but as one Oxfam worker relayed, men are generally more aware not only because they venture further than women, but because they listen to the radio much more widely. He told the research team that in some cases "women do not want to know what is going on outside because they think that it is not their business."[62]

Obtaining knowledge around particular areas that others in the family or community see as important and advantageous can be a way of increasing poor men and women's participation in household and community level decision making. This is demonstrated in the way sons are chosen to go to the bazaar, midwives have responsibility to birth babies, and respect is given to those that have gone through even minimal trainings with NGOs.

But there are practical barriers to women increasing their knowledge. In particular younger women in the community have a heavy load of household chores which constrains their available time to participate in community life and decision making. When the researchers asked Yassine, the young *sayyed* woman, whether she thought that women had any knowledge that would help them to participate at the community level, she said "if women are educated, then they have all kinds of knowledge, although I don't know which kind."

The issue of knowledge – having it or not, being perceived to know something others don't, particularly if it is practically useful or revolves around the *Quran* - is a key issue here and must be explored in greater detail. The idea that education is one route to gaining knowledge is perhaps a more recent notion that has emerged with exposure to more educated people and increased opportunities for formal education. Though a few of the younger women wanted to be educated, they had little idea which kinds of knowledge they needed.

Equally important is the knowledge that women already have, via their life experiences or simply through second hand access to information. This existing knowledge is generally not acknowledged, and was even denied by some women who obviously did have some knowledge and opinions of their own, such as the example of Afghan Gul and her cousin in Qale Nau.

Box 7: Afghan Gul: Knowledge and Its Denial

Afghan Gul was one woman in the community who understood her role and her place, and managed to take on a leadership role among the women. While her words relayed her knowledge of the place of women, and the need for denial of women's knowledge, she did not accept the idea that women have no knowledge in her actions. Over the few weeks the researchers spent in the village, they got to know a woman who felt free to speak her mind and not back down from her opinions – even though she clearly knew how to appease others by appearing to acquiesce to their points of view, even while extolling her own. After articulating her perspectives on democracy – unsolicited – the team asked her how she got her courage. She said "I have my own thoughts and they come from my own mind. I am just telling you what I think. I don't have any education, and I don't know anything but what I told you."

Considering the physical freedom of women in this village, and their regular trips to the mountains it is obvious that women have some access to information. In addition the layout of the mosque, where important community issues are discussed, is such that the women can hear everything the men say regardless of whether or not they are consulted and able

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[62] Pers. Comm., Shah Wali, Oxfam, June 2004.

to participate directly in decision making. There may be opportunities therefore, to broach the topic of the knowledge that women already have in culturally sensitive ways.

External agents

In this context, external agents range from the current and past governments to NGOs to the presence of outsiders such as the research team that conducted this study. The interaction between external agents and their processes, and local agents and theirs is important because they can widen and entrench gender disparities or provide opportunities for change. In the past, the researchers were told that there was an *arbab* who functioned as the primary leader of the community. The researchers were told that in the past "if a man was an elder in the community, he was the *kalantar*, if a man was working for the government, he was a *commander*, if a man had relatives in the village, he was the *arbab*." The *arbab*, however had escaped when the Taliban arrived and was never replaced. Interestingly, it was during the time of the *arbab* that there was leadership among the women that does not exist today.

The type of external agents in the area probably has a lot to do with the perception within the community that there is a lack of local institutions and leadership capable of addressing and solving the problems of the community. More recently, NGOs such as Oxfam have come to the area and established the VO. These new institutions have however, not necessarily replaced the already existing power structures, rather they seem more to build on top of them.

This means that aid and its distribution in the community, however well intended, can bring about new problems, hierarchies and conflicts. The Obtoo community does not have – nor has it ever had – any formal decision making structure. When the team asked the men and women they spoke to whether there were institutions that helped people in the community, the first that would come to mind was the VO. The fact that it was initiated by an international NGO probably gives it higher profile (when representing it to outsiders) than more informal and traditional institutions. Oxfam staff told the team that they established the VO based on the traditional *shura*. They consulted the community elders in order to ensure that the VO built on existing structures rather than imposing something new. More generally in Panjao there is evidence that *shuras* of the past were disrupted during the war and did not have regular meetings unless there was a special problem or event. It was still clear however who would gather in the event of a major problem arising.

Section VI: Conclusion and Recommendations

From the Household to Community - Public vs. Private Decisions

The study of Obtoo illustrates the challenges for household concerns, and particularly those of individual women within them, to be reflected in "community" level decision making. It shows how, in practice, the concerns and interests of marginalised groups such as women and the landless can be subsumed by local and external institutions that do not take into account their gender dimensions. Local gender norms dictate that women should not speak in front of men regardless of their physical proximity, prevent women from participating fully in community level discussions, and ignore the fact that women may have concerns of their own. Women's domain is seen as the household, and subsequently, they are perceived to have knowledge only about things directly related to the household. Any concerns that women have are expected to be related to those of their families, and are considered private issues to be handled by elders in the household.

The participants of this study indicated that there were stronger roles for elders in the past than there are now. In particular, they used to have a greater role in resolving private issues within the village than they do at present. It is impossible to measure the extent to which this is true, given that the past is often reinvented by those who wish to make sense of the present, but it is still an important indicator of a lack of trust and solidarity in the village. The impact on local institutions, gender relations and leadership of the years of conflict, encroaching external influences, outward migration of many of the younger men for work and inward migration of landless people are not fully understood and need to be studied further.

Gender specific concerns, which may or may not have been addressed in the past by women and their own leadership, do not currently appear to be addressed in this village. The desire to avoid conflict of any kind, be it at the household level, the community level or further afield is likely to be an important factor, and one which needs to be considered by development actors. In the absence of a process that enables women and other marginalised groups to raise their own concerns; and without a process to address the conflict that is likely to be part of a process that challenges the status quo, women may be permitted to have a seat at the table but no real change in gender roles, cultural and social norms is likely to result. Indeed this is something that they themselves would have to identify, desire and pursue.

The presence of groups who are traditionally marginalised from public and community decision making (including all women, all children, landless men, young and unmarried men) in a forum such as the VO does however have the possibility for opening up new opportunities. But is only one step and action must be taken towards the more ambitious goal of the actual participation of these groups in decision making processes that affect their lives.

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

Recommendations

- **Ensure power dynamics are factored into project planning.** In Obtoo the research identified key differences in status among villagers according to gender, as well as age and land assets as determined by lineage. These differences, as well as others important to the social and power structure of the village, should be taken into account in project planning and implementation.

- **Ensure marginalised groups are not excluded.** The research also showed that status is a key determinant of participation in community life and decision making. The commitment of Oxfam to the use of participatory methods should be re-focused in light of shifts from humanitarian to development outlooks, and used to encourage villages to account for differences among villagers and foster greater participation from women and the landless, who are currently marginalised. Continual experimentation with different participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques according to each community's self defined and externally assessed needs should be explicitly incorporated into the planning of projects. It should be understood that "community" is an artificial unit that should be problematised in each local setting, such that marginalised groups are included.

- **Identify opportunities for women's participation.** Based on findings that women's interests have not been defined or are not being met, and the potential obstacles to defining them, special consideration should be given to identifying culturally appropriate participatory methodologies.

- **Provide opportunities for women to gain practical knowledge.** Opportunities for women to advance their practical knowledge, and be seen to be contributing to the welfare of their households, other households and the community at large should be developed. These should be paired with encouraging their skills in community participation and followed up over time.

- **Ensure projects for women do not enforce gender stereotypes.** Consideration should be given to whether special income generating projects for women (i.e. gabian weaving, carpet weaving and embroidery) are increasing their status and contributing to their empowerment. These should be assessed against women's heavy workloads – especially younger women – and whether they rather reinforce gender stereotypes that constrain their ability to participate in decision making seen to be beyond their sphere or knowledge.

- **Examine gender roles in development projects.** Issues currently on the development agenda (for example roads, schools and water) should be examined with the community in order to look at the gendered roles and responsibilities that are involved. Currently, because of rhetoric on gender roles and responsibilities, these are seen as male issues. Women also travel roads, collect water and are interested in the education of their children, but currently have no say in these issues.

- **Increase transparency in selecting members of VOs and other community structures.** The social change processes that organisations like Oxfam hope for are really what will determine how structures such as VOs function, i.e. they are dependent on longer term cultural change. Therefore it is necessary for them to have a clear and transparent process for selecting leadership for VOs and other externally established community groups. This may also lead to better understanding of the pre-existing decision making structures.

- **Develop tools to manage conflict arising from social change.** Community development strategies to address inequities in access to resources, activities, opportunities and constraints between men and women in particular should recognise that conflict is an

inevitable component of social transformation, and steps should be taken to enable communities to manage these conflicts among themselves.

Lessons Learned From Existing Projects

▪ Women in Obtoo said that they wanted more help from the NGOs, but did not know what else the NGOs could do for them. While NGOs have specific mandates, they should consider how to initiate project planning from the perspective of the communities and then consider how best to cooperate with other organisations to meet the self defined community needs, rather than having them choose from a set menu of projects.

AKDN Bamyan is launching a community action practice (CAP) to enable different sectors of communities (i.e. women, landless, disabled) to meet together, build up trust and feel comfortable over time to voice their needs and priorities to each other and to other groups. At this point, it is theorised that sub-groups in the community will be empowered to voice their particular concerns. Assessing these priority issues together, after sufficient analysis has been done in the separate groups, will enable the community to come up with more accurate perception of the needs of the whole community, and not just the dominant few. Enabling sub-groups to explain these issues will be more likely to increase positive solution-focused participation.[63]

▪ The idea of practical knowledge that serves to help others and the resulting increase in status of those who gain this type of knowledge is important. Providing opportunities for women and other marginalised groups to gain knowledge that is seen as useful to others in their communities is an important way for them to gain legitimacy in participation in the local level development process.

For instance, women who have participated in Oxfam seminars on health and sanitation and are able to impart this knowledge to other women in their communities see a rise in their status. Continued support and further opportunities to build on this knowledge are necessary if such training is to have sustainable effects. In addition it should be ensured that training is not only given to women who already have status and confidence.

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[63] Pers. Comm., Zulfi Haider, AKDN Bamyan, 23 June 2004.

Appendices

Appendix I: Conceptual Background

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

The operating definition of community used in this research is "a group of people who share a common sense of identity and interact with each other on a sustained basis, with organizations, networks, village institutions and inter-household associations that make up local civil society." [64] The focus of much of the development effort in Afghanistan today is on strengthening communities' ability to prioritise, plan and finance their own development in a participatory way. This is happening principally through the government's National Solidarity Programme,[65] as well as similar but smaller scale efforts by other aid organisations.

In Afghanistan, the focus on assistance to communities is enabling some innovative and visionary projects to emerge. For the first time all over the country, women, young people and other traditionally marginalised groups are being included in forums to determine their own development priorities. Many of these communities are participating to access resources, but also because of their impatience with the current inequitable status quo. However, the term "community" can be misleading in the way that it provides "an image of an undifferentiated and co-operative social group"[66] which may not be reflective of the complicated nature of the communities that are being worked with.

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

Some of the basic assumptions of this research are:

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

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[64] Kabeer, op cit.
[65] The NSP Operations Manual (Draft 2003) uses a technical and geographic definition for the rural community: "a village of not more than 50 families." Further it states that "a Development Council will be established for each community. Development Councils can not be established for sub sets of an existing village (e.g. a village cannot be split into its constituent political or ethnic/qwam subdivisions."
[66] Guijt, I. "Gender and Participation." *Development and Gender In Brief*. BRIDGE, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. 2001. Issue 9. Page 2.

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

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

Appendix II: Challenges and Caveats

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

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

Except in Kabul the research team worked in areas where their NGO partners were operational. Working with NGOs provided the team with background information on communities, introductions by entities known to the communities of study, association with credible and trusted organisations and access to up-to-date security information and guidelines. The researchers generally worked only in areas where the NGOs were comfortable for them to work. This meant that the selection of field sites was heavily influenced by the NGO partners, and their understanding of the purpose of our research.[67]

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

The team also had to deal with the fact that research is a fairly unfamiliar activity to most people in Afghanistan, and in most of the communities they worked in, people had no previous experience of it. Afghans were more familiar with outsiders being aid workers, soldiers or spies, than researchers. A lack of understanding of how aid is distributed hindered understanding of the purpose of the research team's work. The concept that the work was aimed at influencing policy and practice, rather than providing direct assistance, was difficult to explain. On a few occasions it was apparent that the community leadership did not fully trust the researchers. This had implications for the willingness of community members to trust them, although they were still able to have good interactions with some of their members in these locations. The current security environment combined with regional and local experiences of foreigners and outsiders, contributes to this lack of trust. The team felt that over time people would have a better understanding of their purpose and would open up more. While this happened with a few key informants, others became suspicious of why the researchers were staying so long. The team attempted to manage this by always explaining their purpose at the beginning of each interview, sometimes avoiding writing notes until after the interview, meeting people in their homes, one on one if possible, and always trying to be as friendly and respectful as possible.

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

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

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

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

Appendix III: Overview of Households, Concerns, Responsibilities and Decision making

Household	Description	He said	She said
Abdul Azim (m) Yassine (f) 2 sons (1st marriage) 3 sons (current) unmarried sister	(Sayyed) Hamid and Yassine married when his first wife died. Her sister is married to his brother, though they say the marriage was not a direct exchange. The household has very little land. They migrated from Yakawalang.	"When we have household decisions, we sit together and discuss them. For instance, sometimes we need to rent cows to plough the land and Yassine tells me that I should borrow money to rent the cow."	"It does not matter if my sister-in-law prefers to work on the land or take care of the baby, because she does whatever I want her to do."
Abdul Jawed (m) Wife 6 sons 2 daughters	(Zamendar) Abdul Mohammad has been educated to grade 12, making him most educated in village. In the past, his father was the *QARYADAR*. His sister is married to Ewaz, the representative of the *shura*. He has worked with NGOs, the UN elections registration and elections team. They have one *jerib* of land.	"When we have different opinions about an issue, we sit together and give ideas and discuss until we agree." "Women have control over decisions in the household, like showing manners to the children and dividing work among them."	n/a – the team were not able to speak with his wife about decision making.
Mohammad Hassani (m) Afghan Gul (f) 6 sons (2 in Iran, 1 in neighbouring village) 5 daughters	(Bezamen) Mohammad Hussan has not worked in six years because of heart problems, and Afghan Gul and her sons earn income for the household, by collecting wheat and grass and spinning wool. They migrated from Tagaborg 25 years ago. She is one of the few women in the village who can travel freely, has leadership role in important social functions among the women, and has participated in Oxfam trainings.	"I am the person responsible for the household because I am old. I cannot work now, but I divide the work among my children. For instance, I will tell them at dinnertime that one of you should irrigate the land, one of you should bring the grass, one of you should go to the mountain and one of you should go to the flour mill."	"When we have to buy something we will sit together and discuss what we should buy, how much money we have and who should go buy it. I always send my eldest son because he has more knowledge about how to buy the best items. And he has the trust of the shop owners"
Aziza (f) Asim (m – son of Aziza) 1 grandson 1 daughter 5 sons (3 living in Iran)	(Bezamin) Aziza is a widower, and lives in the household of her son and his wife. He went to Iran, but returned as he is the eldest male in the family. He has no education but is eager to educate his younger brother and will not let him work. They are worried that if the landowner finds another farmer, they will be asked to leave the land and move elsewhere.	"Women and men are partners, they live together and women have the right to participate in decisions. For example if I go to Panjao for shopping, I ask my wife's opinion about what I should bring from the bazaar, because women are in the house and they know what is needed. Also, when I want to work outside I ask the permission of my mother and my wife."	"My daughter-in-law only works as a servant, and I do not ask the opinions of my daughter-in-law or my son because I am the elder of the family…without my permission, they cannot do any work, for example if I want to make *namad* I decide that my daughter-in-law should not go to the land or to the mountains because she has to provide tea and food for whoever is helping me to make the *namad*."
Akhund Mohammad Ali (m) Meena (f) 3 sons (1 married) 3 daughters 1 daughter in law 3 grandchildren	(Bezamin) They migrated from *Pushta Ghorgori*.	"I am old and cannot see, so you should go and work. These decisions are made by me and the rest of the family participates. For example, I divided the work among the children – one of you should go and work on the land, one of you should do some business and one of you should bring firewood."	n/a – the team were not able to speak with Meena
Mohammad Nasir (m)	(Zamendar) There is no relationship between him and	"We make decisions on animal husbandry and	n/a – the wife did not discuss

Wife (f) 6 sons 2 girls	his wife, but they are both from the same village. They have many sheep, and he cooperates with Bashir and Muhammad Ali in order to sell the sheep. He has a radio and informs his neighbours of the news.	agriculture, and I ask the opinions of my elder son and my wife. For example, I wanted to sell the animals to pay back a loan, so I asked my son and he said that we should wait for the wheat. I agreed with him and did not sell. The women have control over household work."	
Bashir (m) Wife (f) No children	(Zamendar) He is the elder of the community and is respected. He appeared to be the largest landowner in the village, renting his land out for others to farm. He has a large house, built 30 years ago.	"The important decisions in the household are what we should grow on the land and who we should give our land to work on. I make the decision and my wife participates." "The women have control over housework and weeding."	n/a – we were not able to speak with his wife, as we were told she was in Kabul
Sayed Hassan (m) Wife 2 daughters 2 sons	(Zamendar) Has one *jerib* of land to farm and his own house.	"The main issues we are making decisions on are what we should grow on the land and how we should find grass for the animals. My wife and I make these decisions, and the rest of the family participates. For example, we sat together and discussed what we should grow on land, because growing different things is better for the land and it gives good results for the land owner." "The women have control over housework and weeding."	n/a – the wife did not discuss
Sahar (f) Rahim (m – brother in law) Hakim (m – migrant) 5 daughters 5 sons 2 brothers in law 1 daughter in law	(Zamendar) Her father was a rich landowner (beg) and left all of his land to her brothers. He is a day labourer, is the VO representative, but is rarely in the village. In his absence, his brother Rahim takes his place. Sahar is considered one of the freest women in the village, because her husband is not at home and she is older Rahim.	"The decisions about agriculture and what to buy in the bazaar are made by me and my brother. For instance, if we need money to buy something, I will tell my brothers that I want to sell a sheep or a goat and they will agree. I also decide who does each kind of work in the household, and I am responsible for the money."	"I have control over all things at home. My husband is not at home, so there is no one to give me orders. My brother in law has control over the land and the animals and business....even if my husband comes, my brother in law has control because my husband does not know about business and half of the animals here belong to me – my father gave them to me."
Old Woman Brother No children	(Zamendar) She was alone, working near Bashir's land with her calf. She is unmarried, lives with her unmarried brother and has no children. She had her own land in a lower village and in *Obtoo,* and hires someone to help her to work on it.		"I don't need a husband. I have my own land and my parents died 9 years ago. He divided the land between me and my brother"
Muhammad Abdul Wife Parents 3 brothers 4 sisters	**(Bezamin)** He and his family travelled from Waras because they did not have any land there four years ago.	"My father makes all the decisions in the house, like working on the land, bringing grass for the animals and collecting firewood. He doesn't ask our opinion."	

		"The women in my household are under the control of my mother and whatever she says, they should do without asking why. Like making *gilems,* bringing grass, weeding and housework."	
Akhund Mohammad Ali Marzia 2 daughters – her first marriage 1 son – her first marriage	(Zamendar, possibly *sayyed*) His first wife died from illness, and remarried a widow whose husband was killed by the Russians. Her son lives in Iran, and daughters live in an upper village. He is the elder and leader of the village, and people respect his community level decisions. She is the daughter-in-law of the *akhund* and is a Sayyed. Her cousins are Marzia and Yassine from Obtoo.	"We make decisions on working on land, loans that we have taken from people and how we should pay them back, and groceries - like what should I bring from the bazaar. Usually I make the decisions because I am old but I take the opinions of my wife and son, for example when I wanted to grow puppies on land"	"I sit together with my father-in-law and mother-in-law and they make the decision. In all of our families, the elders make deisions. We talk about how to provide food for our family and money. We don't discuss daily household chores like baking bread and going to the mountain because the women know what to do." "Sometimes I will share my ideas with them, but not always. If my idea is good they will take it. If not I will accept whatever they decide."
Zahara Husband No children	(Zamendar) Said that she had been landless 20 years before, but she was given some land by her relatives (her *nawa se a meshohar*). She has a bad hand and the other women reported helping her because of her disability.		"In my house it is only me and my husband, so we make all of the decisions."
Masuma	(Bezamin)		"Two months ago I was sick and wanted to go to the hospital and for four days I stayed there. Women are not allowed to go to the doctor unless they have their husbands' permission. Without this permission we are not allowed to go, we need to get it."

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

Household	He Said	She Said
Abdul Azim (m) Yassine (f)	"A male leader should be honest with the people, educated and should see everyone equally. … Women cannot be leaders because women don't have complete knowledge. Also we don't have in Islam that women should be leaders."	She participates in the *shura*, but in the women's *shura* not with the men. "I bring issues to the *shura* sometimes, but not household problems only community ones".
Abdul Jawed (m) Wife	"At the community level women have control over decisions about *nazr*." "A good male leader should be honest, he should think about the benefit of society not his own benefit like making buildings for himself, and he should be educated. There should be no difference between male and female leaders."	n/a – we were not able to speak with his wife about decision making
Mohammad Hassani (m) Afghan Gul (f)		"The democratic system means that men and women have equal rights and roles and don't listen to the people who used to have power…more women than men registered to vote and this shows that they have equal rights with men." "There are no differences in the qualities of a female leader and a male leader….I don't care if the president is a male or a female, a *Hazara* or not, they must have good character in the household and the community."
Aziza (f) Asim (m – son of Aziza)	"I cannot say anything about community level decision making because we have not lived here long."	"Sanitation is the biggest problem in the village. I wanted to tell you the other day [in the VO meeting] but could not…because we cannot talk to the men….no woman has ever spoken in the *shura* meeting."
Bashir (m) Wife (f)	"A good leader should have good manners, be educated and he should persuade the good people and punish the bad people…female leaders should be like male leaders."	
Aziza (2)	"I have been living in the village for 35 years and women have never participated in the *shura*, not before the Taliban or before the Mujahidin."	

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