



DEVELOPING POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS (DEVP)

November 2020



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Acknowledgements

Developing Positive Perceptions and Partnerships (DEVP) is a project designed to support the Livelihoods Unit of UNDP in communicating the Livelihoods Improvement in Tajik- Afghan Cross- border Areas (LITACA) project to relevant partners.

We would like to acknowledge the contributions provided by Laura Rio chief of unit, Mathew Duncan, Nilofer Malik, Sayed Omer Sadat, Sana Dawari and the research team Maria Tzika, Raqima Majeedi, Najla Faizy, Farida Nabizada , Nabila Abed.

LITACA played a significant role in bringing work and training opportunities in the area. It was generally considered a sustainable and successful programme, even though it was observed that insecurity had affected its activities and we would like to thank Nilofar Malik for her main role on the LITACA project.

Best,
Sana Dawari
Research Project Officer, UNDP Afghanistan

Foreword

A woman's life is full of moments of transition and transformation. They move from the father's home to the in-laws, they become young brides, then mothers, and then mothers-in-law. As they bear children and grow older their status grows but not without struggle and a tremendous ability to endure.

Developing Positive Perceptions and Partnerships (DEVP) is a project designed to support the Livelihoods Unit of UNDP Afghanistan in communicating the Livelihoods Improvement in Tajik-Afghan Cross-border Areas (LITACA) project to relevant partners.

The key objective for DEVP is to provide the tools and a platform for *real people's voices and experiences to be heard and seen and contribute to UNDP communication approach and overall narrative of the office*¹. In order to do that it employed an ethnographic research approach.

Women's empowerment has become an almost ubiquitous element of development programmes in Afghanistan. At the same time women's empowerment has been a controversial objective, as it was not grounded in the existing culture of Afghanistan, and therefore became viewed as a foreign imposition in the minds of many Afghans.

It is necessary to acknowledge the traditional and emerging female networks and power structures in order to understand, Women's agency, Women's engagement with programmes, Women's empowerment, and Social change.

The main Goal is to accelerate economic growth in order to reduce vulnerabilities and poverty, strengthen the resilience of the licit economy and reduce the illicit economy. ² UNDP Afghanistan and Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development work in close collaboration with UNDP Tajikistan and the Tajik government to provide the populations of both countries with access to rural infrastructure and public services, and employment opportunities as well as access to a cross-border dialogue, trade and partnerships.

Sincerely,

Surayo Buzurukova

Surayo Buzurukova
Senior Deputy Resident Representative for Programme

¹ As stated at the TOR

² LITACA II Prodoc p. 6

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Executive summary

Gender talk and women's empowerment is uncomfortable for both men and women. It has been observed by field and technical staff that many women do not want their men to be discriminated against and to forego opportunities that are instead given to them³. Trainings, public awareness campaigns and work opportunities target both genders equally. Even so LITACA has a genuine focus on women by carefully selecting value chains and products that have traditionally occupied women.

LITACA II is a three-years project, following the implementation of LITACA I. It focuses in four Afghan provinces and six districts bordering with Tajikistan: Badakhshan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Balkh. LITACA II is part of the Livelihoods portfolio at UNDP AFG and is being implemented by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD).

Among its other objectives, LITACA II targets women as a marginalized group in need of trainings and work opportunities and has adopted a holistic approach to achieving these objectives. It invests in new and old infrastructure like health, education, transportation, irrigation, and agricultural facilities.

The aim of this research and communication project is to provide a platform for female beneficiaries to express and communicate their experience of empowerment. It further tries to explore and develop an understanding of women's agency and create a space for the LITACA staff and donors to reflect on their perceptions.

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³ MT Fieldnote 17/07/2018

1. INTRODUCTION

Developing Positive Perceptions and Partnerships (DEVP) is a project designed to support the Livelihoods Unit of UNDP in communicating the Livelihoods Improvement in Tajik- Afghan Cross- border Areas (LITACA) project to relevant partners. The key objective for DEVP is to provide the tools and a platform for *real people's voices and experiences to be heard and seen and contribute to UNDP communication approach and overall narrative of the office*⁴. In order to do so it employed an ethnographic research approach and documentary filmmaking techniques in creating a character led documentary film.

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Its key objective is to accelerate economic growth in order to reduce vulnerabilities and poverty, strengthen the resilience of the licit economy and reduce the illicit economy.⁵ UNDP AFG and MRRD work in close collaboration with UNDP Tajikistan and the Tajik government to provide the populations in both countries with access to rural infrastructure and public services, and employment opportunities, as well as access to a cross-border dialogue, trade and partnerships.

2. THE APPROACH

The aim of this research and communication project is to provide a platform for female beneficiaries to express and communicate their experience of empowerment. It further tries to explore and develop an understanding of women's agency and create a space for the LITACA staff and donors to reflect on their perceptions.

Among its other objectives, LITACA II targets women as a marginalised group in need of trainings and work opportunities and has adopted a holistic approach to achieving these objectives. It invests in new and old infrastructure like health, education, transportation, irrigation and agricultural facilities. It strengthens labour skillsets and supports business and local traditional productions by adapting the "One Village One Product" model. Last but not least LITACA II supports cross-border economic cooperation and interaction through markets, B2B exhibitions and events and public awareness campaigns⁶.

Military interventions, NGOs and UN-Government development programmes have prioritised women's interests, since Laura Bush in 2001 announced that the fight against terrorism was also a fight for the rights of women⁷. Few months after the US invaded Afghanistan to overthrow the insurgence group, she announced that the invasion would benefit the women

⁴ As stated at the TOR

⁵ LITACA II Prodoc p. 6

⁶ LITACA II Prodoc p. 8.

⁷ Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania press, 2015), 6

of Afghanistan who have suffered in the hands of these groups. Since then, women's empowerment has become an almost ubiquitous element of development programmes in Afghanistan. At the same time women's empowerment has been a controversial objective, as it was not grounded in the existing culture of Afghanistan, and therefore became viewed as a foreign imposition in the minds of many Afghans.

During my conversations with a female UNDP member of staff based in Kabul, a lot was discussed about the ways one can approach gender in Afghanistan⁸. She mentioned that gender is a taboo topic for discussion in Afghanistan. 'Gender' initiatives are understood as the promotion of women's privileges at the expense of men, as prescribed by Western cultural values. At the same time, development and development agencies are considered 'western' or 'foreign' by many Afghans living in rural areas. Their presence in the country is often perceived as intrusive and imperialistic. Hence, discussing marginalisation and mistreatment of female members of a community is done discreetly by using a considered vocabulary. In the case of this female UNDP officer, who has worked extensively for NGOs and the UN and has made women's rights her lifelong project, the word 'gender' is prohibited. She instead uses the Dari word 'jensiat ajtemayee' which translated to 'sex in social context'. Her strategy is based on Quran references and reminders of the Prophet Mohammed's first wife's business ventures. She repeats her spiel to me: 'Nowhere in the holy book does it say that women are inferior to men or they should not be allowed to work'⁹.

Gender talk and women's empowerment is uncomfortable for both men and women. It has been observed by field and technical staff that many women do not want their men to be discriminated against and to forego opportunities that are instead given to them¹⁰. LITACA, according to a senior UNDP female employee, has addressed this in the following manner: The programme offers employment opportunities for both men and women in their outreach areas. Trainings, public awareness campaigns and work opportunities target both genders equally. Even so LITACA has a genuine focus on women by carefully selecting value chains and products that have traditionally occupied by women¹¹.

Community empowerment is, on the other hand, at the heart of participatory development programmes like LITACA. The aim is to involve and collaborate with beneficiaries in all stages of conception, design and implementation of the programme. Participatory development is seen by many as an element to change society, empowering beneficiaries to take responsibility for their own development¹². My initial conversations with LITACA staff were dominated by evidence of changes in community perceptions. And while in hindsight I realised I forgot to ask for their male beneficiaries' signs of empowerment, in the moment I cherished their excitement over the women's transformation. One male community mobiliser described how widowed women that were extremely vulnerable and previously heavily dependent were now able to earn an income. Their families as a consequence respected them

⁸ Maria Tzika (MT) Fieldnote 17/07/2018

⁹ http://islamswomen.com/articles/do_muslim_women_have_rights.php

¹⁰ MT Fieldnote 17/07/2018

¹¹ MT Fieldnote 15/ 11/ 2018

¹² Mary Beth Wilson, Impacts of Participatory development in Afghanistan, (Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2013), 26

and regularly asked for their opinion¹³. The narrative of empowerment was shaping into a before and after storyline. 'Women that before would have their backs turned and covered in burqas in the presence of non-mahram men, now they are now talking business'¹⁴ .

My initial response was to identify those relationships in which these women were performing this new 'after-LITACA self'. I was particularly intrigued by a rather old but insightful research done by UNRISD on women that lived in refugee camps in Pakistan in the 1990s¹⁵. One of the findings was the correlation between the amount of a woman's earnings and the support she received from the adult males of her household. The more support she had, the more she earned. But at the same time the working women kept a low profile in the community and only spoke about this with their close families. Drawing from this and the descriptions of the LITACA staff the initial research question was a look at the support, especially the husband or father and brothers, and experience of empowerment within the household unit.

Initial Research Question

The initial questionnaire was built around 6 themes with subthemes¹⁶. Questions were given to the research team with instructions for their observations for each visit. They were asked to treat the questionnaires as reference points and were given full instructions and training on how to contact open end interviews. The themes and subthemes were designed in order to cover personal and background details, perceptions of gender identity and rights, mobility, access to education, information and work, finances and LITACA. Further questionnaires were designed tailored to the husband or other male and female members of the family.

Five beneficiaries from LITACA I and five from LITACA II agreed to take part in the research. These were a mixture of women working in handicraft, tailoring and beekeeping. Some of the beneficiaries were based near Kunduz, in Imam Sahib and Markaz, and the others near Takhar, in Yangi Qala and Dast Qala. The research phase started in March 2019. The plan was to visit each beneficiary once a month and to spend four to five hours with each of them in different settings, such as at home or at trainings. Interviews were to be arranged with the rest of the family members. In the actual research phase, the research team managed to visit all families in Yangi Qala and Dash Qala but only a few families in Kunduz area.

A major limitation of this research has been the lack of a full time, neutral, research team. The research team consisted of two LITACA gender officers, one based in Kunduz and the other in Takhar, and two female intern students working for LITACA on a voluntary basis. The gender officers had full time commitments which sometimes took precedence over DEVP. Further to that, the security situation was extremely unstable and affected the field trips on several occasions especially around Kunduz. The third month of the research visits were not carried out because of Ramadan; the participants preferred not to be visited during that month. In June 2019, the fourth month of the research, due to the mentioned limitations it

¹³ MT Fieldnote 10/11/2018

¹⁴ MT Fieldnote 15/07/2018

¹⁵ Hanne Christensen, The reconstruction of Afghanistan: A chance for Rural Afghan Women, (UNRISD report, 1990) 30- 31

¹⁶ Annex I, Themes

was decided to carry out research visits only to the participants that were more likely to agree to filming. As the research had only a six-month life cycle, and the objective of DEVP was to produce an insightful communication product, in consultation with the research team we selected three out of the ten participants. We continued for the next three months our visits to those three participants.

Apart from the above complications, our sample was quite limited. We did not have access to people that are not LITACA project beneficiaries. Further to that the selected beneficiaries had to live in relatively secure areas and easily accessible by the research team. Hence it would be difficult to draw any conclusions that could be applicable to the community as a whole. There were some meaningful insights that will be further discussed in this report. These insights could potentially be helpful to the LITACA technical and field staff.

Shift in focus

Early in the research, observations and reports from the field began to direct my attention to the relationships and influence women had towards one another and in their own communities, which represented a shift in focus. I heard stories of authoritative mother in laws, resilient daughters in law, women that the community trusted with their daughters, and Tajik women who inspired others through the TV screen. New friendships and work relationships were created through the LITACA trainings and opportunities which came with the OVOP centres and exhibitions. A dynamic system of power relations, networks of solidarity and oppression where the agents were exclusively female began to emerge.

During my workshops and meetings with technical and field staff where extensively discussed the formal and informal power structures which existed, for example the elders, religious leaders, CDCs and maliks whom they had to respect and go through, in order to gain and maintain access to the communities¹⁷. The world I was presented with was exclusively male. Soon after, I received the first fieldnotes from the research team, and I started questioning the beneficiaries' journey to empowerment as a 'before and after' narrative. And while there was mention of 'brave and strong sisters', who were raising the profile of their communities, the majority of women I heard about seemed to be repressed, hidden, and vulnerable.

Anila Daulatzai in her ethnographic work in a widow-run bakery in Kabul, notices this dichotomy between the oppressed, voiceless woman on one side, and the heroic autonomous figure on the other¹⁸. She considers this dichotomy as an obstacle to properly understanding women's struggle and agency in their everyday lives. She continues, 'to locate agency we need to examine and analyse the structures of existing possibilities in which one is able to act - how relationships are formed, situated and sustained rather than individual actions'¹⁹.

¹⁷ MT Fieldnote 19/07/2019

¹⁸ Anila Daulatzai, *Acknowledging Afghanistan: Notes and Queries on an Occupation*, (Cultural Dynamics, Sage Publications, 2006)

¹⁹ Ibid: 302

A global discourse on human rights which informs development work has, at the top of their agenda, the independence and empowerment of vulnerable women whose rights are being violated on a daily basis. Anthropological works like those from J. Billaud (2015) , Rostami-Povey (2007), Grande (2016) and others try to change this narrative, which they recognise as stemming from an approach that promotes ‘a univocal model of humanity, build according to the cultural, moral and economic standards of neoliberal democracies’²⁰. Within that framework, Afghan women need to be saved from a repressed patriarchal society with the help of international humanitarian and development agencies.

The works of the above anthropologists keep at heart this critique and discuss women’s agency prior to their vulnerability. This approach does not deny suffering - it just reinstates a balance lost in years of war, conflict and international interventions. Deborah Smith writing for the Afghanistan Analysts Network, notes that ‘Recognising the agency of Afghan women does not deny the terrible gender prejudice and discrimination that they face. It does not deny the horrors of child marriage, exchange marriages and domestic violence. Nor does it deny that women are systematically marginalised from local and national political and economic processes’²¹. Instead, recognising that rural and poor Afghan women are more than passive victims of such crimes allows for spaces for change to be identified and worked within; spaces that have already been defined by these women.

I approached this research in this light. Hence, in this report I will try to present all those empowering moments that the participants experienced throughout their lives through incidents and stories that decided to share with the research team. In that way I hope perceptions of themselves and of their actions will become evident. How do they act according to their values and towards their goals when given the opportunity?

While doing that I am hoping to create a space for reflection for relevant programme staff. The aim is for them to contemplate whether enough attention is paid to traditional and new female networks and whether female authority within the community and the household is sufficiently acknowledged and considered systematic.

I believe it is necessary to acknowledge the traditional and emerging female networks and power structures in order to understand:

1. Women’s agency.
2. Women’s engagement with the programmes.
3. Women’s empowerment.
4. Social change.

²⁰ Julie Billaud & Antonio De Lauri, Humanitarian theatre normality and the carnivalesque in Afghanistan (London- New York, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016), 72

²¹ Deborah Smith, Women and Reconciliation (2): The dangers of representing women as victims (Afghanistan Analysts Network, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/women-and-reconciliation-2-the-dangers-of-representing-women-as-victims/>, 2011)

FINDINGS

Daughter, Bride, Wife, Mother

'At that time, as there was not any vehicle in our village, people used to take the new bride to her husband's house by horse. My husband also took me to his house on a horse. At that time, when the bride arrived at her husband's house, there was celebratory gunfire from the groom's family. When I got to my husband's house, his family celebrated with gunfire. And since there was a military force nearby, they also fired bullets in the sky in response. I was so afraid of the bullets and the noise; I still cannot forget that moment.'²²

A woman's life is full of moments of transition and transformation. They move from the father's home to the in-laws, they become young brides, then mothers, and then mothers-in-law. As they bear children and grow older their status grows but not without struggle and a tremendous ability to endure. Most of the participants in their forties, that had been married for a few decades, described how respecting the in-laws, and in particular their mothers in law, was almost a strategic move in order to achieve good treatment from the new family. A 'good woman' was described by most of the participants as one that has good behaviour towards others and especially her in-laws. She might be taunted, mistreated, and isolated; and, almost as a rite of passage, she must go through this and gain her in-laws trust with her good behaviour. Ultimately, she must be flexible, clever, and wise, and she must have children. And that has been the advice the mothers shared with their daughters as they sent them off to a new regime.

A young bride is expected to do the heaviest housework in her new household. Amena, as other participants were critical of this abusive treatment of young brides. At the same time, she could not consider heavy housework as an obstacle to women advocating their rights. She gained confidence when she realised as a young bride she could do all the housework, take care of her co-wives children and in the evening prepare a feast for 500 guests at a time; 'I used to think where to start and which task I should do first. I prioritized my tasks from the most to the least urgent ones. First, I sent animals to the butcher, then I would wash the rice and start cooking the dinner and arrange the guest room, as well as prepare tea for them. This is how I prioritize my tasks. Every person should have a schedule for their daily routine.'²³

Khatera drew from her organizational skills as a housewife and a tailor when she was asked to become a trainer for LITACA. She had made an elaborate plan of what seemed a random allocation of tasks to different trainees during her sessions. Her goal was to train everyone in every single task of the tailoring process unexpectedly during the training sessions²⁴. Khatera is illiterate and lives an impoverished life. Her decision to become a tailor stemmed from her need to become independent of her husband's low income. Tailoring was and, in many cases, still is the only option for women to work. You can work as a tailor indoors, on your own and with flexible hours as your first priority is to fulfill your duties as a mother and a housekeeper. In the case of Khatera though, while she describes her relationship with her husband

²² Raqima Majeedi (RM) Fieldnote 8/6/ 2019

²³ RM Fieldnote 14/08/2019

²⁴ RM Fieldnote 26/ 08/ 2019

positively changing after she started earning an income, she continued having no authority or decision-making power until her mother in law left.

The mother in law holds the authority of the household. Apart from being the one to manage the female members to carry out the housework, cooking and anything else related, she also manages the expenses of the household, and she consults and participates in important decision making along with the male members. Lena Ganesh's report on women's economic empowerment commences with acknowledging senior women's place in the community: they can move freely, mahram younger women, consult and seal marital alliances, they have authority over daughters in law and act as peace negotiators if feuds erupt, they are responsible for hospitality, and solidarity between families and kin²⁵.

In one of the workshops I carried out in Kabul, a senior member of staff gave an example of the oppression of the women by the Insurgent group. The discussion was around difficulties of having female members at CDCs. In insurgent group areas, they did not want women to participate but they were willing to compromise and allow senior women to take the role²⁶. While this position is a manifestation of the restrictions that women face, it is also an acknowledgement of their authority as seniors. And while the male elders' authority is widely recognized, the female elders did not have a presence in the discourse of the development program. Failing to appropriately acknowledge women's authority in the household, might lead to overlooking important aspects of the structure of domestic networks and the impact of these relationships.

Even though the sample was limited it provided few opportunities to compare the life conditions of participants that were related to each other. Sadaf was Khatera's younger sister and yet portrayed her life in a completely different light to her sister. While Khatera spoke of her mother in law not allowing her to study, visit her parents or attend any celebration in the community²⁷, Sadaf spoke of her life as a teacher and a university student. Her mother in law along with her husband take care of her children while she commutes to work and university in Takhar²⁸.

A UN Women research report published in 2016 highlights how the ability of a young woman to continue or complete her education depends on the permission of her in-laws and her husband²⁹. Further to that, her right to work is also dependent on her in-laws' wishes. 'Women's rights are not agreed by all, but her responsibilities are' says Khatera³⁰. All participants that had daughters declared that they would not allow their daughters to be engaged without their consent or before they have finished their education. They all drew from their own experience of forced marriage and restrictions to work and study as soon as

²⁵ Dr Lena Ganesh, Women's economic empowerment in Afghanistan 2002- 2012, Situational Analysis, (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, https://areu.org.af/advanced-publication-search?publ_title&publ_author&publ_theme&publ_date&upubl_rproject&publ_paper=case-study, 2013), 11

²⁶ MT Fieldnote 4/03/2019

²⁷ RM Fieldnote 8/06/2019

²⁸ RM Fieldnote 30/04/2019

²⁹ Knowledge, attitudes and practices survey on women's economic rights in Afghanistan (UNWOMEN, August 2016)

³⁰ RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

they joined the in-law's household. They all believed that forced marriage leads to domestic violence alongside unemployment and illiteracy. Their main concern was to give these opportunities to their daughters and make sure they have the right to consent to their marriage.

Marriages are often financial transactions. Fazal Muzhary, from the Afghanistan Analyst Network describes how weddings are expensive and a great burden on grooms and their families, but also a vital source of income for the families of brides³¹. A lot of poor families with daughters might choose to get them engaged early to unsuitable men in order to cash the 'dowry'. At the same time, boys might decide to drop out of school in order to work or immigrate to save some money to get married, like Khatera's son Ahmad³². At the same time, as Amena puts it during her interview, women are devalued when a price is put on them. This transaction has allowed the in-laws to treat women as slaves; they consider them 'the same as the goods bought from the bazaar'³³.

Maryam, one of our participants, proudly declared her daughter's happy marriage to a family that supported her to work and allowed her to continue her studies. Mursal's father commented how they did not choose wealth but a family that were close relatives to his wife. By doing that he was declaring his daughter free of the burden to bring financial relief to the family. Maryam, and her husband have empowered their daughter by making her less vulnerable to abuse and ensured her right to work and education. Maryam's thoughts on the right to consent came as a result of her experience. She did not know she was getting married until her in laws came with her wedding dress. She was astonished but did not say anything as she was illiterate and had no job, she was 16 years old³⁴. Her participation at LITACA increased her income and the quality of her family's living conditions.

Maryam made enough money as a tailor trainer for LITACA I to renovate her house, help her husband open a shop and send all her children to school and private madrasa. One of LITACA's outcomes is the acceleration of economic growth and as a consequence the reduction of vulnerability and poverty. When I encountered Khatera through the fieldnotes and audio-visual material, her story was the success story development agencies usually want to see on the ground. Further to that, her hard work and love for education and work opportunities had benefitted apart from her daughter, her female neighbours, her niece, and sister. All these women were working with Maryam, selling her tailoring products at the market. A network of solidarity and opportunity was growing around her, and LITACA staff had played a significant role in that. Maryam's husband spoke of how the LITACA gender focus officer has supported his family and the community.

Unfortunately, Maryam did not become the protagonist of the DEVP film. A rather disturbing incident brought up questions of risk and vulnerability. The scope of this report and the limitations of this research does not allow an analysis, but it is worth presenting the data. While a month of clashes between insurgents and the military was taking place in Imam Sahib,

³¹ Fazal Muzhary, The bride price: the Afghan tradition of paying for wives (Afghanistan Analysts Network, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-bride-price-the-afghan-tradition-of-paying-for-wives/>, 2016)

³² RM Fieldnote 4/07/2019

³³ LAPIS interview 17/09/2019

³⁴ Najla Faizy (NF) Fieldnote 23/04/2019

making communication with Jamila very difficult, her husband was arrested and jailed by the police. The accusation was that he was a witness to a wedding where the groom abandoned the bride. He was in prison for a month, Maryam sold her cow - her steady source of income - had stopped working and her children, had stopped going to school in order to find and save the money to pay for his release³⁵. She was no longer keen to be filmed and her life seemed in tatters. A few LITACA employees had run to the rescue, using their contacts to achieve his release. The true explanation to this incident, according to other sources that I spoke to (a member of LITACA staff and one of my researchers), was that her husband had been arrested by corrupt police officers who were looking for bribes.

What struck me from this unexpected turn of events was not just the vulnerability of people's lives in unstable environments, and the risk to the sustainability of LITACA's impact, but also the involvement of LITACA staff who had mobilised their networks to help her. And while enhancing local economic development, improvement of local governance, and promotion of cross border cooperation are activities LITACA staff engage in, the human networks they create are of equal importance. Those networks are several, for example, the trainers and trainees, the interactions with Tajikistan, the OVOP associations etc.

A senior member of staff told me that they can pinpoint the sustainability of their program on one single factor: the feeling of ownership that is created through the associations LITACA is supporting the communities to elect and organise around the OVOP activities and centers³⁶. Empowering the community to own, manage and sustain their resources as a group beyond the run of a development programme can achieve improved living conditions and make communities resilient in the long run. As this research had a fair amount of limitations and restrictions, we were not able to observe, or interview members of associations formed with the support of LITACA. Our focus was mainly on women and their feelings of empowerment as stated above. One of the main insights has been that most participants believed that women's solidarity networks and groups are essential to their empowerment.

'There should be a programme where women can meet and get to know more about each other. They should know how each one of them lives, what each one of them does. Women should be aware of anything good or bad about each other.... There is no such programme and women's voices are never heard... A lot of women haven't even been out of the house in a year' said Khatera³⁷. Khatera feels her voice will be amplified if it's joined with other women's voices, a process of recognition, acknowledgement and solidarity. Further to that, most participants declared that if they worked with more women in a group they could work more and earn more.

Khatera craves for something that will bring her in touch with women outside her inner circle. Traditionally though, the women of the household go through all their chores and further aspects of their lives together; that is very empowering and strengthens their identity of being female, notes Dr Ganesh³⁸.

³⁵ MT Fieldnote 6/08/2019

³⁶ MT Fieldnote 6/09/2019

³⁷ RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

³⁸ Dr L. Ganesh, 2013: 11

Within this small circle of the household women, we find hierarchies, power relationships but also friendships: among mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and brides, co-wives, sisters and sisters-in-law. I have already tried to introduce some of the participants' relationships above in relation to women's right to consent to marriage and establish their rights to work and study. I have already mentioned how women that were financially stronger were able to contemplate a different future for their daughters and refuse to engage them to unsuitable suitors. It is worth mentioning, however, that a lot of the participants described their communities as insecure and with 'bad' costumes. And while all of them highly regarded their daughters' consent and rights to work and study, their higher income was not always enough to allow them to act upon their convictions. Khatera describes how she had to wed her daughter to a family that threatened to abduct her if they did not agree to this engagement. The in-laws and husband lied that they would allow her to continue with her studies and she was further abused in their hands³⁹.

A few of the participants were younger, unmarried women. They have been part of the LITACA programme and had literacy, numeracy, and training courses. They were working as tailors and described themselves as financially independent. They were also financially supporting their families and claimed that they were part of the decision making. They also reported how they would teach their sisters or sisters in law how to read and write or embroider. Those families would not allow their female members to work and study outdoors but had trusted one daughter or sometimes more to participate to the LITACA activities. A few reasons were mentioned as to why the women of these family were restricted:

i. insecurity, ii. community customs, iii. financial limitations. We had the chance to interview a few of these family members and the usual response was that they felt that they were also benefiting by the participants' access to work and education.

Unfortunately, the research team did not manage to visit those women more than a few times. The security situation restricted movement around Kunduz. Hence, we can only note here that our next questions would be around their participation in the programme, their participation in the decision making and their consent to marry and what were their future and ambitions.

Mahmood, 32yo: 'I am not married yet. I was paid 2,600 AFN when I was working under the LITACA-I project. Additionally, I would sew clothes and embroider veils for my neighbors. I get paid 1,000 AFN for one embroidered veil. I work five hours a day in order to cover my expenses. I taught embroidery for 15 other girls during LITACA-I. Now, each one of those girls are better embroiders and are financial independent. I also financially support my brother. My sister, Nafisa, and I were working under LITACA-I project. Since we started working our lives are better'. None of the women in the household are allowed to work outdoors. Her sister in law is not allowed to leave the house or be educated but she is happy that Mahmood is financially independent⁴⁰.

Nasrin, 23 yo: 'My great ambition is to continue my education. I really liked to study economics. But as I failed the Kankor Exam, I could not study in a public university. At the

³⁹ RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

⁴⁰ NF Fieldnote 08/05/2019

same time, as we are poor, I could not start my undergraduate studies. That's why I am currently trying to make money so that I could pursue my undergraduate studies in one of the private universities/higher education institutes.' Nasrin is working both as a tailor and also as a gender officer at her municipality in Yangi Qala. She tries to persuade women not to be scared and go out and work⁴¹. When the research team met her at a LITACA training for new business ideas she was excited with the workshop and said: 'We were fifty participants with fifty new ideas'⁴².

Zainab, 23 yo: She studied up to 12th grade and then had to stop because of lack of money. She wants to be a teacher. She teaches her sisters at home as there are insurgent groups in her village and they are not allowed to go to school. She said 'LITACA is very useful, educating women is very important as they can help their kids get educated'. In that way she hopes that women will be saved from violence. She gave as an example a story of a young woman that got married to a man that six months later was killed by these groups. She was not allowed to go back to her father's home, and she was married to her brother in law as now she was the honour of the family⁴³.

All women we met used their newly acquired skills to support other women within their household or their close social circle of neighbours and extended family. This is of course nothing new. Rostami- Povey (2007) notes that under insurgent groups women's survival strategies were to create networks and groups of trust, reciprocity, and solidarity in their neighbourhoods, with friends and relatives. 'Under the insurgent groups, these networks and forms of solidarity became mechanisms for women's empowerment'⁴⁴. Those networks were especially used by women of the elite that would teach the most poor and underprivileged their different skills. During interviews, our participants described their support in two ways, first, they taught them tailoring, writing, and reading, and second, they encouraged them to be aware of their rights. There was a consensus that the best way to empower women was to give them access and awareness of their rights and the support they need to demand them. Most women mentioned the rights to work, education, the right to choose their husband, protection from violence and the right to be represented at CDCs and the government. The right to representation was mentioned by one woman that was also a deputy of the CDC. This woman was the example of the 'exceptional', the one that stands out. The type of woman that I first heard about from a female officer at UNDP.

This officer has been campaigning for women's rights around Afghanistan and has visited a lot of rural areas. She is an urban, well-educated career woman, who seemed to have a lot of energy and ideas. She spoke with admiration about a woman she once met in a remote village who was eloquent and sharp. 'She had a surprising good level of understanding and knowledge of psychology' said the officer⁴⁵. Communities often have exceptional women that act with authority amongst the other women, who are usually daughters or wives of elite families of officials or other powerful or rich men.

⁴¹ RM Fieldnote 27/03/2019

⁴² RM Fieldnote 27/03/2019

⁴³ RM Fieldnote 15/04/2019

⁴⁴ E. Rostami- Povey, 2007: 32

⁴⁵ MT Fieldnote 17/07/2018

The brave sister, A case study

I have already mentioned the problem of creating dichotomies between heroic women and oppressed voiceless ones. That dichotomy fails women in many ways, including in the way they relate to each other. Sharifa, 42, has been working hard to support women to know and access their rights. She came from a privileged background, a well-off family with a father that believed in education and the will of his daughter. His dream was to send her to Moscow to study for a master's in medicine. Unfortunately, he died before she reached the age for this, and, due to the war, she was married to a polygamous military man.

Her right to work did not come without a struggle. She was only allowed to work after she had proven to her in-laws that she could complete her household tasks. In the meantime, she had already set up a literary course with a blackboard under the shade of a tree. Around thirty of the girls and young women of her village came to attend. Sohaila claims that she gained confidence only after she started working outdoors. However, she stood by her beliefs much earlier in life. She describes how as a teenager she would remind her mother to treat her sisters-in-law with respect, and how she put an end to the violence against the females of her husbands' household. She was empowered early on in her life by her family to believe she was capable, and that hard work should be rewarded.

She says that 'In the past, my father used to encourage me to sew handkerchiefs. He always promised that he would buy those handkerchiefs from me. He did buy my handkerchiefs and I have always wondered what my father did with all these handkerchiefs. When I got older, I found out that my father was keeping all those handkerchiefs in a bag. Then I realized that he had always encouraged me to work'⁴⁶.

Sharifa believes women don't speak out because they have no one to listen to them. She says 'Women in Afghanistan are keeping silent because their families do not allow them to protest against anything'⁴⁷. Further to that, women are misrepresented in the public sphere, there are few political figures and activists. Most of the participants have lived in communities that did not have female representation at their CDCs. But Sharifa adds that 'women will not access their rights until the time they will speak up and advocate for their rights. I believe that rights are taken, not given to anyone'.

Sharifa describes how she became the deputy of her CDC by exposing the previous council's corrupt activities. Her main objective was to inform the female members of the community of their rights under the NSP. She had noticed that the women were not aware of what they were entitled to, as the community would not inform them. The members of the council being male and also corrupt, did not address the issue. Having a voice is not enough when no one is listening. Creating and supporting each other through networks of solidarity amongst women provides them access to resources and platforms where they can voice their concerns, demands and needs.

⁴⁶ Film Shoot, Kabul. Interview 17/09/2019

⁴⁷ RM Fieldnote 14/08/2019

Sharifa being the 'brave sister' (as a lot of officials she worked with called her) made use of the privilege of her background and her family's status. She promoted collective action and used herself as an example and role model for the rest of the women. I acknowledge that presenting her as a case study is incomplete as the data only derives from interviews with her. We did not have access to her family and members of her community, as she lives in a insurgent group-occupied area, where no LITACA staff can visit at the moment. She met our researcher in Takhar, and she was also interviewed by the film production company in Kabul. What we know about her is her account and her point of view, and her perception of empowerment and empowering others. Her story and her personality have been fascinating. For that reason, I provided her with a mobile phone and asked her to film her everyday life. She did and the result was edited into the final deliverable of this project.

Sharifa's literacy course was only the beginning of her community mobilisation. She says in one of our visits that she wanted to put an end in the violence towards women. She claims she managed that by bringing people together in groups and associations. She spoke to us about her Handicraft Association which she established a year ago in her village. She established it because she wanted to provide work and training opportunities to disabled women and women that did not have access to any of that. In her words 'We know that one person cannot do anything by themselves alone. If a group of people come together, they can definitely bring change in their communities' ⁴⁸.

At the moment there are twenty-five female members. They hold meetings where all members and their families participate and discuss work, trainings and education, savings, small enterprises and social issues such as marriage. One of the most important things discussed was the issue of high dowries and expensive weddings and gifts and how to eliminate them. The members work together and sell their handicrafts in district markets, at the OVOP centre and exhibitions in Kabul and Tajikistan. All the members participate in decision making. Raw materials are bought from proceedings and often by Sharifa herself in an attempt to support the association to grow.

Sharifa noticed that the members of the association had brought change into their lives. They had managed to buy carpets, furniture and other necessities but they also started managing their income more efficiently. Sharifa describes expensive gifts and imported clothes as unnecessary expenses linked to bad traditions and habits. Through the work and the meetings done at the association she noticed that the much more affordable, locally produced handicrafts and traditional clothes started becoming more popular in the community, worn at festivities, and given as gifts.

There is a theme of unity that keeps coming up in her conversations about positive change. She feels happy when she sees the members of the association wearing the same handmade clothes 'They look beautiful and united'⁴⁹. She describes her household as united when she refers to her co-wives 'I believe we should be the same, wear the same clothes, go to the same places. I even buy the same clothes for the servants when I buy for my husband and sons'⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ RM Fieldnote 14/08/2019

⁴⁹ RM Fieldnote 25/06/2019

⁵⁰ RM Fieldnote 25/06/2019

These observations make me think of a certain outcome when promoting unity among women. J. Billaud (2015) talks about the gift economy amongst women and families. She notices how a failure to return a gift when given one might lead to status damage and gossip which is considered 'the most dangerous feminine weapon'⁵¹. Backbiting and gossip has been mentioned by most of the participants as the dreadful consequence of defying cultural norms. It is a social mechanism that seems to keep women in check and dictate what is right or wrong. Sharifa, on the other hand, considers it a result of unemployment and illiteracy which she is determined to change. Unity amongst women can lead to less backbiting and criticism when some of them supposedly defy the norms, by, for example, working outdoors.

Unity, peace and security in Afghanistan are what she wants for the future. The images she uses are strong, 'The police station is on top of the hill and the insurgent groups quarters at the bottom, our house is in the middle'⁵². She gives food to both camps in an attempt to unify them as people in need of her motherly love. 'I'm nice and polite to everyone' she says, and even though her husband is a controversial figure as a military man, she herself has adopted the softness of the peacemaker. A traditional female role indeed. Further to that unity seems to have grown organically in the community, since a lot of the women and children that she has supported with her initiatives belong to insurgent groups families. These groups acknowledge her contribution by not disrupting her activities.

Sharifa is a woman with strong values. She believes women have the responsibility to clean and do the housework and cooking, respect the husband and work alongside him. She considers women that work to be 'good' wives who understand that they need to have an income in order to help their husbands feed their families. One female member of UNDP staff once said, jokingly, that we should teach them negotiation skills not only in business but with their husbands as well⁵³. Perhaps this is not far from the truth. Sharifa advises women to have a logical answer to anyone that tries to stop them from working or studying, 'I always advise them to tell their husband that they will stop working when he is able to afford their children's expenses'⁵⁴. Further to that she visits and talks with their mothers-in-law and male members of their household, discussing how a woman's responsibility is to work along her husband to cover their household expenses in these times of insecurity, war and poverty⁵⁵.

Sharifa identifies with the image of the strong mother, "with one hand shake the cradle and with the other the world"⁵⁶. Dr Huma Ahmed- Ghosh (2003) writes that in a traditional society patriarchy is maintained within the family. Gendered hierarchies ensure the transmission of religion, culture, and family values from mothers to children, hence "the concept of motherhood is glorified but not the actual mother"⁵⁷. Sharifa became a mother before she gave birth. The first thing she did when she entered her new house as a young bride was to

⁵¹ J. Billaud, 2015: 132

⁵² RM Fieldnote 15/08/2019

⁵³ MT Fieldnote 15/11/2018

⁵⁴ Film shoot, Kabul. Interview 17/09/2019

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ RM Fieldnote 25/06/2019

⁵⁷ Dr Huma Ahmed- Ghosh, A history of women in Afghanistan. *Journal of International Women's Studies* Vol 4, 3/05/2003: 9

ask permission to make decisions for her co-wives' children. She washed them, dressed them with clean clothes and took them to school. She urges women to fight for their right to make decisions about their children," because if they have the right to decide about their children, they will realise their value"⁵⁸.

Women need to socialise, be consulted, and to participate in decision-making procedures in order to feel empowered. Sharifa notices how illiterate women act with intelligence and confidence after trainings and involvement with her association or other group activities. This image is not far from the descriptions given by LITACA's male staff: that beneficiaries sit with their backs to them, and yet just a year later are able to talk business with the outmost authority. While women and their work are often devalued in the family and the community, seeking their advice in matters they are expert in raises their status and their confidence. 'You are not weak' Sharifa reminds women⁵⁹; by saying that she not only empowers women but also raises the status of their work and their ability to multitask e.g. raise children, do the housework, keep animals etc. In other words, she changes perceptions.

Azarbaijani- Moghaddam (2004) makes an interesting point when she describes how women's labour in the informal sector and in traditional labour is "not organised and certainly not unionised and almost always controlled by men"⁶⁰. A few of the participants spoke of women in Afghanistan as slaves; hardworking unrewarded slaves that should be grateful for the food they are given by their husbands. Sharifa's handicraft associations, and also LITACA's focus on traditional lines of work, turns these unofficial but money-making jobs like husbandry and tailoring, into businesses that can grow and flourish. Those initiatives are shifting the narrative of hard labour and hand to mouth existence, to creativity, business management and international trade.

Sharifa's proudest identity is that of the businesswoman. She has mentioned at least four businesses she runs at the moment and two ideas for the future. She makes money out of her poplar trees, processing and exporting lemons and honey from her beehives, and lastly from her embroidery. She is thinking about a cement import- export business with Tajikistan and also a bag factory which could utilise local leather and skilful local weavers. LITACA has provided her with honeybees, a variety of trainings, access to markets where she sells her handicraft products, and the market of Tajikistan where she has signed export agreement for her lemons. LITACA is also aware of her association and they have supported it with workshops and access to OVOP centre.

" Women can be good businesspeople because they are honest"⁶¹ she says. She herself has looked up to other women that run successful businesses in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. She believes in exposure and access to knowledge of other lifestyles and cultures. She has attended several exhibitions within the country and abroad. Unfortunately, she was always invited alone. She says," if my association members would have the opportunity to attend the

⁵⁸ Film Shoot, Kabul. Interview 17/09/2019

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S., 2014. Trapped in the Past or Empowered for the Future? Afghan Women's Prospects in the Decade to Come. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 3(1), p.Art. 40. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.em>: 3

⁶¹ Film Shoot, Kabul. Interview 17/09/2019

exhibitions together as a team, we could convince and encourage other women to work”⁶². Her testimony alone is not enough to transmit the message that more and more women are out there working.

Sharifa does not defy women’s” traditional” roles. She is trying to empower women to take ownership of those roles and redefine them in their own terms, and in that way redefine the community so that their economic and social contributions are recognised. As has been described above, Sharifa achieves these goals by creating networks of solidarity but also bringing herself and other women to the forefront as role models and inspiration. Female representation in the public sphere, in the political arena and the sites of power are the ultimate goal in securing the implementation of women’s legal rights. Sharifa has worked as a field monitor at Dasht Qala with the IEC over six elections and also as a community mobiliser with NSP to establish female CDCs. She took on those roles with one objective in mind: to support women know their rights as voters, candidates, and beneficiaries. She is now a deputy at the Aykhanom CDC and proudly declares that her community encourages her to run for a parliamentary candidate.

Networks of Trust, Hope and Inspiration

As I have tried to argue above, in order to understand empowerment, we first need to understand women’s networks and roles. Their stories of old, along with their newly found, powers should be allowed into the development narrative. The perception of the woman as vulnerable and deprived of agency might be a bureaucratic convention that informs official documents and communication material, circulated between agencies, donors and the wider public, but its impact on perceptions should not be mistaken as insignificant. I believe that both the technical and field staff of LITACA work successfully along those female networks and structures, but that this is not being communicated in the official narrative of the programme.

One of the things that I tried to understand very early on, was the ways the community was being approached. I had the opportunity to discuss this with anthropologist Julie Billaud. She was one of the very first fieldworkers back in Afghanistan after the arrival of allied forces in 2001. Her research focused on encounters between international experts in gender and transitional justice, Afghan civil servants and NGO staff, and women affiliated with these organisations. She observed that a lot of mistrust had started building towards aid and development in a very short time. In 2004, many people were happy, by 2007, many people were angry with international staff and agencies and the government ⁶³. A senior member of staff put it quite bluntly, stating that communities do not trust development unless they see something being built⁶⁴.

Both technical staff at UNDP and MRRD, and LITACA field staff, described their approach to engaging with the communities and the success of implementation, as an ethnographer would describe gaining and maintaining access to the community. The community mobilisers and technical staff visit the community and speak to the Community Development Councils,

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ MT Fieldnote 18/07/2018

⁶⁴ MT Fieldnote 15/07/2018

the elders, Malik and other authority figures. A verbal agreement based on mutual trust takes place before any further interactions occur. Further to that, the safety of the workers is also based on trust. A communication officer from UNDP said to me "It is irrational to believe that trust will save you from the insurgent groups but the only way to film and work in those communities is to trust them that they will protect you by agreeing with these groups not to hurt you; things can go wrong any time but still if there is an agreement it will be kept"⁶⁵. A.Z. Galad (2012), describes the code of hospitality as entering the security of a house. Hospitality and protection of a guest is an Islamic religious practice and law layered over older tribal social codes⁶⁶.

Sharifa talks with pride about her guests, who are very often officials and development workers," As we have a wide yard, they come here to park their vehicles in our house during the night. I welcome them and prepare different types of food for their dinner and breakfast. In the mornings, I usually wake them up for morning's prayer. I sleep on the top floor and let my guests have the first floor. I prepare water for them to do their ablutions and if it is winter, I provide warm water for these, before their morning prayer.... They used to say that we are very proud of having such a brave sister in this remote village. They thanked me for everything I provide them"⁶⁷. Sharifa says a lot of her confidence was built by taking care of her guests and being acknowledged and thanked for it.

Women are the carers and workers of the domestic realm; they are also as I have mentioned already, the peacekeepers. Carrying out those traditional roles, women seem to play an important role in those mutual agreements of trust and hospitality. Nevertheless, the women of the community were not mentioned by the technical and field staff in the conversations about trust. During our interviews, however, the older women participants that worked as trainers for LITACA, spoke extensively about their trusted roles in their communities.

LITACA carries out tailoring and embroidery trainings. The programme employs local experienced tailors to teach local girls and women. The participants that worked as trainers were happy to be given that work opportunity and they were paid a decent salary. What was interesting was that all participants were not so keen to talk about their income, role or status as teachers. They instead discussed how the community trusted them with their daughters. Khatera remembers" Their trust enabled me to take their daughters to the office. When I stopped working, they also stopped going there"⁶⁸. The communities do not trust outsiders. The trainers would go around the village and discuss with families the training and guarantee the safety of their daughters and wives. " I'm so trusted by the community that when the Agha Khan Foundation came to ask me to gather 11 people for a project, I managed to get 120 girls. They then told me they can't even gather 10 people", said Sharifa proudly⁶⁹.

LITACA and other development programmes access communities not just by approaching and receiving the approval of the elders and other formal or informal authority in the community.

⁶⁵ MT Fieldnote 19/07/2018

⁶⁶ A.Z. Galad, The challenges and role of structures in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, 2012, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, DOI:10.11610/Connections.11.2.02; 12

⁶⁷ RM Fieldnote 14/08/2019

⁶⁸ RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

⁶⁹ RM Fieldnote 25/06/2019

They access and engage the community by using networks of trust and solidarity. This makes absolute sense in a community where the total social field is divided between those who share or have access to the same kor (domestic quarters) and those who veil from each other⁷⁰. In opposition to the familiarity of kor and mahram (intimate) people, women and men use polite behaviour to show formality and maintain social distance with non- kor and non- mahrams (Dr. Ganehsa: 9). Especially when it comes to women, they are required to keep pardah, which signifies a range of spatial and physical segregation, veiling, avoidance of unrelated men and certain gendered forms of behaviour which help recreate the spirit of Zanana, which in physical terms is the part of the house that women are dominant⁷¹. The presence of well-respected women in the programmes seems an essential requirement for a lot of families to trust their daughters are in a safe space where they can maintain their integrity and honour of their families according to these rules. This acknowledgement of respect and trust the communities demonstrated made the participants feel proud and empowered.

Besides the opportunity for a public reaffirmation of existing networks within the community, LITACA creates new networks which include their female staff. Khatera said to researcher/ LITACA gender officer while she was interviewing her, "I feel like you are my relatives now", and she responded, "Me too"⁷² - an exchange of solidarity and trust between two women. When another member of the research team interviewed this research/ LITACA gender officer with regards to her relationship with the beneficiaries, she responded warmly, "They were very friendly with me. The older ones considered me their daughters and those who were younger, used to call me sister"⁷³.

The Kunduz-based LITACA gender officer has been working with the programme since its first round. During the workshop on research techniques, her description of her job again resembled the job of an ethnographer. She observes and participates in the lives of the beneficiaries. She gave many examples from her fieldwork: cooking, working in the fields, selling in the market, participating in ceremonies. Her life entangled with the life of the people she works for. A lot of the participants thanked her by name for including them in the programme.

Those relationships and strong ties the field staff creates with the community, along with the conditions those females have to work in, should be further researched and documented. I believe there is a correlation between well supported female gender officers and the success of a programme with a strong gender focus. Unfortunately, the scope and limitations of this research cannot provide insights but only suggestions for further research on this topic. It is worth noting here, however, that this is a job with great risks, a lot of travelling in remote insurgent group-occupied areas, a high level of commitment, and long absences from home. According to one of the gender officers and a few members of the technical staff in Kabul, it is hard to find good workers to take on the role and very often women quit as the travelling puts a strain in their family life. At the same time, in comparison with the past ten years, many more females work now for NGOs and the government and their presence is felt by the

⁷⁰ J.W. Anderson, Social Structures and the veil, 1982, *Anthropos- Vol.77, no3/4*, Salzburg: 401

⁷¹ Dr L. Ganesh, 2013: 9

⁷² RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

⁷³ NF Fieldnote 07/09/2019

community, one of the gender officers observes ‘I believe the perceptions of the local communities have been changed as they witness more women working outdoors. In comparison with the past, the situation has changed a lot and now they consider women to contribute everywhere’⁷⁴.

The above becomes particularly meaningful if we look at one of the key findings of Dr Ganesh’s research that was published in 2013. She observes that the more remote and rural women were less able to discuss their restrictions as they were not aware of other ways of living. The less remote and more urban women were more dynamic and wanted to change things for the generations to come⁷⁵. All of our participants were very aware of the restrictions they and other women were imposed to. They spoke with clarity about the importance of equal participation of women in decision making, consent to marriage, right to education and work. Khatera was also very straightforward to suggest that” LITACA will only bring change in the communities if they help women access their rights”⁷⁶. They all suggested that living in a city offered greater opportunities for education and work and also interactions with open-minded people.

And while Dr Ganesh’s participants had limited access to the ‘outside’ world, most of the participants in this research spoke of the changes in the last ten years. There is now access to asphalted roads, bridges, the internet and social media, TV, phone coverage and electricity. In particular one of the most popular shows seems to be a Tajik tailoring show which teaches its viewers new designs. Most participants were familiar with the Tajik women through those shows. They considered them similar to themselves, in terms of culture and language, but at the same time more independent. Most participants said they felt happy when they encountered either in real life, online or on TV, women that worked and who were educated. Most striking was a comment from a 23-year-old participant” I believe the old generation lives in misery and ignorance as they don’t have access to technology. I belong to the new generation; I have access to technology, and I have a high level of awareness”. She uses WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook⁷⁷.

LITACA mandates infrastructure like bridges and markets, exhibitions in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and access to trainings and workshops. I would add to those, access to new networks of solidarity and inspiration between:

1. Trainers and trainees
2. Beneficiaries and staff
3. Afghanistan and Tajikistan businesswomen.

As Dr Ganesh noted in 2013, only urban, less remote women thought of changes they wanted to bring for the next generations. Most of our participants, even though they are living in remote areas, spoke of their vision of a country where they can raise their children in peace and with access to opportunities. The confidence that they can create something better for themselves and for the next generation is empowering to themselves and their community. O. Sehin quotes Braithwaite’s (2004) concept of collective hope which is formed through

⁷⁴ NF Fieldnote 07/09/2019

⁷⁵ Dr L. Ganesh, 2013: 62

⁷⁶ RM Fieldnote 26/08/2019

⁷⁷ RM Fieldnote 27/03/2019

institutions of hope, the norms and practices that ensure that we have some room to dream and achieve the extraordinary⁷⁸.

Due to limitations and restrictions this research had, there is no sufficient data on ideas and perceptions on political representation and female presence in CDCs.

1. SUMMARY

Despite the limitations and restrictions this research had, it succeeded in its final output: to identify a female participant to become the protagonist of a documentary film. The film's objective is to give a platform to real voices from the field to be heard. The overarching question that drove the research and the film was female perceptions of empowerment.

Sharifa was presented here as a case study, but her life story has also been the subject of the film. Sharifa is an exceptional woman that works to improve the life of her family, her community and the women of Afghanistan. She is a businesswoman, a mother, a co-wife, a wife, and a deeply religious woman. She worked with the National Solidarity Programme, run her own literacy programme, and established a tailoring association. Her achievements are great but most importantly her ideas are a great insight into a woman's perception of empowerment.

Sharifa does not defy traditional roles. She feels empowered in them. Her work with the community focuses on educating women on their rights and support them to fight for them. She speaks of women as slaves who are devalued by their families and acknowledges the need to change perceptions towards women's contribution. She believes by bringing women together will make their voices heard.

Most participants spoke of empowerment as something achieved in unity and collaboration with other women. And while their income was increased through programmes like LITACA, they still acknowledged their restrictions and vulnerabilities until their rights were established. Most participants spoke of consent to marriage, protection from domestic violence, right to work and study, access to decision making in the family and the community, and representation at CDCs and the government. Most women had access to TV, electricity, internet, good roads and health clinics. The access to media and infrastructure had increased the last 10 years along with presence of more women in office jobs. Observing women at work and education brought emotions of happiness for most participants.

LITACA played a significant role in bringing work and training opportunities in the area. It was generally considered a sustainable and successful programme, even though it was observed that insecurity had affected its activities. What was suggested above was that LITACA also creates new networks of solidarity and exposure among women in several ways:

⁷⁸ Sehin, O., Coryell, J., & Stewart, T. (2017). Engendering Hope: Women's (Dis)engagement in Change in Afghanistan. *Adult Learning*, 28(3), 91-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159516679357>: 93

1. By employing local trainers that play a significant role in recruiting local women in the programme.
2. By employing female gender officers who work closely with the beneficiaries.

Unfortunately, we did not have access to women that have travelled to Tajikistan, apart from Sharifa. Nevertheless, all participants were keen to travel and be exposed to different cultures given the opportunity.

In order to understand women's agency, it is important to acknowledge women's roles and contributions. Women transition from daughters, to brides, to mothers, to mothers in law. They continuously acquire or lose status, visibility, power but also skills within well-established structures that inform both the domestic and public realm. A woman's journey from vulnerable to empowered is not linear or solitary. There is a lot to be learned from women that lives, status, rights, sense of security physical or financial is always in flux.

All participants felt empowered by the trainings and income opportunities, as they found themselves being considered useful and trustworthy by their families and communities. At the same time there were a lot of voices of discontent when describing how their hard work in the home has always been undervalued. More importantly, though, they consider their problems, similar to their male counterparts, a result of constant war, insecurity, and poverty. All participants expressed very similar ambitions, to raise their children in a peaceful country where they can be educated and grow to be useful people to the society. And if agency is about realising a goal and making decisions to achieve it, these women are craving for more opportunities to learn and work.

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Research team:

Maria Tzika (MT) - International Consultant

Raqima Majeedi (RM) - LITACA Gender Officer

Najla Faizy (NF)- Intern student

Farida Nabizada (FN)- LITACA Gender Officer

Nabila Abed (NA)- Intern student



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