

# Giving Light and Hope in Rural Afghanistan

*The Impact of Norwegian Church Aid's Barefoot Approach on  
Women Beneficiaries*



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*Cover photo by author.*

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## CHAPTER 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Norway's contribution to the military and humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan is a feature of our foreign policy that is becoming increasingly highlighted in the public debate. Through military presence and aid initiatives the goal is to foster peace by giving support to the Afghan government and create security and stability in order to lay foundation for reconstruction and development. The question of how Norway "does its business" and how the government prioritises and distributes finances in the military and aid sector involved in Afghanistan is a contested issue and goes to the heart of the intervention's legitimacy. Recent years there has been a rising attention to women's role in peace-building processes. Women's participation on decision-making level is perceived as vital for securing sustainable peace, and an international priority in peace-building through UN Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2000 (Lithander 2000). Afghan women have been viewed as among the most suppressed and tormented in the world and helping their cause has been an important part of justifying Norway's commitment in Afghanistan. Due to Norway's involvement in Afghanistan it is important to explore how Norwegian agencies work to promote gender equality and the impact of our commitment to work for empowerment of women. The aim of this Master thesis is to analyze how Norwegian aid agencies involved in development projects in Afghanistan can foster a change in the social and political role for rural women so as to increase their possibilities to participate on decision-making level. The Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) project "the Barefoot Approach" is used as a case study.

The Barefoot Approach is directed at establishing environmentally healthy and community-driven solar electricity in rural Afghanistan. Though the main goal is electricity as a benefit for rural societies, this project targets women as beneficiaries, but also as community members with responsibility for maintaining the solar energy in their village through training as Barefoot Solar Engineers (BSE). The direct engagement of women in engineer projects undertaken or helped by the international aid community is unique. Administering tasks in the local community that is not clearly "woman affairs" are normally delegated to men in line with local values. The outcome of this project has indicated a change in status and life conditions for women through; opportunities to

generate income, acceptance as skilled workers, increase in self esteem and a healthier indoor environment.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Research Question

In order to analyze how the Barefoot Approach has fostered a social change of gender roles in Afghanistan the following research question is formulated:

- *How has the Barefoot Approach changed the social and political role for women beneficiaries in their local community?*

The research question has two main dimensions; the social role and the political role of women in their local place. The term social role refers to acknowledged socially defined features giving a person duties and rights in her community (Eriksen 1998). Political role is here understood as acknowledged perceptions of women's abilities and responsibilities in local governance structures. These dimensions will be discussed in the context of two theoretical approaches. Exploring changes in women's social role will be done in a empowerment approach development framework, with emphasis on how solar energy has changed the life of the affected rural women in terms of material changes in everyday life and chores, creating opportunities for social empowerment. Changes in women's political role will be discussed following a feminist geography approach, with a focus on social and cultural change in the discourse of women's place and constructed identity. This analytical division of social and political role is artificial, created for the purpose to shed more light on the research question. Within these aspects of change in women's place the aim is to reveal if the Barefoot Approach has given women empowerment and opportunities for local political participation in local governance structures. Exploring the research questions will be linked to how the Barefoot Approach create new possibilities for women by evading or eliminating factors limiting women's status.

Doing studies in and about conflict torn areas has its own challenges which limit researchers' ability to gather and analyze reliable and accurate material. Afghanistan at

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/article/articleview/6197>, 13.02.07



present is at best described as a country with local conflicts undergoing a state-building process. Others see it on the verge of civil war, with deeply embedded state corruption and an illegitimate government. Any information and knowledge acquired must be viewed with this in point as information is highly politicised and often provided by different factions or institutions to enhance their interest. Further when it comes to political stability and human security the future of Afghanistan is uncertain. Any conclusions based on today's context may be irrelevant in the light of possible new civil war and destruction.

Doing fieldwork as a master's student in a conflict torn country also gives constraints in terms of accessibility and choice of topics. Relying on a network to help you come in contact with relevant people is crucial. This in turn means your network has possibilities to influence on the information gathered. Doing studies on women's social and political status is particularly challenging as gender has historically been politicised. Balancing respect for local values, while trying to gather material through NCA for this thesis, some compromises had to be made. At the same time my approach permitted access to communities and individuals that I would otherwise not have been able to reach.

## 1.2 Motivation and Actualization: *jus post bellum*

From a feminist perspective much of the motivation and focus in this thesis is founded in UNSCR 1325 and the importance of including women in development processes and peace-building. The UNSCR 1325 states that women's experiences and perspectives should be part of the conflict resolution and peace-building process on decision-making level, because participation is also an essential part of the democratization process necessary to establish peace. International concern for women's inclusion in peace-building relates to *jus post bellum*, meaning justice after war, the values by which a post-war outcome is judged. The hope of democracy as remedy for war-torn societies in building sustainable peace consequently means addressing gender inequalities that jeopardize the female population's possibilities for political participation.

Participation of women in decision making regarding issues such as feuds, conflicts and reconciliation in Afghanistan is rare. Many women feel they lack experience and knowledge after being confined to the private sphere and refused

education. Women were not allowed to organise or move freely under the Taliban without risking their lives, resulting in few functioning women's organisations or movements and in reality civil society does not have the strength to hold politicians accountable.

For rural women the government in Kabul still has little consequence for rights and important decisions regarding the family and marriage. The minimum age for marriage, legally set at 18, is rarely observed and women are seldom part of the decision on whom to marry, though this is a right both in Afghan law and *shari'ah*.<sup>2</sup> Traditional rural political systems of governance in Afghanistan are village councils called *shura* or *Jirga*,<sup>3</sup> consisting of prominent village elders and at times the religious representation of a *mullah* to oversee adherence to *shari'ah* the religious law of Islam. International Crisis Group (ICG) and Goodhand have pointed to good results of using the *shura* and *jirga* as a conflict resolution mechanism and rebuild state-society relations in Afghanistan (Goodhand 2002:854, ICG 2003a:12).

With this in mind I became aware of the Barefoot Approach through NCA's Afghanistan Annual Review 2005.<sup>4</sup> The project has indicated potential to positively influence women's participation in rural community political affairs at decision making level, by being a provider of necessary knowledge, authority and confidence to perform in such roles. And by being included in the project at all levels the women are drawn into the community's decision-making sphere. In 2005 one woman was through her training as BSE asked to join her village *shura* in making decisions as the first woman ever in her village. The project challenges the political space of rural Afghan women, and thereby creates new standards, norms and discourses.

Also the benefits of receiving electricity have profound impact on women. For poor rural communities the transformation from using traditional sources of energy to electricity has many implications besides technical benefits. Access to electricity creates fundamental changes in people's lives. Improved livelihoods and a more modern lifestyle foster new identities, values and discourses (Winther 2005).

The time for research regarding Afghan women, aid and local political participation is overdue. Since 2001 there has been great disappointment towards the

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<sup>2</sup> Islamic jurisprudence based on the Quaran and the Hadiths. There are a variety of interpretations, however five schools of thought are considered to be the correct standard.

<sup>3</sup> The *jirga* is the Pashtun council of elders and *shura* is the equivalent term in Dari (ICG 2003a:12).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/article/articleview/6197>, 13.02.08

international society's initiatives and particularly towards the aid community. Especially has the failed effort to meet Afghan women's needs been criticised as their rights seem to be compromised in the playing out of Afghanistan's reconstruction and nation-building. Women in Afghanistan continue to suffer from many of the same problems as during the Taliban rule. Despite massive resources brought in to Afghanistan and the international commitment to UNSCR 1325 and women's empowerment through aid, women still experience lack of health care and basic necessities, as well as restricted freedom and mobility.

In the field of political geography Afghanistan has played an important part in the West's geopolitical interest. During colonialism, in the heat of the Cold War and later in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) Afghanistan has served as the battlefield to ideologies not indigenous to the country itself. After the terror attack in New York and Washington DC on September 11 2001, the rule of Taliban was suddenly scrutinized across the world. As the US government under George Bush planned a military response in Afghanistan, a type of rhetoric developed in foreign policy and media that would later be used as legitimacy for military intervention wherever international terrorism had grounds. Edward Said's depiction and critique of Orientalism<sup>5</sup> became not a warning light, but a beacon and example of how negative portrayal of the "other" could benefit "us". On a global scale the emphasis gradually shifted from Human Security to Homeland Security, and many states battling with violent internal opposition has gladly joined the GWOT of the US (Gregory 2004).

An immense focus was set on Afghan women and aiding their cause was seen as an important legitimizing factor in the military intervention. As the long experienced researcher on Afghan women, Nancy Hatch Dupree, stated; "there is probably more international concern about women in Afghanistan than there is for women in any other country in the world today" (Dupree 2002:1). This focus and concern has to this day not only failed to explain the fluidities of Afghan women's identities, but tended to describe Afghan women as largely inanimate objects to suit international grand designs (Rostami-Povey 2007).

I will argue that few women as a national group have ever to such extent been subjected to a constructed identity by media, politicians and policymakers. Afghan women is almost universally represented as fully clad in *burqha*, suppressed by male

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<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Said. 1978. *Orientalism*.

domination and war's ravage, victimized and totally in need of patronage and help from a well willing developed world. Although the role as victim may be true for several Afghan women, it gives little room for the heterogeneous identities of Afghan women related to status, age, ethnicity and location in Afghanistan or in diaspora communities. It also does not acknowledge Afghan women's own capacity, intellect and drive to help themselves, their families and fellow sisters. Afghan women have during the invasions, civil war and Taliban bravely contested the construction of their identities. They have negotiated their gender roles with considerable effort and few means available. Some women also have played an active part in both conflict and war, contrary to the view of women as natural peace lovers (Rostami-Povey 2007).

This thesis aspire to bring broader knowledge on the issue of women in Afghanistan and how the international society best can create opportunities for Afghan women to take part in decisions in their local communities in order to form a future where their needs and ambitions will not be so easily compromised. The aim is to present my informants' own priorities and needs in line with the complex reality of their identities, gender roles and everyday life and struggles.

### 1.3 Afghanistan's Difficult Nation-building and the Implications for Women

The politicisation of gender in Afghanistan can be traced back to the formation of Afghanistan as a nation state in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the question of women's rights gradually became a central issue in the state-building process (Moghadam 1994). Afghan women have been put at the forefront as symbolic actors to the country's development level and cultural and religious identity. There are few nations in the world where the ideal of women have been altered in such drastic turns to benefit the interests' of political actors.

Immediately after the US invasion in 2001 the Bonn agreement laid out the foundations and responsibility for the reconstruction of Afghanistan by the new Afghan government and international society. There was a great initial focus on including women in the new state-building process and women were again put in the forefront as symbolic actors. Unfortunately the ambition of including women still needs to be effectively put in place. To reach this ambition it is necessary to pay more attention to the factors that made past reforms unsustainable (ICG 2003b). When researching the

situation and status of women in the Afghan society today it is necessary to explore Afghanistan's history through a gender lens.

### ***1.3.1 The Emergence of the Afghan State and Early Reforms***

Afghanistan's current borders were defined in a process of war and negotiation between the Russians, the British and Afghans between 1878 and 1893 (Dorransoro 2005). When it was clear that neither Russia nor the British were able to hold direct control over the country they pushed for the establishment of an Afghan nation state. Modern Afghanistan was founded in the mould of the imperial powers and the state legitimacy changed from Islam to Pashtun<sup>6</sup> nationalism as it simultaneously coexisted with patrimonial practices of the governing class. To make up for any weakness in the state an authoritarian rule was practised (Dorransoro 2005).

Afghanistan's process of becoming a nation has involved bringing together traditional tribal patriarchal system with the Western concept of the nation-state. The Afghan society has and is greatly influenced by *pashtunwali*, the Pashtun tribal code of honour. Though Pashtun in its origin the *pashtunwali* values are a pervasive part of all Afghan society and therefore have been an element in all state-building side by side with ambitions of modernity and a developed state structure (Murshed 2006). Roy explains the *pashtunwali* as; "...at one and the same time an ideology and a body of common law" (Roy 1986:35). The code has specific values relating to women that are based on tribal and Islamic principles of the family as the most important societal unit, with women's role being mothers, wives and bearers of tradition. But *pashtunwali* goes beyond the religious discourse and reflects the core of Afghan culture concerning hospitality and honour. The part which relates to honour has important significance as it lays the foundation for the traditional view and importance of women's chastity as a symbolic sign of the family's honour and disgrace (Dupree 1990).

Afghanistan is based on a patriarchal societal structure where power is held by male heads of household and there is a clear separation between public and private spheres of life (Moghadam 1992). In the patriarchal social system the family is seen as extended kinship networks with its primary function as a support system and security

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<sup>6</sup> Ethnic group in Afghanistan and constituted the majority in the Taliban.

from birth to death (Dupree 1990). The patriarchal society also relieves the state's welfare and security burden. Men's control over women's sexual behaviour and choice of life partner to secure reproduction and high fertility rates is also an important element in a patriarchal society (Ferguson and Folbre 1981, in Fox 2001). The family constituted the most important political institution in Afghanistan and the state was seen as an extension of the family (Dorransoro 2005).

The founding of the Afghan state was assisted by the British and resulting in role of imperialist influence on the elite and its ideas of running a nation. Afghanistan early years was characterized by rapid changes in heads of state and conflicts between different ethnic groups (Moghadam 2003). A modernization process started in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and various rulers introduced reforms affecting women's conditions. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the intellectual Mahmud Tarzi, advisor to the governing royal family was the first person to take publicly a positive stand for feminism and raised a public debate to improve women's conditions (Moghadam 2003). The practice of brideprice, the *mahr*, was a central issue because it led to indebtedness and financial devastation of many families in the rural population. A great number of Afghans ended up borrowing money to meet the expenses of *mahr* and a system of high interest and increase in the *mahr* itself developed into escalating economic problems and the transfer of girls as a financial commodity (Moghadam 2003). But also women's legal rights in marriage, abolition of child marriage and slavery were part of the reforms. There was no direct criticism against polygamy, but the ideal family was projected as being a husband and only one wife in line with the modern and pro-British elite in Kabul. In this process there was an emphasis on education of girls and women as a remedy to change old-fashioned cultural practises. Among the reforms introduced was a study abroad programme for girls' higher education in the 1920s.

The reforms to enhance the status of women and girls were projected as *himayat-i niswam*, protection of women in accordance with the principles of Islam. Albeit in the process of implementing these reforms the government also by instating the administrative code *Nizam-nameh* gave the government responsibility for regulating family problems that traditionally had been dealt with by a *mullah* (Moghadam 2003). There were also measures to reduce the practise of using veil or *burqha* and *chaddari*, especially in public spaces.

The measures to emancipate and improve Afghan women's status were not met positively by the *ulama*, the Islamic clergy (Moghadam 1994, 2003). The unprecedented reforms were seen as offending to the *ulama* and their followers; this was especially in rural areas, which gave rise to polarisation between rural and urban areas in economic and cultural terms. In 1924 violent opposition started with an uprising led by the *ulama*, which continued sporadically (Moghadam 2003). Later on the *ulama* went in alliance with tribal factions and the opposition became increasingly difficult for the government to handle. This ended many social reforms until the 1950s. Then reforms to curb costly ceremonial rituals like *mahr* were again launched, but enforcing implementation was at best difficult.

### ***1.3.2 Revolution, State-building and Women's Rights***

The establishment of People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1965 brought new focus to the reform programs from the turn of the century (Moghadam 1994). The PDPA began working for a modernisation process to lead Afghanistan out of it's, in their eyes, backwardness. Democratic Organisation of Afghan Women (DOAW), which was founded at the same time, was also pushing for the revitalisation of reforms for women's rights. Women were subsequently given the right to vote and four DOAW members were elected into Parliament in the early 1970s. DOAW managed to secure women the formal right to education and employment, earlier a privilege only for women of elite families. At this time most of the population were involved in agricultural-related activities, and only 4 % of the women had any formal occupation. These constituted mostly teachers, nurses and government employees. Despite this a modern occupational structure emerged in this period.

In April 1978, the PDPA seized full power through what later was named the Saur Revolution. The PDPA introduced a radical reform program to alter the political and social structure of Afghan society. Land ownership and the position of women were a focus area and the reform program included ending the practise of *mahr* and land mortgage, and giving women more freedom of choice in marriage. All debts prior to 1974 were reduced or cancelled and it was forbidden to collect usury. This was an approach to tackle complementary problems for rural families in financial crisis and

women's low status in negotiating their own future and marriage (Moghadam 1992, 1994, 2003). The new government also launched legislation with a minimum age of marriage at 16 for girls and 18 for boys. In 1978 the President Noor Mohammad Taraki declared that with the new legislation;

‘..the hard working peasants were freed from bond of oppressors and money lenders, ending the sale of girls for good as hereafter nobody would be able to sell any girl or woman in this country’ (quoted in Tapper 1984:291, in Moghadam 1994:864).

The ending of the *mahr* as declared by Taraki was highly controversial and met with disdain from the large parts of the population and the ulama in particular.

The PDPA also started an aggressive literacy campaign led by DOAW. The goal was to educate women, bring them out of seclusion and initiate social programs. In this process the matter of education became a principle of law and literacy education became compulsory for men and women in both urban and rural areas. Earlier the education of women had been a matter of choice left to male guardians in line with the patriarchal system, resulting in practically the whole population of Afghan women being illiterate. Primary education was now obligatory and resistance was met with physical force. President Taraki also pushed for semi-secularism or what he labelled constructive and tolerant Islam (Moghadam 1994).

The very rapid and aggressive character of the PDPA government reform program to transform the patriarchal society and decentralized power structure based on tribal and landlord authority led to violent opposition and political instability. The reforms were perceived as a direct challenge to the religious and patriarchal structure in society and the reforms in the agrarian sector disrupted the financial system of many and prevented traditional transactions which ruined many households and led to local violence (Moghadam 1992). The divide between the new government's modernisation ideologies, formed in the vicinity of the privileged Kabul, as opposed to the traditionalist tribal system of the rural majority population grew alarmingly. Some families fled to Pakistan in order to prevent their daughters from being shamed by attending literacy classes, the most extreme case reported was of two men who killed all their female family members to avoid dishonour (Dupree 1984, in Moghadam 1994). An Islamist opposition began organizing militarily against the government of the Saur revolution. Subsequently the PDPA itself became factionalised and President Taraki was killed and



replaced (Dorronsoro 2005, Moghadam 1994, 2003). Security matters quickly deteriorated and in December 1979 the Soviet army intervened. The reform program was slowed down and a more gradualist approach to change was adopted. Nonetheless the Islamist opposition Mujahidin intensified their military attacks and the war on the Soviet occupation began.

As a result of the strong opposition to the government reform program in the late 1970s and 1980s, the “woman question” was given a profound position in cultural and political discourse, and state policy (Moghadam 1992). The response from secular oriented regimes in the Middle East and Afghanistan to conform to Islamist opposition has been to build public secular institutions governed by Westernized laws, while the private sphere remained under traditional and religious law regulations. This has created a dichotomy in women’s role in *watan* (homeland) and *ummah* (Muslim community) (Shukrallah 2001). Women have lawful rights in the public sphere, such as the right to education, maternity leave and equal pay, but in the private sphere her husband can, justified with religious norms and *shari’ah* law, demand that she stay at home. In order to legitimize power in patriarchal societies the state’s continuation rests on legislation that subordinates women to the control of men. In the process of altering such social organisations’ the role of women becomes crucial in the identity of the state. As the Marxist experiment of the Saur Revolution was introduced, this dichotomy was entrenched in the Afghan society, as the oppositions’ religious discourse prevented women from using their new rights in society.

### ***1.3.3 The Impact of Violence: Soviet Occupation and Civil War***

For Afghan women the Soviet occupation was a mixed bag. Under the Soviet supported regime prior to the Taliban rule, women’s role in society was connected to modernism and secular nation building. This gave the women a space outside the patriarchy (Moghadam 1992). On the other hand the war between the Soviet army and Mujahidin ravaged the social and economic infrastructure. About a third of the population fled to Pakistan and Iran, leaving Afghanistan without the necessary people to maintain agriculture, health services and schools (Dupree 1990, Rostami-Povey 2007). Many who did not migrate to Pakistan and Iran ended up as internally displaced in Kabul and the

other cities which were under government control. The death toll of men in their prime working age in the war was very high, leaving behind widows and orphans. Consequently women had to adapt their role in society to new demands (Moghadam 2003). To provide for themselves and their family, women had to find survival strategies unfamiliar to the patriarchal structures. DOAW, which in this period changed their name to the Afghan Women's Council, continued the work for social reforms to improve women's status in society and women increasingly worked outside the home as teachers, nurses, doctors and servants (Moghadam 1994).

In Kabul at the end of the 1980s, women employees could be found in all government agencies and social organisations. Also the media had their own unveiled women announcers. Side by side with men, women took part in traditionally male dominated organisations, such as the military force, guerrilla and even trade unions which is and has been off-limits to women in most Muslim countries. According to Moghadam the UN reported in 1989 that the Afghan government had succeeded in pursuing its educational policy regardless of the war situation (Moghadam 1994).

Another feature of Afghan women's lives during the Soviet occupation which has been poorly documented was the extent of sexualised violence (Rostami-Povey 2007). Mostly reported through literature, organisations or daily conversation was the rape and harassment of Afghan women by the Soviet military.<sup>7</sup> Sexual assault against women was practiced as the ultimate means of dishonoring entire communities. This escalated further during the civil war as ethnic violence increased. It is more than likely that this became an important factor in the discourse of women's honour and the development of an authoritarian and policed practise of *purdah*, the separation of the sexes by physical segregation and requirement for women to cover their bodies, which emerged within the Mujahidin and later the Taliban.

As refugees in Pakistan, Afghan women encountered a war rhetoric which had profound impact on the dynamics of gender roles. Women in Peshawar had to observe the *purdah* at its strictest and with very limited freedom of movement (Dupree 1990). As a result they were prevented from engaging in productive activities to generate income (Moghadam 2003). Organisations like UNICEF and UNHCR met persistent resistance against providing services like schools and health care to girls and women. In Peshawar

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.amnesty.org/en/alfresco\\_asset/3a351092-b5bb-11dc-a84c-d5c747e827a7/asa110111999en.html](http://www.amnesty.org/en/alfresco_asset/3a351092-b5bb-11dc-a84c-d5c747e827a7/asa110111999en.html) and <http://www.ips.org/icc/tv230604.html>, 15.02.08

many Afghan men did not allow male medical workers to attend to women. Many were also reluctant to let women leave the home, denying them any health-care, even though women and children constituted 75 % of the refugee population (Moghadam 1994, 2003). Much of the aid contributed to the refugees in Pakistan was delegated through the networks of Mujahidin giving them further legitimacy and control (Goodhand 2006, Moghadam 2003).

Access to food was a persistent problem for widows and children in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. As they did not fight in the *jihad* they were seen as contributing less and hence less in need for help. This led to a strong emphasis on women's reproduction, and the control over women's sexuality and fertility was seen as part of male honour. There was a sharp increase in the birth rate and many women stated that their best contribution to the *jihad* was to have many children to replace those lost in the war (Dupree 1990, Moghadam 2003). This had a devastating impact on living conditions as nutrition and health-care was scarce. There are several depictions of Afghan women suffering from depression, loneliness, fear and guilt during this time (Dupree 1990, Rostami-Povey 2007).

In 1989 the Soviet Army retreated from Afghanistan. The "woman question" was subsided in favour of a national reconciliation plan (Moghadam 1992). The years 1989-1992 was a transitional period, the *jihad* was over, but Mujahidin was still in opposition to the government in Kabul as it hindered a new Islamist political configuration (Dorronsoro 2005). Financial aid from the US and other supporting parties to the *jihad* gradually was suspended. In 1992 the Najbullah government fell and the conflict continue into civil war. During the internal fighting between different factions of Mujahidin the security situation deteriorated rapidly and starvation, collapse of social networks and ethnic and sexualised violence prevails. Mujahidin lost the people's support and was accused of violence, as exemplified by a communiqué in 1988 from the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan:

'killing innocent men and women, raping, marrying forcefully young girls and widows, and hostility toward women literacy and education, are some customary cruelties committed by fundamentalist who have made our life inside and outside the country bitter and suffocating' (Moghadam 2003:264).

Within this situation of discontent the Taliban grew out of the younger generation of Mujahidin. They felt their older leadership had failed as people were suffering from

death, rape and destruction and they set out to change society into a harmonic Islamic state (Rostami-Povey 2007). Their initial intention was to restore order and Islamic justice in order to pave way for a new legitimate rule.

### ***1.3.4 Confinement and Resistance during Taliban Rule***

The Taliban rule may be analysed as a reaction to the insecurity and frequent sexualised violence against women, rather than a mere rejection of modern values (Rostami-Povey 2007). Their first coming to Kabul was by many greeted with joy as they ended the civil war and disarmed the population, decreasing the violence. In the long run the result for women was instead insecurity in new arenas. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan's largest cities and gradually established their rule, harsh restrictions were put on women's freedom, mobility and opportunities. Taliban's famous gender policy decree was distributed to the population:

‘...women you should not step outside your residence... Women should not create such opportunity to attract the attention of useless people who will not look at them with a good eye... In case women are required to go outside the residence for the purpose of education, social needs or social services they should cover themselves in accordance with Islamic *sharia'ah* regulation... We request all family elders to keep tight control over their families and avoid these social problems. Otherwise these women will be threatened, investigated and severely punished...’ (Excerpt from Rashid 2000, in Rostami-Povey 2007).

During the Taliban rule women were obliged to be accompanied by a *mahram*, a male guardian relative, at all times outside their home. The justification for this was based on the *pashtunwali* and the religious rhetoric and ideology developed during the *jihad*.

The emerging Taliban's military victories gave way to implementation of their ideology of radical Islamic fundamentalism. The Taliban secured a full Islamisation of the Afghan society culturally, politically and socially. Their doctrine was inspired by Pashtun code of honour and by religious and cultural practices from the times of the prophet Muhammad at 600 A.D. (Murshed 2006). The trajectory of this particular form of Islamism is complex and it is necessary to clarify that Islam is not a fixed entity, but as all religion, its practices are a result of constant negotiation and development. Moghadam points out that this type of discourse was already a pervasive part of society even before Taliban seized power (Moghadam 1992). Others claim that the extent of the

suppression of women during Taliban was unprecedented in Afghan history (ICG 2003b).

The result of the constructed collective identities of Afghan women was that they could only break the pattern with the cost of losing identity and social security bonds. As Moghadam point out;

Afghan women were held hostage to the notion that women's rights were Western and that the modernizing government of Afghanistan was merely replicating the bankrupt Western (or Soviet) model (Moghadam 2002:19).

Though there are many different strands, Islamism has proved to be the most effective symbolic and cultural presentation drawing legitimacy from Muslim identity, historical roots and the political struggle against Western colonial oppression (Shukrallah 2001, Mir-Hosseini 2000). The result is that women and ethnic minorities are seen as “the other within”, a threat to good moral, and often targets for violence (Shukrallah 2001). The political struggle from discriminated groups have been transferred to “imagined” areas of conflict such as women's dress, segregation of the sexes and dichotomies of east and West. Women who resist are being viewed as false to Islam.

The effect of the Taliban rule and their gender policy was devastating on women. Women who had no men to provide for them had few means for acquiring basic necessities to keep themselves and their family members alive. In order to survive women helped themselves by creating informal networks (Rostami-Povey 2007). Women from the urban elite who had not fled the country cooperated with poor women in income generating activities and food supply in order to increase one's own and each other's security. Another feature of life resisting the Taliban was a great number of secret schools and educational centres for girls and women (ibid). NGOs and unemployed women teachers taught in clandestine home schools both as a political struggle and for money to survive. Everything from girls' elementary school, women's shelters and teaching of handicraft skills was provided during the Taliban rule. This was in many ways in contrast to women as providers of the same things for their children within their home and family. The obligatory practise of *mahram* made single women hire men in their community to accompany them to do necessary errands. Women took the role of employer and demonstrated their capacity to cope in difficult times and their dominance over men (Rostami-Povey 2007).

Though these activities meant that women lived in parallel realities, often with their lives at risk, women also experienced empowerment as their survival leaned on strategies fostering new gender roles. As the International Crisis Group states the result was that: "The barring of women by the Taliban from most employment and secondary school education paradoxically galvanised Afghan women activists" (ICG 2003b:ii).

Survival strategies like this were most important to women of single female-led households who had no men as formal head of family. Still times were very difficult and a lot of women had to resort to prostitution and begging, the last being the only allowed occupation for women by the Taliban. A little minority of women also worked for the Taliban and joined their cause either as a result of marriage or to prevent starvation. A few also joined because of personal conviction (Rostami-Povey 2007).

### *1.3.5 Imperial Democracy and New Space for Women*

The period after the US led occupation of Afghanistan and the removal of Taliban from power gave hope for new possibilities for Afghan women. Today this has turned largely to disillusionment and disappointment. Afghans generally, and the women especially, are of the opinion that too little has been done to late. The foreign powers' influence in the military and political sector and the pressure for establishing a neo-liberal market economy seems to give the population a distaste of imperialistic tendencies Rostami-Povey calls; imposing "an alien imperialist culture and prefabricated identity wrapped in the rhetoric of security, development, women's liberation and democracy" (Rostami-Povey 2007:77). Arundhati Roy termed this new era of military intervention "imperial democracy".<sup>8</sup> The phrase has emerged in the criticism against US foreign policy and intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Imperial democracy signifies a critique of the North's economic exploitation through military intervention and the West's firm belief in democracy as a quick fix for conflict-torn countries.

The present situation in Afghanistan makes it evident that the international society and the Afghan government have grossly failed in their aim for development, reconstruction and security in Afghanistan (Rostami-Povey 2007). Six years have passed and albeit huge geographical differences, access to food, education, jobs, security, health

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.democracynow.org/2003/10/24/instant\\_mix\\_imperial\\_democracy\\_buy\\_one](http://www.democracynow.org/2003/10/24/instant_mix_imperial_democracy_buy_one), 15.02.08

care, housing, clean water and electricity is still lacking for a vast portion of the population. The civil war problems of opium production and addiction, begging, prostitution and malnutrition are reoccurring (Rostami-Povey 2007). Women and children are still disproportionately affected by conflict, poverty and cultural norms and practises. The international society's effort to improve women's conditions have been either very localized or it suffered from lovely rhetoric in pretentious arrangements presenting mere rhetoric and symbolism (Rostami-Povey 2007). Simultaneously the rural-urban gap is increasing as economic opportunities present to the elite in Kabul with ties to the international society, while the development process in poor and rural areas seem to be on a time still. Rural-urban polarisation has been the cause of earlier violent insurgency and constitutes a security problem in today's Afghanistan.

Women are increasingly taking public roles again after the Taliban rule, but on the political level and in the formal labour market there is not much to celebrate in the women's arena. The few women employed outside their home are mostly in the aid and NGO sector. Women are being quoted in to parliament and politics and actually 25% of the parliament are made up of women. Still there is only one woman minister, and the women in parliament are very often not part of the informal "backroom" decision making process that lies behind most policy making (Wordsworth 2007). Women have been perceived to best deal with women's affairs and not heavy politics like reconstruction, opium related problems and security issues.<sup>9</sup> The established Ministry of Women's Affairs is viewed as the only legitimate arena for women to make decisions. This ministry unfortunately also has been the most lacking in resources and finances which adds to the burden of showing women's "natural" place in politics.

The current Afghan government still embodies many of the patriarchal characteristics and is in a predicament in bridging a legacy of a male-dominated war culture legitimized by a conservative religious discourse and securing human rights and a substantial democracy. Historically the regimes' strategy is to compromise between Islamists opposition and pressure to reform politically and financially toward Westernized standards. The political space the Karzai government has to manoeuvre is pressured by both sides, and the "woman question" is often used to ensure short term political stability (Moghadam 1992). The new constitution of Afghanistan reflects

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<sup>9</sup> Shukria Barakzai: Speech given 15.11.07 at Prio's Nordic/Baltic Conference on Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: How to Reach the Women.

compromise concerning the institution of the family and the private sphere. The law states that all citizens are equal in all respects, but the constitution clearly refers to religious laws and practices concerning the family as unit:

The family is a fundamental unit in society and supported by the state. The state adopts necessary measures to ensure physical and psychological well being of family, especially child and mother, upbringing of children and the elimination of traditions contrary to the principles of sacred religion of Islam (Ch. 2, Art. 33 Afghanistan's Constitution).<sup>10</sup>

This cleavage between *watan* and *ummah* creates different sets of citizenships for men and women which contradicts democratic principles. Creating such legislation for political reasons mean that women are not valued as individuals, but through derived status according to specific religious standards. A redistribution of power and the elimination of structural biases such as gender discrimination must be included in the process to obtain substantial democracy.

The conservative notions of this radical political Islamism is not only present in the cultural and political discourses on the “woman question” as Moghadam pointed out, but women and girls are targeted by systematic violence in order to conform to traditional values. Amnesty International's report: “Afghanistan: Women still under attack – systematic failure to protect”, reveals abductions and rape, forced marriages and trade of women to pay debts (Amnesty 2005). Amnesty claims that this violence is accepted among local authorities and is not dealt with on a higher level in the judiciary system.

The incidents of violence and threats against women in Afghanistan are on all levels; domestic violence, societal violence and state violence. Women who have ambitions of public roles in particular are targeted for public violence and threats. The mere threat or fear of violence is also significant in women “self-censuring” themselves socially and politically. In 2007 two Afghan female reporters were shot to death in their home, highlighting the risks facing women who dare to speak up and take public roles.<sup>11</sup> The Afghan government also practice self-censure, out of fear for increased violence they cannot control, or of losing political support from important factions in the political and economic environment.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current\\_constitution.html](http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current_constitution.html), 15.01.07

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jun/06/radio.afghanistan>, 16.02.08



Another main challenge for Afghan and foreign NGOs striving to improve women's conditions and their legal and social status is that the initial focus on women by the international society seem to fade in the face of economic profit and maintaining short term political stability. In the process of gaining global security the inclusion of Taliban and warlords in the formal politics is preferred over women's rights and inclusion of women in Afghanistan's reconstruction and peace-building (Rostami-Povey 2007). It is likely that gender will continue to be a source of political controversy as conservative understandings of tradition and religion continue to come into dispute with those promoting the women's rights agenda in the new government and from the outside (Wylie 2003).

#### 1.4 Structure of Thesis

In this introductory chapter I have presented the research question and the motivation to my choice of field, topic and case. In the introduction I also outline the historical and contemporary background to women's discourse and status in Afghanistan. In chapter two I will present and discuss two theoretical understandings; empowerment approach and feminist geography approach, which will be used as framework to understand the changes in social and political role of my women informants. The third chapter will discuss the choice of method applied in this thesis, my fieldwork and ethical dilemmas. A presentation of my case study will also be given here. In the fourth chapter I will analyse the narratives and statements from my informants regarding changes in everyday life and impact on women's social role in relation to empowerment in access to power and in ability to make important choices. The fifth chapter will give an analysis of the changed discourse on gender relations in the affected communities and the impact on women's negotiating power and participation in local political institutions. Finally in the sixth chapter and conclusion an account of the main findings of the study will be presented. A glossary list of vocabulary in Arabic/Dari that is central and frequently used can be found in the end of this thesis. The appendix also provides a list of frequently used abbreviations and an overview of my informant interviews.

## CHAPTER 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to explore the phenomenon of social changes affecting women in the aftermath of aid projects, this thesis will apply two theoretical perspectives as principles of explanation; *empowerment approach* in the field of women and development to address women's social role and *feminist approach* to address women's political role. The two perspectives have a long history together and are used complementary in research, policy and discourse. Feminist scholarship has since the 1970s been an important contributor to development theory in relation to women and development, but it also has served as its severe critic.

From the 1970s the male oriented thinking and practice of development aid was gradually influenced by the Western women's movement and feminism (Arnfred 2001). Development aid was thus predisposed to a Eurocentric definition of womanhood (Stølen 1991). Women were increasingly brought on to the agenda of development aid first under the label Women in Development (WID), which later transformed to Gender and Development (GAD). Due to empirical findings of positive correlations between literacy and education for women, and family health and well being, women came into focus in the 1990s as a driving force to development in the South (Karl 1995). Several UN conferences on women were held and lay the foundation for the thinking and practise of the international society on the subject of women in the South. Among the most important to mention are UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UNSCR 1325, which commit member states to undertake a series of measures to ensure women's rights, protection and participation.

The influx of feminism into development discourse and aid programmes has by many been viewed as a success. Nevertheless there has recently been a critique that development discourse has played a major role in the creation of unified language of development agencies and emphasised policy orientation and measurability at the expense of the original political struggle for gender equality (Arnfred 2001). As Kabeer (1999) stated:

Advocacy for women that builds on synergies between feminist goals and official development priorities made greater inroads in mainstream development agenda than advocacy for these goals on basis of their intrinsic values (Kabeer 1999:2).

The concept of empowerment has been integrated into research, discourse and policy as an analytical tool to conceptualize the process from being disempowered to a state of empowered related to access to power for excluded groups. Often the term empowerment is given without further definition. Instrumentalists offer empowerment together with other desirable multiplier effects to policy makers such as economic growth, family welfare and fertility decline. In effect this has been favoured in development aid as opposed to women's empowerment as a goal in itself. Others like Friedmann (1992) and Kabeer has sought to pinpoint empowerment to certain factors improving life quality and providing opportunities for individuals and households to be active agents in their own development.

Kabeer and Friedmann's conceptualisation of empowerment as concept and approach goes a long way to explain the empirical data of this thesis' case. On the other hand in light of the critique against development discourse and its' narrow focus on women's empowerment, it will be useful to view this case through a feminist approach in order to grasp the details and nuances of change in Afghan women's social and political role in their community. The key aim of feminist scholarship in general is to demonstrate:

The construction and significance of sexual differentiation as key organizing principle and axis of social power, as well as a crucial part of the constitution of subjectivity, of an individual's sense of their self-identity as a sexed and gendered person (McDowell 1999:8).

Feminist geography often takes a starting point in the construction of gender identity and discourse in relation to place and space. Viewing Afghan women in their contemporary context and the transformation process in their political role relates to more than providing empowerment, it relates to the always ongoing negotiation of power on gender relations. The intention in this thesis is to use the inter-dimensional relationship between the empowerment approach and feminism approach to shed light on the research question (McDowell 1999).

## 2.1 Women and Development – the Empowerment Approach

At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power which is associated with different ideas, meanings and values. Power, and hence empowerment is a contested issue with no established definition. I will address empowerment as a concept in relation to alternative development. Since its beginning in development the concept of empowerment became linked to the alternative development discourse and its' aim to work with small local movements and initiatives at grass root level. Alternative development and empowerment was a critique of governments and large development actors' perception of development as a top down process. In his book *Empowerment. The Politics of Alternative Development* Friedman offers Seers' (1969) three critical questions that call for a rethinking of liberal development doctrine: "What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality?" (in Friedmann 1992:1). His argument and the argument of alternative development thinking is that if the central issues brought up in these questions have not improved; there can not be development, even if economic growth and per capita income has improved.

The new focus brought in to the development discourse was how individuals can gain control over their life situation and be active agents in their own development (Friedmann 1992). Empowerment has become a key tool in the process of providing groups excluded from formal power structures in society this control. Exclusion of certain groups is explicitly visible in war torn or countries emerging from or in ongoing conflict (Paris 2004). Today this thinking plays an important role in the development and aid discourse. Development schemes and aid projects governed from outside have in many cases been abandoned by local communities after the external initiatives are withdrawn. The reason often lies in the lack of using local experience and knowledge and or failure to calculate cost and benefits for the community (Friedmann 1992). Alternative development thinking is also justified by the understanding of human rights and civil rights entitling a person the possibility to live up to her or his capacity. Without a local voice and participation, schemes and projects may well be set by standards, ideology and values inconsistent with our fulfilment of human rights and individuals hopes and ambitions.

WID and GAD have embraced the empowerment concept as women are excluded from power in many developing countries. Providing women the access to power and control is at the heart of elimination discrimination against women and ensure women's rights socially and politically (Senerivatne & Currie 2001). The process from disempowered to empowered also reflects more than merely giving women rights and opportunities, but transformation of hierarchy and rules as power shifts.

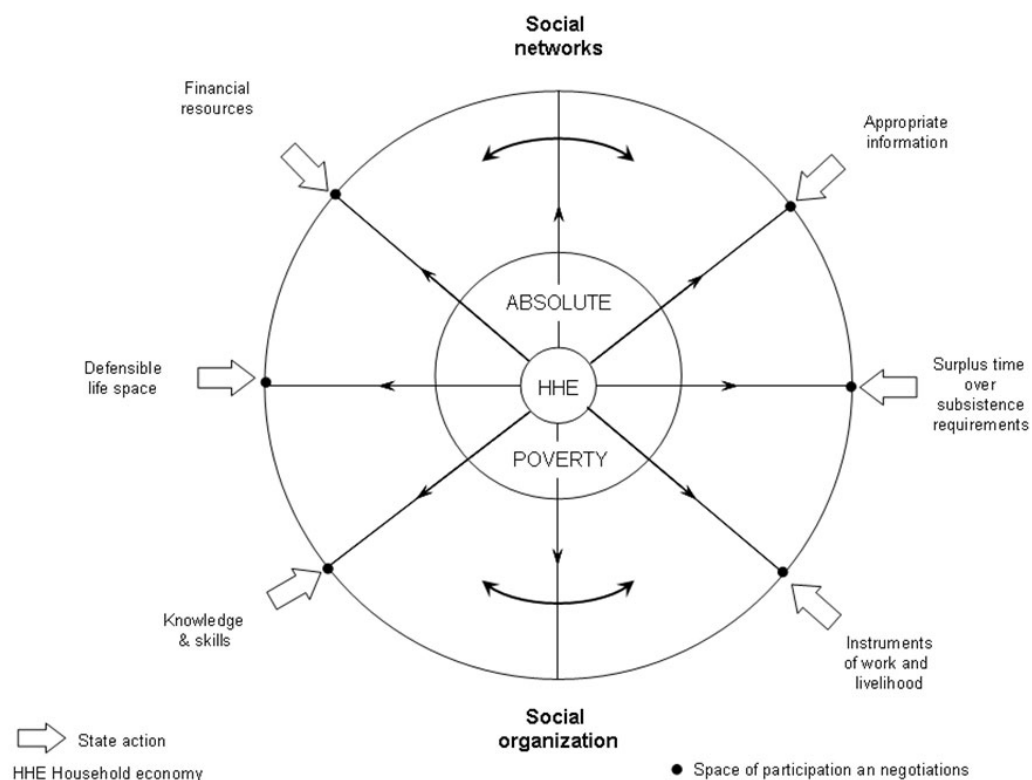
### *2.1.1 Friedmann: Empowerment as Access to Power*

Friedman focuses on empowerment as increased access to power for marginalised groups, such as poor or women (Friedmann 1992). According to Friedman three types of power are needed for excluded groups to gain access to formal power and control their own development: *Social power, political power and psychological power*. Social power is contingent on access to resources like: information, knowledge, skills, participation in social organizations and access to finances. When household's access to these resources increases, the households' ability to decide and meet objectives also enhances. Political power is understood by Friedmann as the individuals' access to participate in decision-making processes. Especially access to participate in decisions affecting the individual's life and future is viewed as important. Political empowerment is here viewed as much broader than just the right to vote, but includes the power to give voice to his or her opinions and to take collective action. Psychological power is gained through confidence and awareness of ones possibilities. This creates self-confident behaviour which has positive effects on households' struggle to social and political power. At the same time success in social and political domains gives psychological empowerment, creating an enforcing relationship.

Alternative development aims to give communities, households and individuals' access to social power in all three types of empowerment. According to Friedmann it is not based on merely satisfying material needs, but focuses on relations of individuals and households, and therefore cannot be guided from governing elites without loosing its alternative character (Friedmann 1992). Friedmann also claims that empowerment has the best chance of success through collective organisations, because networks strengthen the process of social, political and psychological empowerment. Different types of resistance among social groups are used as reference where excluded groups

struggle for survival and social power. Resistance attempts redistribution of social and political resources, through individuals, households and social movements' fight at the grass root level.

Friedmann depicts alternative development's main goal to be the fight against poverty. To alleviate or eliminate poverty is contingent on households' social power to improve the living conditions of its members. He shows this in figure 1 where poverty is explained as lack of access to bases of social power.



**Figure 1: Poverty as Lack of Access to Bases of Social Power**

Source: Friedmann 1992:67

The figure links the power of civil society to that of the household, because they are both dependent of the eight bases of social power;

- *Defensible life space*, meaning the territorial base of the household like home and space for socialising.
- *Surplus time*, the time available to the households' economy that exceeds the subsistence economy. This is the second most priced social power.

- *Knowledge and skills*, which refers to education and mastery of specific skills which give them human resources enhancing economic prospects.
- *Appropriate information*, which are relevant to the households struggle for subsistence ranging from hygiene to available public services, rights and opportunities.
- *Societal organisations*, which refers to informal and formal organisations the households belong to, which offer relevant information and mutual support.
- *Instruments of work and livelihood*, the tools in household production like manpower, access to water, land electricity and appliances that enhance the households overall production.
- *Financial resources*, which include the net monetary income and credit arrangements.

The access to these eight bases is a measure of the extent the households control the resources for their development. Increasing access to the dimensions above will improve households' condition and livelihood (Friedmann 1992).

Friedmann also explores the dimension of gender equality in relation to power and empowerment. He points out that there are practical demands of women's lives which are particularly challenging when working for women's empowerment. He defines these challenges as time, health, skills, access to information and income. The deployment of household as an analytical entity is also problematic as it is oblivious to the political hierarchy within them. Tasks, privileges and income in a given household are divided according to gender, age and status (Eriksen 1998, Friedmann 1992). In many societies women have generally been excluded from access to health-care, information and income. As women have important reproductive roles through pregnancies, nursing and motherhood they are vulnerable to health problems and time consumption. Also education and time are major preventions in women's empowerment as girls and women have been confined to the home because of a large work burden and cultural practices.

The result is women's double disempowerment as both poor and by virtue of sex, resulting in sever restrictions on women's agency because of their gender. Friedmann claims empowerment in the sense of increased access to social power, political power and psychological power are relevant to women's struggles. He especially emphasises

the importance of women's networks as basis for empowerment. He refers to lessons learned from Latin-America where social mobilisation has been a major force in social and political changes in women's benefit. Still it is the household that is the most important factor in women's everyday lives as its practical claims dictates women's access to social power (Friedman 1992).

### *2.1.2 Kabeer: Power, Gender and Choice*

Another authority on empowerment and women is Kabeer. She offers a theoretical perspective of empowerment that goes beyond Friedmann's focus on household empowerment, but look to the individual and gender relations. Kabeer subsequently bridges the gap between the instrumentalist approaches of development and feminist geography approach. Her conceptualisation of empowerment is related to the concept of power and a way of thinking about power as ability to make choices (Kabeer 1999). Empowerment is therefore referred to as a process from disempowerment, where those who have been denied the ability to make choices, are empowered and gain this ability. Choices are differentiated according to significance where the strategic life choices have the most importance and frame the less consequential choices. She then describes the ability to make strategic life choices in three dimensions or moments in the process of social change; *resources, agency and achievements*.

Kabeer refers to resources as material resources, human resources and social resources that enhance the ability to exercise choice. These resources can be acquired through social relationships, market, state and community (Kabeer 1999). These acquired resources do not just include influence over allocation of resources, but future claims and expectations which is reflected in the norms of distribution. Certain institutions have authority over the allocation of resources such as heads of household, tribal leadership, elites and organisations. The dimension of agency relates to the ability to define goals and act upon them. Agency thus includes meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activity and which give them a sense of agency. Kabeer understands agency as beyond mere decision-making, but the result of negotiation, resistance, manipulation, subversion, reflection and analysis. Agency can be exercised on individual basis, or as part of a group and it also can be exercised as control over one's life in a positive sense or as control over others in a more negative sense.



Kabeer however point out that power can be used without agency. She exemplifies with strategic life choice in South Asia where parents according to the norms choose their children's spouse without it being perceived as a form of power.

Kabeer's last dimension called achievements refers to the outcomes of being and doing that is realized by different individuals. Achievement further relates to inequality in the capacity to make choices. Gender has been proved to be a factor in obtaining functioning achievements, but this said, it is a difficult matter to measure. One way to ascertain this inequality is to look at the gender differentials in covering basic needs such as adequate shelter, clean water etc. There is a logical connection between poverty and disempowerment because insufficient material resources gives painful trade offs between important dimensions of choice (Kabeer 1999). Systematic gender differences at this level can be viewed as inequality in the ability to make choices. This approach overlooks gender differences that prevail in non-poverty contexts. Prosperity might alleviate some gender differences, but impose or strengthen others. It also misses out on disempowerment in poor households that are not related to poverty. Different poverty-stricken countries can have differences in indicators such as children's nutrition and gendered life expectancy that are commonly related to women's discrimination. Viewing ability to make choices in an economic model or according to political representation also is too narrow as it conveys little of the level of power for rural and or poor women.

A dilemma with the use of agency and achievements as measures of empowerment is the relation between the power to make choices and welfare of those making the choices (Kabeer 1999). This is especially apparent when analysing women and empowerment in Muslim societies. Women also actively at times choose their own inequality. When the status of women as inferior or submissive to men is institutionalised in the social setting women might continue this practice though it impedes other women and daughters' ambitions for the future. A well known example to this is female circumcision that is carried out through older female relatives. Power and choices are also a reflection of consent and complicity as much as coercion and conflict. Saadallah (2001) brings this up in her analysis of "Gender and Power in Muslim Societies", where patriarchal structure, religious and cultural practices maintain and are maintained by women and men's inequality. At times women have *de jure* rights to for instance land by heritage, but due to norms denounce this right to male relatives with no

further compensation than moral entitlement of support in difficult times. In some Muslim societies like Punjab, claiming actual *de jure* rights in court would likely give an early and unnatural death (Das Gupta 1987, in Kabeer 2001). Kabeer conceptualise this with Bourdieu's idea of *doxa*. He refers to the Greek word *doxa* as traditions and beliefs that exist beyond discourse or argumentation (Bourdieu 1977).

Kabeer's main methodological point to take from this discussion therefore is that the resource dimension has to be defined in ways which spell out their potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple access indicators generally do, if it is to be useful as a measure of empowerment. It is also question of social change: 'how do attempts to change deeply entrenched structures, for instances religion or customary practices, translate into changes in the individual agency and choice?' (Kabeer 2001:30). This has yet to be satisfactory answered in empowerment literature.

## 2.2 Feminist Geography Approach

The purpose of applying feminist geography approach in this thesis is to present a framework of understanding on rural Afghan women's changed political role in relation to the Barefoot Approach. For this purpose post-modern thoughts on identity, power and knowledge in feminism will be applied. The importance of the space and spatial imagination in contemporary feminist geography and scholarship lies at the heart of understanding the social construction of gender relations. The feminist geographer McDowell links feminist geography to anthropology with Moore's definition of feminist anthropology as;

‘...what it is to be a woman, how cultural understandings of the category “woman” vary through space and time, and how these understandings relate to the position of women in different societies’ (Moore 1988:12, in McDowell & Sharp 1997:2).

Feminist scholarship gradually came together with the theoretical debates of postmodernism and post-structuralism due to an important turn in feminism in the 70s and 80s (McDowell & Sharp 1997). A powerful criticism from African-American or immigrant women with origin in the West, and women from the South was directed against feminist politics, because they reflected issues concerning the lives of white

middle class women. The fight for employment outside the house or waged labour, equal pay and the right to control fertility were not compatible to all women. For the poor, refugees and many other women the political agenda and interest for them was to have the right to stay at home and to have children. Most notably the criticism was against the presentation of a feminist solidarity based on Eurocentric values that seemed more exclusive and dividing than inclusive and unifying. Fixed labels of “woman” and race such as “black” stereotyped identities were not in line with the heterogeneous category of woman identity and background. As McDowell puts it:

As feminist had long pointed out, Western enlightenment knowledge, with its liberal assumption of a disembodied, rational and universal point of view, in fact reflected a very particular set of ideas about power and knowledge, about truth and humanity (McDowell & Sharp 1997:5).

As the basis for feminism lies in the idea to speak for the powerless, feminist thought in relation to different cultural settings was very affected by this criticism and the contemporary third generation feminism evolved under the influence of this criticism and post-modern and post-structural ideas. The postmodernism and post-structuralism’s break down of the unitary subject and hence unitary woman led to new understandings of identity, power and knowledge. The construction of discourses and practices that define women became an important theoretical perspective in understanding why women are being treated as secondary humans and denied the same option as men.

### *2.2.1 Constructing Gendered Identity through Discourse and Social Practise*

Foucault is often perceived as the founder of social constructivism and frequently his ideas are used in feminist theory (Hirschmann 2003). Foucault’s perspective was that the production of knowledge is not an impartial reflection of the world, but needs to be understood as results of discourse (Foucault & Gordon 1980). The concept of discourse is referred to as a way of speaking about and understanding the world. The discourse reflects the language and moral of what is deemed appropriate, and further what is viewed relevant prior to being conveyed in public channels as politics or education. This framework for discourse and knowledge is based on unwritten norms and produced historically and culturally in networks of power relations (Stokke 1999). Put in different

words knowledge is not just a base of power, but power defines knowledge by creating a hegemonic “truth regime”. This means a construction of identities that are represented as “natural” and work as reductionism to the real complexity. Moore’s definition of feminist anthropology and what it is to be a woman builds on this dynamics of power and identity. Nonetheless, Foucault’s theories are oblivious to male privilege in power structures concerning social construction (Hirschmann 2003).

Discourses are given meaning in everyday life through social practises and women’s collective identity is formed in the intersection of discourse and social practice. The spaces where social practices occur affect the nature of those practices. The spaces themselves are in turn constructed and given meaning through social practices that define men and women as different and unequal (McDowell & Sharp 1997:3). Social differentiation is a phenomenon in all societies and inhabitants have different duties, rights and influence on collective decisions (Eriksen 1998). Societal differentiation can be understood in terms of access to power and or as divisions in duties and chores in as society. Inequality in gender relations is an important feature in social differentiation, and the socialisation of gender, as opposed to a view of gender in strictly biological terms, is understood as children being raised as gendered individuals in their society’s category of woman or man, feminine and masculine identity.

As Hirschmann puts it; this means that women act within given practises which are constructed by both men and women (Hirschmann 2003). Still viewed in a historical perspective the gender discourse and social practises can mainly be identified as male produced. Hirschmann gives the example of Taliban who politicised their gender policy by violent public sanctions, constructing discourse and practises of “proper” women with legitimacy in God-given rules for good moral. The production of gender roles are reflected in gender relations, a term which refers to the relation of power between women and men made known in practises, ideas, divisions of labour and resources (Agarwal 1994). Gender relations are a product of these practices and ideologies which configure in interaction with other societal hierarchy structures which frame relations within the category of the sexes, such as class, ethnicity, age and status (Moghadam 2003).

### *2.2.2 The Impact of Patriarchy and Religious Culture*

Feminist geography aims to reveal power relations that limit women's possibilities for power (Senerivatne & Currie 2001). This entails understanding the contextual factors framing women and men's discourses in their place. The very essence behind social constructions of gender identities is based on the notion of serving some needs over others. In Afghanistan the construction of women's collective identity, as discussed in the introduction chapter, is a result of a politicisation of gender roles and legitimacy for religious, tribal and political factions in conflict over power. Two pervasive characteristics of the Afghan nation and society that plays a major role in collective identity are patriarchy and religious culture.

The concept of patriarchy has been used in feminist theory as means of asserting that gender inequality is a pervasive feature in society, and that oppression of women is different than other forms of oppression (Fox 2001). Patriarchy according to Fox is often viewed as sexual division of labour, where men as family leaders have confiscated the modes of production in society, so women work in the home under economic dependence of men for survival. Another dimension of this gender system is the social relations between men that secure their dominance. Moghadam defines patriarchy with Mann's (1986, in Moghadam 1992) elaboration that a patriarchal society is characterized as one where power is held by male heads of household and there is a clear separation between the public and private spheres of life. Women hold (idealistically) no formal economic, ideological or military position of power (Moghadam 1992). Men's control over women's sexual behaviour and choice of life partner to secure reproduction and high fertility rates is also an important element in a patriarchal society (Ferguson and Folbre 1981, in Fox 2001).

This system is regardless of women's heavy agricultural burden and functional importance in the household. Mann states that the entry of women in the public sphere, due to emerging capitalism, weakened patriarchy, and the emergence of universal citizenship dissolved it in Western Europe (Mann 1986, in Moghadam 1992). The Middle East, North Africa and South Asia have been referred to as the "patriarchal belt", and Afghanistan has a gender system traditionally based on patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent (Moghadam 1992).

Religion is at the core of most Afghans' sense of self. Gendered identity in this thesis is concretely linked to Islam as Afghanistan has a long history of being a Muslim nation, and religion is a very pervasive element in the society as a whole. Islam and the *Qur'an* states all men and women as equal before God, but the Islamic holy scripts and the *Shari'ah* deems women and men unequal in rights pertaining to divorce, child custody, inheritance and freedom (Mir-Hosseini 2000). In Afghanistan if you are an Afghan you are Muslim, though religious interpretation gives different meanings to different Afghans. Nevertheless it implies dismissal of other possibilities. The Taliban's radical Islamism was based on a rejection of discourses such as secularization, socialism and nationalism which were projected as humiliating exercises from the West. Still in many countries when tribal norms clash with *Shari'ah* the former is consulted and women's rights in Islam are disregarded when in conflict with patriarchal or tribal traditions (Wadud 2006). Muslim women adapt to Islamic norms as God-given and unchangeable, but also deal with them in terms of different interpretations and practises in a specific context at a specific time, coloured by cultural and social conditions.

Shukrallah links gender identity in societies where Islamism is pervasive to the term "the other within". Women and ethnic minorities are seen as "the other within", a threat to good moral, and often targeted for violence (Shukrallah 2001). This term is in reference to the work of Edward Said. Said argued that Western studies and thoughts on oriental societies have developed a constructed character and forced identity (Said 1978). The constructed visions and representation of the Middle East and Muslim countries is being institutionalized through social practices, meanwhile the constructed characterization is projected as natural and objective. This representation of "the other" is according to Said means of acquiring power over non-Western societies politically and economically. The discourses and the materials used to give power and legitimacy is the representation of dominant forces that claim the monopoly of truth. Labelling women who do not apply to the gender identity of the Islamist forces "the other within", dangerous to the natural space of Muslim women, moves the political struggle over power to imaginative struggles over women's bodies. The result of these constructed identities is that women can only break the pattern with the cost of losing identity and social security bonds. Islamism has proved to be an effective symbolic and cultural presentation with legitimacy in identity, historical roots and fight against Western colonial oppression (Shukrallah 2001, Mir-Hosseini 2000). Though the influx of

Islamism has been a mobilizing force in form of a movement towards a religious political rule and fight against authoritative and secular governments, this has generally not been the case for Muslim women (Shukrullah 2001).

### 2.2.3 *The Politics of Negotiation*

The roles women and men have expressed through gender relations is not something monolithic and fixed, but a result of discourse and practice. According to Agarwal gender relations are not “uniform across societies nor historically static” (Agarwal 1994:51). Agarwal’s work has focused on women’s right to land in parts of South Asia, in terms of how negotiations over land are symbolic negotiation of gender relations. Her conceptualisation on gender relations as a product of negotiation, and what determines women’s bargaining power, are relevant to viewing empowerment of women in a development perspective and a post-modern conception of feminist struggles.

Gender relations are constantly being subjected to changes and negotiations in the form of cooperation and conflict. In other words this means that hierarchy and relations between the sexes in a given context are maintained or transformed through contestation or bargaining according to the actors’ access to social, economic or political power (Agarwal 1994). This can vary in; *form* from individual covert resistance to group mobilization, the *context* and it’s accompanying rules, practices and institutions, and *arenas* ranging from household and family, to community, market and state. Agarwal claims the bargaining power of individuals is dependant on a) a possible fall-back option in case cooperation is ceased, such as financial or social resources, b) if claims by the individuals are viewed as socially and legally legitimate, and by invoking Sen (1990, in Agarwal 1994), c) the individuals self-esteem and sense of own value compared to others, and perceived contribution to the household. Sen’s claim is that women get less when views of women’s lesser value are institutionalized by both men and women. Women’s income earning outside the home has great significance for both a) and c).

Interestingly Agarwal disputes c) and Sen’s notions of women’s compliance due to sense of self-worth. She claims that investigating covert resistance reveals that women in fact do not see these practices as legitimate and hence have no “false consciousness” about their selves and their value. Instead compliance is the only option available. This relates not to self-esteem, but as Kabeer points out; choices are

dependent on the existence of alternatives, if women are denied the ability to make their own strategic life choices there are in fact no alternatives to choose from. Agarwal also claims bargaining power is determined by d) what it is possible or legitimate to be bargaining about. Gender differences in bargaining power affect not just outcomes to particular matters, but the actual bargaining issue. Here Agarwal like Kabeer cite Bourdieu and his term *doxa*. The *doxa* include practises which in many societies gives preference to collectivistic interest rather than that of the individual, meaning that bargaining power is determined not only by access to resources, but also by symbolic meaning.

The arena's for negotiating gender relations are by Agarwal divided into the household and family, the community, the market and the state (Agarwal 1994). Women's bargaining power within these interactive arenas is related to Agarwal's points of a), b), and d), but all have distinctive factors determining women's space to manoeuvre. Inclusion in communities offers support and gains. As communities share location, and or belong to a social group of religion, ethnicity, clan etc, communities function both as social network and collective identity. In return for providing "safety in numbers" the expectation from the included is loyalty. The community entails rules on whom to marry, degree of women's seclusion and so on, which are in women's disfavour at the negotiating table.

Communities in South Asia traditionally have excluded women from local decision-making bodies and the marriage according to patrilocal practises means that many women do not have the support of kin in their vicinity after marriage, hence her contribution to the community is viewed to be of little consequence and non cooperation is ignored. Women's ability to bargain in the arena of the market is also affected by gender ideologies which often contradict simplistic theories of economy. This can result in women being excluded from the market arena all together or that feminine behaviour puts boundaries on their economic performance. Women's relationship with the state is often most apparent through NGOs or women's organisations and their demands. The state can enact laws and devise policies and programmes in women's favour and allocate financial resources for reducing gender bias in access to productive resources, employment, information, education, and health, The state also has the power to provide protection from gender violence and to counteract the force of *doxa* by influencing discourse on gender relations in specific directions through the media and educational



institutions. Nonetheless the same state can also use its resources and coercive apparatus to reinforce existing gender biases (Agarwal 1994).

#### *2.2.4 The Impact of Intervention*

As patriarchy and religious culture plays an important factor in framing gender relations, also foreign aid has potential for men and women's space for negotiating their gender roles. The need to address gender issues has been firmly established in the development agenda and the use of gender mainstreaming as a tool to eliminate gender bias has become obligatory in most aid projects. Gender equality has in many cases overshadowed the debate of inequalities in general. The intention of incorporating women in development through first WID and later GAD has; "become an issue of checklists, planning and political 'correctness'" (Arnfred 2001:76). Both perspectives have had a tendency to add the gender dimension rather than address women's discrimination directly as phenomenon.

Despite enormous gender focus and elimination of discrimination against women little is said specifically of what exactly is to be achieved on gender relations. The rhetoric of conferences and policy statements seems to be that the international gender focus is a "one size fits all" with a footnote on contextualisation. Later it is up to the aid agencies situated in the local settings to make sure local needs and perceptions are incorporated. There is a gap between the legitimacy of gender perspective to emancipate and empower poor, suppressed women in the South, and the reluctance to actively change gender relations in communities out of fear of disrupting positive aspects of existing relations. There is also a discrepancy between articulated goals "at home", that are put forward to justify and commercialise aid in national or global aid communities, and the aims and goals being conveyed to the beneficiaries in the local setting where projects are implemented. In addition the interest and views of stakeholders like Norwegian tax payers and general public are often important in how gender is highlighted. To be justified, aid evidently should have an impact and change prejudiced gender relations. On the other hand research has played an important part in revealing interventions' counter-productiveness on women's status in gender relations. Roughly the main body of critical research has disclosed the negative impacts and the grey

literature presenting researches of positive impacts, with few exchanges of knowledge and experience between the two (Kabeer 2001).

Kristi Anne Stølen brings up the legacy of WID and GAD and their continuation of feminism's Eurocentric values. Though WID and GAD have changed since its start to incorporate more heterogeneous views, the conceptions of woman and man are still derived from our experiences in the West (Stølen 1991). Stølen makes the point that the aid community, its donors and other stakeholders makes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate gender roles, which hinders local women's own initiatives if they are in conflict with our perceptions. Often new projects initiated from outside put extra work burdens on women, or land rights is given to men in households, ignoring women's needs and contribution. An example was Norad's wish for women's participation in building road infrastructure in Botswana, where it became clear that women already were overloaded by chores in relation to household and farming, while the men had plenty of time on their hands (Liland & Kjerland 2003). However, most aid projects have been criticised for neglecting women altogether. NCA was in 1985 criticised by its own, when a group of women working on their behalf in Sudan reported that the Sudan program was 'extremely male dominated', because the Sudanese and Norwegian management consisted of men who took decisions without consulting women (Tønnessen 2007). This applied also when the projects in the Sudan program dealt with issues that were Sudanese women's responsibility, such as fetching water. At times aid has played an important role in regime legitimisation and maintenance strategies, providing support to neo-patrimonial structures and favoured particular groups and regions. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan aid was used to strengthen the Mujahidin's fight against Soviet and communism. Refugees in Pakistan had to enlist in one of Mujahidin's factions to receive humanitarian aid (Goodhand 2006). This has profound impact on women's space to negotiate as claims for women's interests easily can be rejected as socially and legally illegitimate, further it narrows the field of what is appropriate to bargain about.

Conversely foreign aid can play a vital part in addressing women's needs and positively affect gender roles. By facilitating girls and women's education, promote local women's organisation, and as Agarwal states function as an intermediate between the state and women, it can press governments to pay attention to local women's claims. International intervention and aid often push governments to implement legal rights for

women in the reconstruction process and to promote policies and public debate that includes women in education and politics. An example is NCA's shelter for women in Kabul who work with the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the Afghan government to provide women who have fled from forced marriage and domestic violence with physical and psychological health-care, skills training and legal support. Most notably the aim is to increase awareness in the Afghan society and politics on the problems and injustice that face women in such situations under a larger framework of advocacy for women's rights. The NGOs offer a relationship that gives women an arena and resources for their gender negotiation.

The discussion above shows the potential foreign aid plays in the discourse and negotiation of gender roles. The aid community always enters host countries and local communities equipped with their own discourse, culture and practices. Their *doxa* ensures certain standards and ways of doing business. However, in the interface of the beneficiaries discourse, culture and practises, and the intended ambitions change. Still the accompanying Western gender discourse does not go unnoticed in developing countries and the focus is negatively or positively part of changing gender relations.

### 2.3 Applying Empowerment and Feminist Geography Approach

To research into the affects of aid projects on women beneficiaries requires understandings that are both precise and broad. Friedmann is used in this thesis to conceptualise how solar energy provides access to resources and the potential impact on women's empowerment. Kabeer offers a framework suited to analyse how these resources can be realised in women's ability to make choices forming their own and daughters' lives, which can improve their status. Feminist geography will be used to explore changes in the discourse and negotiation that frame the women beneficiaries' political rights and responsibilities towards their communities. As solar energy affects women's empowerment an added value to providing resources might be positive impact on women's access to local political decision-making. Feminist geography enables an understanding of the factor's informing women's political role such as patriarchy, religion and the presence of foreign aid in Afghan women's lives.

## **CHAPTER 3.0 METHOD**

I have chosen qualitative method as an approach to this thesis because it highlights nuances and aspects of the research questions well. A qualitative approach can give broad and complex information and is characterized by special attention to details and closeness to the informants (Thagaard 2004). Exploring how Norwegian agencies in Afghanistan can impact Afghan women's social and political role requires a deep understanding best suited to qualitative explanations. Further the thesis will be a case study with the NCA's Barefoot Approach in Afghanistan. Focusing on a case study allows for detailed information of contemporary phenomenon within its real life context with multiple sources of evidence (Robson 1993).

A case study is meant to capture cases in their uniqueness, something that makes the issues of generalization contested among scholars (Gomm & al 2004). In the setting of Afghanistan it is very important to be aware of the uniqueness of the situation due to over 25 years of war and mixed experience with the international aid community. As information about the impact of aid on Afghan women lives and participation in the peace-building process is crucial to securing sustainable peace and development the prospect of using knowledge from one country to another is desirable.

This thesis does not look into the contextual and organizational factors deciding Norwegian agencies capacity to impact on Afghan women's conditions. The reach in the organisations' size, local partners and financial funding sources vary greatly. They also to some extent specialise in different geographical locations in Afghanistan making comparisons very difficult. Still the gathering and analyzing of information on how Norwegian agencies can impact on women's social and political role is useful in its own right concerning the future of sustainability in peace-building and the legitimacy of Norwegian interventionism in Afghanistan.

### **3.1 The Question of Feminist Methodology**

The methodology of this thesis is also partly influenced by my feminist position. McDowell & Sharp (1997) and other feminists have raised the question if there exists a distinct feminist method different from conventional methods? In general there is a

broad agreement that feminists, within and outside our own discipline, are searching for methods that are in line with our values and aims as feminists, and apt to feminist topics. Feminist research initiated as a critique of male-produced and male-oriented methodologies within different disciplines (Skotnes 1996). Feminist research embodies the goal of changing women's lives and combating discrimination against women. On the other hand there is no established consensus on how this is to be achieved. Small and qualitative case studies have been viewed as well suited for feminist method, because it draws on women's abilities to listen, empathise and validate personal experiences as part of the research process. Research always consists of an unequal power relation between the researcher and the object researched upon, and one of the goals of feminists has been to even out the inequality between researcher and informants by focusing on commonalities between woman researcher and informant (McDowell & Sharp 1997). Conversely, "creating an artificial egalitarian relationship can cause disappointment, betrayal and abandonment sentiments" (Stacey in McDowell & Sharp 1997:111).

When researching in rural Afghanistan I was met with hope from my women and men informants. Not just because of my affiliation with an NGO, but because the women felt that I was an encouragement to them and their daughters; "by seeing you come here alone, you prove women can do it", was frequently mentioned. This was of course flattering, but also gave a heavy sense of obligation. Likewise I was glad to hear from one of my male translators that he was touched and pleased I had asked these questions, because it was good to hear that the difficult situation of women in his country was changing. The question if my research has a distinct feminist methodology remains to be answered by the reader itself, but as a feminist I clearly cannot avoid to have certain ambitions with my choice of topic and case. As the citation suggests total objectivity is a supposition:

'...the conventional assumption that the researcher is a disembodied, rational, sexually indifferent subject – a mind unlocated in space, time or constitutive interrelationships with others, is a status normally attributed to angels' (Grosz 1986:199, in McDowell & Sharp 1997:107).

The mixing of own values and research are at times deeply problematic as sometimes researchers are unconsciously seductive towards their research subjects, raising their expectations and inducing dependency (McDowell & Sharp 1997). This requires

transparency in the communication between the researcher and informants, and the researcher and the readers, which I have attempted to obtain.

### 3.2 The Case: the Barefoot Approach – Solar Energy Project

The chosen case project the Barefoot Approach was initiated by the NCA in 2005 and is still ongoing. My motivation for selecting this project lays in the indications of empowerment of the women beneficiaries. I was specially intrigued by the inclusion of women in the project at all levels; community mobilisation and the training of women to install and repair the solar panels. The vision of the Barefoot Approach is to help poor remote rural communities in acquiring and administering solar electricity. Two persons who are suited for the project, preferably a man and a woman (a married couple or otherwise related), from the selected communities are trained as Barefoot Solar Engineers (BSEs). By the summer of 2007 the NCA solar project had solar electrified 917 households in 21 villages in the provinces Badakshan, Faryab, Bamiyan, Uruzgan and Daikundi and new villages are continuously in the process of implementation. The total numbers of trained BSEs were 25, whereof 7 were women and 18 men. The first BSEs were trained for six months at Barefoot College in Tilonia, India. In Bamiyan province the second generation of BSEs were trained by the first generation of BSEs in Habashi village, and this method has now been applied in the other provinces as well.

The technology is only introduced after preparation and information and the community has made a collective decision through a binding contract. All households or homes in the village are included to ensure equal opportunities for all villagers<sup>12</sup>. NCA undertakes the costs of the solar panels and the needed equipment for 5 years, and the costs of training BSEs in India or Afghanistan (Interview Jamal 5/7-07). The community with a monthly salary later employs the BSEs to maintain and drift the solar technology, with the equivalent sum previously used for kerosene and diesel in lanterns<sup>13</sup>. The villagers ideally should start saving money to buy equipment when the NCA support eventually withdraws. It is the intention of the project that when the panels are installed

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<sup>12</sup> The recent rapid return of refugees from Iran and Pakistan means considerable amounts of ‘new’ households are without solar energy.

<sup>13</sup> According to my informants the reference of kerosene in Afghanistan in reality is diesel as kerosene is more expensive and hard to come by. I will therefore refer only to diesel.

and the BSEs are trained the equipment belongs entirely to the community for their responsibility and benefit, and with no conditions from external actors.

What is unique about the Barefoot Approach is the focus on sustainability by including the local community in the process, and the gender perspective in the implementation of the project. By building the confidence and capacity of rural semiliterate women's who are rooted in their community, the project challenges the traditional political space for women and creates new identities and discourses that inform gender roles. On the other hand the rationale for choosing women is the fact that men often leave the village for long periods of time, which hinders sustainability in repairing and maintaining the equipment. A male BSE cannot enter the home of fellow villagers if there are no men of the family present. The fact that gender equality is not the "agenda" per se, and that women's capacity-building is given in combination with a great benefit for the community, lessens the risk of provoking a perceived threat on the local communities' traditional values.

Usually it is exclusively men who deal with administering tasks in the local community that are not clearly "woman's affairs". Engineering projects undertaken or assisted by the international aid community are also normally delegated to men in line with local values.<sup>14</sup> The outcome of this project has indicated a change in living conditions and status of women through; opportunities to generate income, acceptance as skilled workers, increase in self esteem and healthier indoor environment (NCA 2005). An example of additional outcome has been the inclusion of some of the women BSEs in local *shura* meetings previously exclusively for men, due to their status and knowledge as engineer. This promotion of confidence and authority from being a woman BSE has potential effects for the overall status of women in their communities.

For this case project I have chosen to focus on four villages in Bamiyan province. This province was suggested by the NCA for several reasons. Bamiyan is accessible from Kabul without days of travel. The province is also one of the safest places in Afghanistan. Afghanistan still suffers from war, conflict and terrorism in several regions. As a student, safety is an important issue and precautions have to be taken. Bamiyan province is the famous home of the former Buddha statues. The area was a tourist attraction in the 70s because of the statues, but became world famous after

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<sup>14</sup> Based on interviews with Norwegian Refugee Council and Norwegian Afghanistan Committee and the NSP mid-term evaluation report, Barakat et al 2006.

Taliban destroyed them as a demonstration of their power in March 2001. The majority of the population in Bamiyan are of the ethnic origin Hazaras, and are believed to be descendants of Genghis Khan. Hazaras belong to the religious group of Shia Muslims. Due to a long history of conflicts the Hazaras was the main opposition against Taliban and at present there are no Taliban left in Bamiyan. Many Hazaras welcome the ISAF forces and their fight against the Taliban rule. All of my informants from Bamiyan were Hazaras. As my fieldwork and interviews with communities were with Hazara the particular gender relations of the Hazara group is depicted. The gender relations in Afghanistan differ greatly geographically and according to tribal and ethnic bonds. The Hazaras were by the NCA perceived to be more liberal and women to have more mobility, this has been refuted by others who see Hazaras to be closed and conservative related to women (Wakefield 2004). The interviews with the other BSEs also gave valuable information, but could easily be particular to his or her community and reveal little of the gender relation of comparable communities.

In addition to the data collected in Bamiyan my case includes individual interviews with women and men BSEs from Daikundi, Faryab and Badakshan. I also met with two men BSEs from Uruzgan at the meeting in Kabul. They were not interviewed because it was not any women BSEs trained from this province due to security issues. The interviews were conducted in the villages in Bamiyan and in Kabul during a meeting between all the BSEs in Afghanistan and the NCA. My interviews in the field and in Norway are presented by an informant overview in Table 2 in the appendix. As I will mentioned later all *names of BSEs are fictional to ensure anonymity*. I also met with two men BSEs from Uruzgan at the meeting in Kabul. They were not interviewed because no women are trained as BSEs from this region due to security concerns.

With the help of NCA I was able to visit 4 villages In Bamiyan: Jarukashan, Pir Dad, Habashi and Ladu. The villages are presented in Table 1, in chronological order of my visits:



Table 1: Village Overview

Village	BSEs	Population size	Economy	Location *
Jarukashan	Maliha Khaled	50 househ./350 inhabitants	Livestock, wheat, hay	3,5 hrs (8 hrs walking)
Pir Dad	Rasheed Amir	225 households	Livestock, wheat, hay, root vegetables Carpet-weaving	2 hrs
Habashi	Taher Hassan	50 households	Livestock, wheat, barley, chick peas, hay, root vegetables. Carpet-weaving	2 hrs
Ladu	Leilah Asim	150 households	Livestock, farming Carpet-weaving	1,5 hrs

\* Drive by car from Bamiyan town, centre of Bamiyan province.

All four villages are part of the Afghan government and World Bank's National Solidarity Program (NSP). This means that the villages have established a Community Development Council (CDC) with women and men. In reality the CDCs are called *shura* in Bamiyan, and have separate women and men's *shuras*. The effectiveness and internal cooperation varies from village to village. Sometimes these new *shuras* or CDCs coexist with old and traditional *shuras*, with an overlap of men who sometimes preside in both new and old *shura* institutions.

The energy consumption in the villages follows the same pattern. The solar energy has replaced diesel lanterns, and now provides lighting in each room, one outside light and one portable lantern. Cooking and heating is still done with traditional fuel which in Bamiyan is a mountain shrub called *butah* and dung from cow and sheep. The women's responsibility in relation to energy use is to shape and dry cow dung, and previously also to clean and maintain the diesel lanterns. The men have the responsibility to collect the mountain *butah* and shape and dry the sheep dung. The shift from using kerosene and diesel lanterns, has given a health benefit of less smoke and indoor pollution. Unfortunately the *butah* still creates unhealthy indoor smoke and harvesting cause erosion in the mountains. The shrub has consequently been given a protected status by the government and only local inhabitants are allowed to collect it. Some also use the solar energy for TVs, DVDs and cassette players. In some of the villages the first thing I saw beside their solar panels on the roofs was large dish antennas. In addition some of the villages experiment with using the solar energy for

machines that aid every day chores, like making butter. Some of the women BSEs interviewed were also urged by the other women in their community to construct machines to make thread-making or carpet-weaving easier.

### 3.2.1 The Villages

Jarukashan is a small village with about 50 households and 350 inhabitants. Half the population are children below 16 years. The village has children' school in close proximity and one of the women in the village functions as a teacher. She also is the leader of the women's *shura*. The economy in the village consists of keeping livestock and growing wheat for food and hay for animals. The equipment and skills for weaving carpets have vanished after the inhabitants left as refugees during the war and Taliban era. Now there are no finances to buy new equipment. The village is about three hours with car from Bamiyan town and is located near the Band-i-Amir lakes. The far distance from Bamiyan town means it is cut off from access to health clinics and the *bazaar*, except for a few of the men. From Jarukashan the BSEs are Khaled and Maliha. They are brother and sister and trained for six months in Tilonia, India.

The village Pir Dad is quite large compared to the others and has about 225 households. As in Jarukashan half the population are children under 16 years. There is one school near the main village, but during the summer months most of the women and children go to summer pasture with the livestock. The journey to school is then about 3 hrs away by foot and many children, particularly girls, stay home with their families. The economy in Pir Dad is different than Jarukashan, because they have organized carpet-weaving. Most families with children have carpet-weaving in their house, but on my visit I also was shown common rooms for large carpets where 8-10 children worked shifts. This village also keeps livestock and do farming. The lower altitude in this part of Bamiyan also allows for more diversity in farming and the main crops are wheat, hay, carrot, potatoes and radishes. Most of them have their own animals, but about 30 % are landless and work on other people's land. This village is much closer to Bamiyan town which gives better access to health clinics and the *bazaar*. In Pir Dad two men, Rasheed and Khaled, were chosen to be BSE. They were trained by the BSEs in Habashi.

Habashi is a small village like Jarukashan with about 50 households. The village is located near Pir Dad. This village has a quite new school close by and most of the children attend school. This village produce wheat, barley, chick peas, hay, potatoes,

carrots, radishes and keep livestock. As in Pir Dad the villagers' economy is dependent on farming and carpet-weaving and most families with young children have weaving done in their home. The closeness to Bamiyan town gives the same opportunities as in Pir Dad. The BSEs Taher and Hassan were trained in India. The BSEs from Habashi now train all the new BSEs in Bamiyan.

Ladu village is a medium size village with 150 households. The village is connected to 4 other villages with Ladu in their name. Only the part I visited has implemented solar energy in cooperation with the NCA. Each household has 5-10 children and most attend school, which is an old UNICEF tent nearby the village. The leader of the women's *shura* also teaches at the school. The village economy is based on carpet-weaving, farming and livestock. About 80 % of the families are involved in carpet-weaving. From Ladu a mother and son, Leilah and Asim, were picked to be BSE. Leilah and Asim were trained in Habashi.

### 3.3 Gathering of Data

In preparation for the field work I conducted interviews with Thora Holter, NCAs gender consultant and Ingebjørg Kårstad, NCAs program coordinator for Afghanistan. In the process of finding interesting case studies I also interviewed Liv Kjølnner from the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, Bente Damsleth from the Norwegian Save the Children and Petra Storstein from the Norwegian Refugee Council, who have provided valuable information on how Norwegian organizations work in local realities in Afghanistan, and how the interests of the Norwegian Government influence gender policies in the organizations' work.

My fieldwork in Afghanistan lasted from July 4 until August 2, 2007. The gathering of data for the Barefoot Approach was done in two stages. In the first stage I conducted interviews between July 9 and July 13 in the four villages in Bamiyan. First I held group interviews with the men's *shura*, then the women's *shura*. In Jarukashan I also had an interview with a joint men's *shura* meeting consisting of three neighbouring villages (Jarukashan included). Finally there was an individual interview with the BSEs in their home village. In Pir Dad and Ladu I had the possibility to meet with a group of women with very few resources, some also heads of female-led households. The members of the men's *shura* selected the different focus groups.

In the second stage I conducted individual interviews with BSEs from Daikundi, Faryab and Badakshan in Kabul when they visited the NCA head office for a meeting on the July 15 and July 18.<sup>15</sup> The interviews are as mentioned earlier, presented in Table 2 in the appendix. In addition to the formal interviews with the BSEs and their communities I had several conversations with the NCA staff, which provides a background picture of the setting, outcome and challenges of the Barefoot Approach and about working in the local reality in Afghanistan. Apart from my time in Bamiyan I was based in Kabul and had a workplace at the NCA head office there. As my fieldwork in Afghanistan was short, I also rely on secondary data. For a background history and conceptualisation of women's role in Afghan cultural identity I have relied mainly on work of experienced researchers within the field Afghanistan, women and Islam such as Valentine Moghadam, Nancy Hatch Dupree and Elaheh Rostami-Povey. My thesis is also based on information from research groups as International Crisis Group (ICG), Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, Amnesty International and other grey literature reports that conduct their research based on qualitative interviews in the field. To support this I have also used some statistical data from Human Development Index. I have not used any particular criteria in choosing secondary literature except two considerations; first the relevance according to the case and politicisation of gender roles, second I have tried to avoid using literature that depicts certain interests, such as grey literature related to the Norwegian aid community.

### *3.3.1 The Interviews*

The gathering of data from my informants where based on Semi-structured interviews. This approach is well qualified to gather extensive information on the informants' life situation. It also allows the researcher to be flexible and open towards other topics the informant might bring up, which the researcher would otherwise have missed (Thagaard 2004). This happened often in the interviews I conducted. Since Afghanistan also was unknown territory for me except from my studies and encounters with Afghans in Norway, it was important to tread the ground first before all the questions were finalized.

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<sup>15</sup> The BSE Maliha was interviewed both in Jarukashan and during the meeting in Kabul.

In the Bamiyan villages all the interviews were group interviews where I would ask questions or discuss some of the themes I was investigating with four to fifteen informants present. The number of informants varied and was not decided by myself. Being rigid about who should be present or not present at the meetings would create an even more artificial setting and would have been considered rude of me, as I was a guest. The number of people was not a problem in the focus groups, as usually a few would speak on behalf of the others and the others would join in agreement if there was something they felt strongly about.

Group interviews may provide the possibility of going more in depth on the topics and questions at hand, because the participants can follow up each others answers and give useful comments (Thagaard 2004). On the other hand it could also result in only the most dominating views to be expressed because participants with divergent views may feel reluctant to present them in this setting. In Bamiyan none of the informants would directly contradict the more outspoken. There were often comments giving additional information or someone would at times comment that they had a different experience due to other circumstances, but never any disagreement. Being a Western visitor accompanied by representatives from the NCA, the setting of rural villages in Bamiyan made individual interviews difficult. We were the spectacle of the day and when I tried to have individual interviews with the BSEs in the villages there were always many curious, young and old, around us. It seems the BSEs were comfortable being the focus of attention, though I am sure it did impact on the data. For this reason I chose to wait with the BSE Maliha's interview until she came to Kabul.

The interviews concentrated on key topics in line with Moghadam's aspects of women's position in rural societies relating to; rights, work, mobility, family, education, health, sexual control and cultural symbolism (Moghadam 2003). Not all topics were possible to explore in depth, but most were discussed directly or indirectly. The main theme was the benefits of the solar energy for women in terms of material changes in everyday life and chores, and cultural perspectives of women's role and status in society. Within these aspects of social change the aim of the analysis is also to reveal whether this has given women empowerment and opportunities for local political participation. My questions related to issues of how the informants felt women's status had changed; whether women's burden of work had lessened; improvements in health and income; if women were included in household and community decision-making, and

whether a new perception of women's capabilities had emerged after experiencing women trained as BSE. I had the help of Jamal from the NCA, who works on the Barefoot Approach, to translate for me.

In qualitative studies where interviews are done in the field, the qualifications of the researcher are of outmost importance (Thagaard 2004). The interviewer's skills in forming good questions are crucial for obtaining valuable information. Also the researcher's ability to follow up and give the right kind of encouragement to the informants' answers is important to give a sense of confidence and interest. My interviews were semi structured giving opportunity for the informants to present their views and ideas. Apart from in the village Jarukashan most of my informants in the group-interviews were very eager to talk and share their experiences with me. At the same time the flexibility also meant that interviews took longer time than planned. This I found to be most challenging during the fieldwork, as the rural villagers have a lot of work and little spare-time in the summer months.

The problem of whether informants tell the researcher what he or she thinks the researcher wants to hear is imminent. As my interviews were conducted in villages where people struggle to survive and are in desperate need of development aid, they have literally a lot at stake when answering questions from foreign visitors and researchers. The fact that I travelled with a representative from NCA doing the interpreting and NCA cars and drivers, probably caused some confusion about my role. I was always careful to point out that I was a student doing research on the NCA project of solar energy, making a deliberate stand to leave all questions about solar panels and community payments to Jamal. Of course in some sense they would still see me (rightly) as a potential messenger to the NCA or confuse me for an aid worker coming to their help. On the other hand they would probably not have answered my questions about women if I was not affiliated in some way with NCA as gender relations and women's virtue is viewed with extreme sensitivity as it reflects on family honour (Moghadam 1992)

Sharon Hutchinson describes fieldwork as the art of conversation (Hutchinson 1996, in Winther 2005). For a conversation to be meaningful, both parties must have a genuine interest in the topic. However, even though being an inexperienced stranger in the Afghan society, and posing questions on sensitive subjects, practically everyone I met were enthusiastic to speak to me about the impact of solar energy. To them, this

constituted a huge change in their life and had given them good opportunities in enhancing living conditions economically and psychologically. They now have longer work days and a qualitatively different social life both within the family and between relatives, neighbours and friends. In addition all of the women and several of the men were eager to talk about the conditions of women in Afghanistan and the condition of women in their place in particular. Their desire to discuss these subjects and the fact that we shared the opinion of its importance gave me the chance of acquiring their knowledge and information easily.

In the interviews I tried not to ask leading questions or questions that gave short answers. This was very challenging because I had very little control over the translator's version of my questions. After some time both in Bamiyan and Kabul the translators would know my questions and intentions so well that they would ask leading questions on their own initiative if the informant did not understand or go in depth. As I had short time in Bamiyan the interview situation was very intense and the many impressions did not exactly make me the perfect interviewer in the end of the day. Not asking the informants leading questions was also at times quite impossible due to our different backgrounds resulting in different knowledge and understanding of words and concepts. Some informants had no knowledge of the concept politics. For rural women without education, TV or newspapers this is not exceptional. Also answering questions about ones age was difficult, as formalities like birth certificates or celebrating birthdays are practically non-existent. As a result it was often difficult to ascertain exactly when girls in the villages get married. In the end I found that the best and most valuable information was the one given spontaneously by the informants where I had gained their trust and they would tell me about domestic violence, indebtedness, giving of daughters in marriage for food or money. Also information about benefits from the solar energy not already asked and told to the NCA, provided reflected information and more flow in the discussions.

The relation between interviewer and informants is important, and the researcher's status, class and gender impacts the types of data informants give (Thagaard 2004). Being a woman and doing fieldwork in Afghanistan was challenging both positively and negatively. Encountering a whole nation with extremely different cultural perspective and ideology on gender relations than my own has been both insightful and painful. According to Warren (1988, in Thagaard 2004) literature in methodology has

discussed the significance of the interviewer sex on the interview situation. In individual interviews there may be a common understanding between informant and interviewer of the same sex. In all my interviews my gender certainly had an impact. In Afghanistan there is a sexual division of space. Traditionally and still widely practised in both rural areas and the cities, women are for the most part confined to the domestic sphere and men have the monopoly of the public sphere. Women are seldom part of public life, even at the *bazaar* and mosques. There are exceptions to this and women are gradually in the public scene, walking outside without the *burqha*, in the politics, television and working outside the home. Though there are other Muslim countries that practice segregation between men and women, the same extent of giving men monopoly in all public spaces is rare. During the Taliban rule women were ideally not to have any public role in the military, politics and economy.

Anyone who has visited the Middle East, and especially Afghanistan, knows that as a Western woman you are given a role outside the normal gender hierarchy and common understanding. You are given the role of quasi-male. When you are among men sitting in a men's *shura* meeting as the only women present, you are not perceived as a traditional or "normal" woman. The setting itself is not according to traditional cultural practice; you are a guest of honour and treated as such. At the same time it is sometimes painstakingly clear that you are a woman, which can lead to confusing and potentially embarrassing situations. In many of the men's *shura* meetings my gender was at times forgotten since I am not a traditional woman and they would confide in me and talk directly to me and not the interpreter. In the interviews with men their background actually gave a more common understanding than with the women. The men I met often had more years in school than the women informants and had an easier time expressing themselves and reflecting on my questions. They also had better understanding of my questions due to more education and experience. Women in Afghanistan have under Taliban most of the time been confined to their homes with little communication to the outside world except closest family.

When I talked to the women either in group- or individual interviews my gender was equally important. A man would most likely not have been able to do the interviews and this kind of research in the Afghan setting in the first place. Being a woman it was "safe" to sit with me and answer my questions. At the same time this had its limits as even if we were all women, the role of women in Afghanistan is very differentiated by



class, status, age and number of children and then particularly sons. As a Western woman, educated at university level, married for five years with no children there was not really a common understanding between us.

In my view the interpreter's gender is equally as important as the interviewer, if not more. In the villages I had a male translator. In most of the villages this was not a problem, although it was clear that answering these questions to a man brought some humour into the situation. The men in the village were on the other hand more sceptical to leaving the women to talk with us. If the scepticism was due to my research or the interpreter's gender is not clear. The translator who helped me in Bamiyan is from Pashtun origin, which might have an impact, though he is well known in the communities and they trust him. In Jarukashan we were denied by the men to speak to the women alone, but it was difficult to ascertain whether this was due to the interpreter's sex or my questions.

In Kabul I had a woman that interpreted when interviewing women, and a man when interviewing the men. This made it possible to talk with the women alone and they could speak without being worried that someone from their village could disapprove. The women were not more open in the individual interviews than in the group-interviews, and being alone with a researcher and interpreter they did not know without their husbands was strange and intimidating to some of them.

The men however felt comfortable in their interviews and not having their wives there was not a problem. In hindsight there is always a question whether things could have been solved differently and the potential impact of this on the data. Finding a woman interpreter in the field in Bamiyan for example proved to be difficult and probably costly. More problematic was the responsibility I would bare for her security in a country still in conflict.

### ***3.3.2 Limitations***

My gathering of information has several limitations. The most severe is time. I had limited time in the villages, which does not allow for a mutual trust to establish and many questions might be answered in a different manner if there had been more time. The time of the people I wanted to interview was an equal problem. In summer there is a

lot of work to do maximise the warm and light summer months, and the informants stopped their daily activities to speak to us. In the evenings the people in the village were tired from a long days work making questions less popular. I found that interviews lasting more than one and a half hours were difficult. When one accounts for the time needed for translation, it is a very limited amount of time left for questions.

As my focus is on the impact of the Barefoot Solar Approach on rural women the questions are also about women. This proved to be somewhat difficult when relating to the men. Though their candidness and openness was still good, some men felt uncomfortable answering questions about women. Talking to women without the presence and influence of men was also a problem. In two of the villages it proved to be impossible to discuss with the women alone. This of course has an impact on the data. At the same time it was also impossible in Ladu to talk with the men alone creating the reverse problem.

Translation always constitutes a problem as there is always some confusion in questions and answers. Further the common language between me and the translators was English, which is not our mother tongue. This impairs continuity and flow in the conversations. More importantly the translator in the villages was male. This is a potential problem when asking questions to women, as they might not speak freely. Added to this the translator is Pashtun while the women in Bamiyan are Hazara. In Afghanistan many hostilities are related to ethnicity and the Pashtun and Hazara have a particular history of conflicts. Positively the women in the *shuras* that were married seemed not to feel inhibited by either the translator's gender or ethnicity. One woman even breastfed her baby in his company.

The men, on the other hand, were more sceptical to leaving the women alone with us. In Pir Dad the second village we visited Abdullah, who has worked with facilitating for the NCA, came to our aid and we were allowed more or less to see the women alone. He is well known in the villages and has experience and authority there. This made a huge difference in creating more of a discussion between the women. One problem, especially when the men were with the women, was that only a few of the people in the focus group talked. The men would very often take much of the attention and not leave natural room for the women to speak. It seemed in all meetings that some were talking on behalf of the others. The other villagers in the meetings only interrupted if they had a different perspective or something to add. There were never any

contradictions or disagreement to what the more outspoken said. But the group-interviews also provided safety in numbers, as many of the women were very shy, but felt encouraged by the others to talk.

### *3.3.3 Ethical Dilemmas*

As mentioned earlier my role as student cooperating with NCA was potentially confusing to the informants. I always pointed out that I was not an NCA employee, but doing research from the University of Oslo. This was always met with gratefulness for the travel I had made from Norway to talk and listen to their stories. Still there is a risk that the informants might feel that they receive nothing in return after sharing their problems. Regardless of my visit there are a lot of expectations and disappointment towards the international community and Afghan government. Therefore I asked permission in all the interviews to use what they told me in my research for NCA. They all said yes. Some were very eager to have confirmation that this would be possible for the NCA to use. I replied that copies of my master thesis will be sent to the NCA office in Kabul and Oslo and that the NCA were very interested in the research, and therefore was helping by providing resources in my fieldwork. I took their concern about NCA's access to my findings as a positive sign that they were more worried about the information being unknown than fear for compromising them. This also indicated that there was an understanding of my independence from NCA.

Cooperating with the NCA opened many doors and can hopefully give valuable information on women's lives in Afghanistan. This of course also has implications for my independence as well. The problem of being objective is more difficult. There is in my mind no doubt that aiding rural poor Afghan communities with solar energy is a good thing. On the other hand this paper is by no means an evaluation of the Barefoot Approach in Afghanistan, but research into the impact on the women beneficiaries.

There are probably also certain doors that were shut when I travelled and cooperated with the NCA instead of coming independently. In this case the "dilemma of access" is further related to a security issue in a troubled country. Afghanistan's history rooted in conflicts, foreign invasions and war also make Afghans sceptical towards foreigners claiming to have "their best interest" in mind. NCA has been involved in

Afghanistan for many years and enjoy trust within the communities, which made them positive towards participating in my research.

A further question of concern is anonymity. In the first village Jarukashan the women seemed very frightened and there was more scepticism. I asked if I could use the interviews and said I would leave out their names. I was granted permission to use the interview with the women, but only on the condition that their names would not be revealed. In the other villages I was gladly allowed to use the interviews and the question of anonymity was not brought up. I will not in my thesis use any original names from interviews in the villages and the BSEs. There is little chance that using the real names will create a problem, but the informants are discussing at times sensitive and personal matters. The cultural practice in Afghanistan is very strict and the social punishment for braking with traditional values and customs can be grave.

My decision is therefore that even if the permission to use names was given, it is ultimately my responsibility to leave them out. To make the reading easier I have given the informants fictive names. For the same reason I will not give out geographical information on where the BSEs outside Bamiyan are from. Bamiyan is the main focus of this case and therefore referring to who is from Bamiyan has an analytical purpose. Further I will in some cases when sensitive issues are discussed not reveal the source of information other then that it is from an individual interview with a BSE, or a villager from a *shura* meeting interview. This is to protect the informants from any attempts to cross-reference statements or finding the informants identity. Revealing this would very easily reveal the real identity to anyone who tries to find it, because information about BSEs and the Barefoot Approach is easy to find on the internet, which could when put together disclose much more than one might be able to foresee. At the same time it is on the whole very obvious to the NCA staff working on the project who is being interviewed. The translators are also from NCA so there is no anonymity there. But the informants know the NCA staff from the project and decided themselves in the interview what they would tell for the NCA to hear. There is a mutual trust based on successful cooperation on the Barefoot Approach and other projects between the NCA, the BSEs and local communities.

There is also an ethical dimension to the nature of the researcher's questions in the interview (Thagaard 2004). My questions were in a Norwegian cultural setting not very sensitive. In an Afghan setting it was obviously topics that were touching upon the

boundaries of what was appropriate. My translators had assured me on before hand that in Bamiyan the questions would not be problematic and if they felt unease they would let me know before asking them. In the interviews the conversation would at times deal with difficult and sensitive topics like violence against women. I never pressed on these issues and they were either the informants own interpretation of the question or a concern they wanted to raise. Revealing this kind of information in the interviews shows that these topics are very important for the informants, and also of course made an impression on me both in terms of openness and as serious issue.

## CHAPTER 4.0 LIGHT AND EMPOWERMENT

Before most of us were sitting in the dark. The rich could afford a generator on diesel. The others were sitting in the dark. Now we are happy and [solar energy] is the cheapest way (Soraya BSE).

Energy is important for women's health, work and education and for reducing the time women spend on household tasks. Indoor air pollution due to use of open fires for cooking and polluting sources of light cause considerable health damage to women and children.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter I will discuss the impact of the Barefoot Approach on women's social role. The implications of access to indoor and outdoor lighting for households modify the way women and men work, socialize and relax. The multiple uses the light offers beneficiaries in everyday life, alters the socially acknowledged rights and duties women have towards their family and community. I will narrate the informants' description of social change after implementation of solar energy in their community and or after being trained as woman BSE, contrasted with life as it was before. Implementation of solar energy is only one part of beneficiaries' life and subsequently there are other explanatory factors relevant to this social change, which I will try to include in this analysis. The Barefoot Approach's affect on women's life will be explored in relation to the process from women's disempowerment to empowerment. Empowerment was a phrase seldom used in the interviews. Instead I tried to investigate the changes in women's social role by exploring issues of new opportunities in everyday life, mobility and women's networking and new interaction in family and married life by using Friedmann and Kabear's theoretical approaches as framework of understanding.

### 4.1 The Barefoot Approach: Skills and Confidence

The Barefoot Approach in Afghanistan originates from collaboration between NCA and the Barefoot College in Tilonia, India. The Barefoot College encompasses a range of development schemes such as drinking water, girls' education, income generation and

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<sup>16</sup> Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Development Cooperation. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2007-2009:31.

electricity in rural communities. The college positions itself within the alternative development discourse by rejecting the idea that there are any experts in development, but work to provide poor rural communities with the skills and confidence to solve their own problems.<sup>17</sup> In the learning process issues of discrimination, injustice and inequality are addressed directly or indirectly by maintaining respect for collective and traditional knowledge, and an intrinsic belief in the democratic political process. Further it is a goal to ensure gender equality and not to discriminate on basis of caste, religion or political thinking<sup>18</sup>.

These values are transferred to the Barefoot Approach in Afghanistan. When the Barefoot project was initiated the NCA approached poor rural Afghan villages in the provinces of Badakshan, Faryab, Bamiyan, Uruzgan and Daikundi with information. Based on inclusive democratic principles the NCA and their partner-organisations organised village meetings. The villages through joint decision determined upon participation in the project, who would be chosen as BSEs and signed a community contract pledging to pay the BSEs for their maintenance work. The training of the BSEs secures a sustainable element in the project as they have the skill to repair the solar panels and batteries when something brakes.

The chosen villages represented the different majority ethnic groups in their provinces. The first BSEs sent to Tilonia were Hazaras from Daikundi and Bamiyan, Pashtuns from Uruzgan and Badakshan and Uzbeks from Faryab. The idea of bringing people from different ethnicities together in the aftermath of ethnic violence in Afghanistan was to start exchanging ideas and experiences cross-cutting regional and ethnic bonds. In Tilonia they lived in the same place and were trained together.

All of the Afghan BSEs were semi-literate or illiterate and the teaching was through demonstration and body language as the teachers were from Tilonia. The Barefoot College encourages a process of learning by doing, practical knowledge and skills rather than paper qualifications. According to the college's founder, Bunker Roy, it is a deliberate strategy to choose semi-literate or illiterate persons to be trained as BSEs, and further not to give diplomas after ended training.<sup>19</sup> The reason lies in the experience that without these precautions the BSEs will leave the rural villages to work in larger cities disrupting the project's sustainability and proving to communities the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.barefootcollege.org/index.htm>, 01.09.07

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.barefootcollege.org/conduct.htm>, 01.09.07

<sup>19</sup> Seminar held by Bunker Roy at Norad 15.05.07, in Oslo.

abilities of semi-literate and poor also provides confidence for others. The local communities have high expectations of the BSEs and they expand their job in the workshop to fixing radios and making new solar lanterns out of old diesel lanterns. Several of the BSEs have constructed machines for their villages for easting butter. Previously the women had to shake the milk inside an animal skin for 45 min, which was very hard work. Some of the women BSEs had been asked by the women in their villages to construct technical solutions to aid the making of thread and flat-woven *gilem* carpets. The women BSEs put great effort in doing this as it would be very beneficial to all the women and considered a great achievement.

Today all the Afghan BSEs have formed a joint civil society organisation and come together regularly to discuss experiences and problems, and to plan for future implementation of solar energy in new households and villages in their proximity. Due to the influx of refugees, especially from Iran and Pakistan, the need to extend solar energy to more households in already solar electrified villages is urgent in order to ensure stability and equality. As the word spreads, neighbouring villages also look to NCA for the possibility to solar electrify their villages. The first generation of trained BSEs collect information from surrounding villages together with the NCA in the planning of extending the Barefoot Approach.

The Barefoot College values and aims are in line with the empowerment approach where the beneficiaries control their development. The travel to Tilonia was meant to give multiple desirable effects of solidarity among different ethnicities and gender. The learning of technological skills stimulates confidence in ones abilities despite illiteracy and lack of experience. As I will discuss later, the training also promoted higher personal status when the BSEs returned to their local communities. They were viewed as strong men and women who had sacrificed safety and family for a long period in order to help their community. Their position in determining solar electrification of future villages also provides them influence and social status. Through their civil society organisation the BSEs have good opportunities to exchange their ideas or problems, keeping their knowledge and psychological empowerment up to date.

How new technology is introduced influence how people utilize and perceive it after implementation. The emphasis on preparing the communities before implementation and on engaging the community in the process has given my informants a sense of ownership and control. The choice of BSEs was mainly made by casting vote.



Still the women had been excluded from the decision-making according to my informants on basis that this was something they would naturally want. Nevertheless the women perceived this as community engagement and felt part of the development.

#### *4.1.1 Building Women's Confidence through Technological Training*

When the Barefoot Approach has been implemented in other countries the BSEs are usually women (Synnevåg 05.07.07). In the Afghan context this would be very difficult and probably unwise. Instead a married couple or otherwise related, in the community that were suited for the project were selected. The relation between the man and the woman means that the tradition of *purdah* is exercised through the man functioning as *mahram*. For rural Afghan women to leave her family and community for months without male relatives to ensure her reputation and safety is very unlikely.

The gender perspective in this project includes women in the implementation process through a community decision, and in the installing and maintenance of the solar technology as resource persons. The realisation of this gender perspective in Afghan rural context is practically revolutionary. The Jarukashan village exemplifies this, as women there never leave the village even to go the *bazaar* or health clinics, but Maliha the local BSE has spent six months without her husband and children in India. The women in her village said they had seen a change in Maliha after she was trained in Tilonia and that this was a benefit to the other women and the gender relations in the community;

She has gained in confidence and can now talk to people and do things. Maliha is an example [for us]... we have more influence now and the men are feeling it (woman from women's *shura* interview in Jarukashan 09.07.07).

The women were proud of her and felt encouraged by her. In addition they saw Maliha's knowledge as a benefit to them in the *shura*. This was supported in the meeting with the men in Jarukashan, especially by her husband and Maliha's brother Khaled (also a BSE). According to them she used to have trouble expressing herself, but now she talked freely and participated in the women's *shura* discussions (interview men's *shura* in Jarukashan 09.07.07). The women in Ladu had similar experiences after Leilah was trained as BSE. According to the other women Leilah induced confidence and pride on

herself and to some extent to all women in the community. She herself said in the interview she used to feel that she previously; “couldn’t even think properly, but now the brain works!” (Interview women’s *shura* 11.07.07). This had given her courage and self-esteem. Increased confidence, status and verbal skills were something all the women BSEs said to have experienced. According to Friedmann psychological empowerment gained through confidence and awareness creates self-confident behaviour. This has positive impact on the individuals’ access to social power and political power. Self-confidence is needed to give voice to opinions and take collective action in relation to local political decision-making. Verbal skills are also related to empowerment, as being verbally eloquent is important for self-esteem and community participation (Karl 1995). The BSE Soraya’s description of her improved verbal skills and self-efficacy post-Taliban is a good illustration;

When you are sitting for long years at home [Taliban era] and you could not see anybody. You do not have confidence in yourself and do not know how to talk to [other people], because you have not seen people. But when you go and receive training and know about this [solar energy technology] and other things you get your confidence. You know how to talk and how to solve problems (Interview 17.07.07).

The fact that women learn technology probably has a special effect, as this is a skill normally outside both many Western and Afghan women’s traditional domain. The Barefoot Approach thereby challenges the gender hierarchy from an unexpected angle. Since BSEs receive wages, they become important assets in the household economy.

The first generation of BSEs train new BSEs for other villages, which means they receive additional compensation for their time teaching and their communities receive income for renting out their homes to the BSE students. According to Synnevåg the Barefoot approach, in addition to implement sustainable solar energy in rural areas, also has the added value of creating a livelihood for the BSEs with waged employment from its own community and repairing other neighbouring villages’ solar panels (Interview 15.07.07). Through other projects like the NSP program more and more villages acquire solar energy, but most of these solar projects implemented without the NCA lack the element of skilled personnel to repair and maintain equipment in the villages (Interview with men’s *shura* in Pir Dad 10.07.07). This creates livelihood opportunities for the BSEs, because the other villages come to them for assistance when equipment is broken. The income of the BSEs potentially also benefits other family

members who are in difficult financial situations, as the extended family functions as an important social security net in Afghanistan.

#### 4.2 Making Everyday Life Easier? The Benefits of Solar Energy

Obtaining electricity is seen as a compelling symbol of development and a step towards modernisation (Winther 2005). In the eyes of authorities, NGOs and other institutions providing electricity is a way of including the rural population in a development process:

The electrification of the townships was a compelling symbol of inclusion, a sign that that Africans too, were to be hooked up with the 'new world society' (Ferguson 1999:242, in Winther 2005:297).

During my visits to the villages it was evident that having solar energy had made deep changes in village life. The informants expressed their luck of having proper light and the feeling of hope for the future was increasing. The best impression of the light's affect on community life was gathered in the villages where I had meetings with the women and men's *shura* and I could visit peoples' home and observe. The first topic was always the benefits. This was an easy subject to start with and set us off on a positive start. None of the informants with solar energy in their home were dissatisfied; instead a whole range of benefits were mentioned and this was brought up repeatedly throughout the interviews. The benefits were generally on the household level though they considered the benefit for the whole community as very important. When I asked about benefits specifically for women, both men and women thought women to be most affected, because their responsibilities were inside the home where the light was installed. Women now had an easier time doing domestic chores, child care and handicrafts and they could more safely move around the village at night to visit others, do the milking and washing with the aid of the portable lanterns. Cleaning and maintaining the old lanterns was also part of women's responsibility, a time-consuming task now gone.

#### 4.2.1 New Livelihood Opportunities

The economic benefits of the solar energy were considered the most important by the informants and the NCA staff. The informants talked with much enthusiasm about the increase in their household income. The new opportunities to increase the households' finances were related to; first savings in shifting from diesel for lanterns to solar energy, and secondly the light extending the hours per day to do income generating activities. The common source of light in rural Afghanistan is diesel used in lanterns, but it is important to note that a considerable amount of the rural population in Afghanistan is without domestic light because they lack means to buy diesel.

In the solar electrified villages facilitated by NCA, each household is obliged to pay a monthly salary to the BSEs. The sum varies from village to village, but is approximately equivalent to half monthly amount spent on diesel. Though the solar constitutes an expense on already stressed household budgets the economic opportunities outweigh the expenses for most of the beneficiaries. In Pir Dad and Habashi they reported that they saved about 2500 Afs<sup>20</sup> a year, which is approximately a doubled yearly budget (Interview men's *shura* in Pir Dad 10.07.07). In Ladu they reported that their income had increased by a 90 % (Interview men's *shura* in Ladu 11.07.07). This was explained by children now working longer hours on carpet-weaving as the solar energy provides light in evenings. They estimated that they worked ten instead of five hours a day and the carpet-weaving was the main way to generate income for subsistence besides farming for food.<sup>21</sup> With the exception of Jarukashan about 80 % of the families in the village were said to be involved in carpet-weaving. All my informants also mentioned that women now could do more household handicrafts such as tablecloth, *gilem*, *namad* or hand-woven bags for collecting *butah*, which is women's responsibility. Few of the women sold any of these works, though they were considering this possibility. Handicrafts can be used in exchange for important household necessities between villagers so any excess of such products is beneficial.

The BSEs in the individual interviews expressed that their economic resources had also increased because of their salary as BSEs. Most of the women BSEs saw the economic benefit from the project as most important. Soraya's answer reflects this:

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<sup>20</sup> Common word for Afghans the official Afghan currency. One dollar was 50 Afs in July 2007.

<sup>21</sup> The income of remittance from relatives abroad was not brought up in the interviews.

For my own benefit it is that the people have to pay money to me, once month or maybe after three months. Some people do not pay because they are poor, but those who pay are my benefit, and that others have light. It is very good for me and very good for the people because they are poor and cannot afford diesel. This is easier and cheapest way to have electricity (Interview 17/7-07).

The importance of the economic benefit was also reflected in the BSE Farzana's negative answer to my question concerning change in status; "the benefit is very good for the others in the village, but less for me, because I am working for free without payment", (Interview 16.07.07). She and her husband's frustrations were due to financial problems. They received payment from the community one year in advance. When the money was spent the community would not pay more. In addition to this NCA will not receive any more funding from the Norwegian government for this region. This constitutes a problem, as when the Barefoot Approach is not extended in this province there are no second generation BSEs to train, resulting in less income opportunities. For her the frustration over financial problems overshadowed the change of status she later in the interview revealed to have felt.

The importance of facilitating aid projects that relieve poverty is shown in the fact that Afghanistan has the dubious honour of being included in the UN ranking of Least Developed Countries<sup>22</sup>. Afghans die everyday due to lack of basic necessities such as clean water, housing and food. Creating livelihoods for the BSEs and their communities are therefore an important element in the NCA Barefoot Approach, and goes further than the mere vision of providing electricity. A story from one of the men illustrates the relation between poverty and human rights in general, and women especially: In the men's *shura* meeting in one of the villages the problem of poverty was discussed in relation to energy consumption. Prior to the implementation of solar energy several in the village had no means to buy diesel for lanterns. To avoid darkness the usual strategy was to borrow money from the Kuchi people, the Pashtun nomads in Afghanistan. This was a very serious issue in this village as several households had in the past been indebted to the Kuchis.

Debt is major problem in Afghanistan as decades of war ravaged the economy, and the system of *mahr* has made vulnerable groups dependent on private loans (Klijn & Pain 2007, Moghadam 1992). The interest rate is often extremely high, and the men

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.mincom.gov.bd/images/additional\\_images/List%20of%20LDC.pdf](http://www.mincom.gov.bd/images/additional_images/List%20of%20LDC.pdf), 03.03.08

informants explained that within one year the loan usually had doubled in size making it impossible to pay back. The solution for many has been to sell their land. Also food and oil from animals were usual means of paying interests. This decreases dramatically the households' food security and makes the family dependent on new loans that further increase their vulnerability. On some occasions in this particular village the Kuchis would take the indebted family's land by force if loans could not be paid. Conflicts over land between the Kuchis and the Hazaras in Bamiyan go back since consolidation of the modern Afghan state around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ICG 2003a). The Hazaras in the Bamiyan area were conquered by Pashtun tribes and their valley and grazing land was confiscated. This situation prevailed until the Soviet invasion in 1978 when this area became semi-autonomous. The Hazaras reclaimed their land and stopped the Kuchis from following their normal migratory routes.

I asked the men in this village directly if this had resulted in the need to give daughters in marriage to settle debts. Reports and research have revealed that this is not an uncommon practice in Afghanistan both in terms of settling conflicts, paying debt and to alleviate family poverty (Amnesty 2005, Klijn & Pain 2007, ICG 2003a, Moghadam 1992). According to the *shura* interviewed one man in the village had a while ago, in their words, sold his daughter for 70 kg of barley. It was obvious from our conversation that this was not something anyone would do with a light heart and they perceived it as the last way out. There were according to them incidents in the area where the Kuchis had refused to give loans before they had a wedding contract with one of the Hazara families' girls. This type of resolving financial problems has a high price, both in the sacrifice of the girl's human rights and the continuation of an ethnic conflict between Hazaras and Pashtun Kuchis. The positive aspect of their story was that their economy had improved to a level where they no longer needed to borrow money from the Kuchis or "had to sell their children anymore". Still the rate of child marriages in exchange for food or money has allegedly increased in Afghanistan as a result of the higher food prices due to global food crisis and general poverty.<sup>23</sup>

Besides the end of exchanging daughters for food or money there are difficulties of asserting direct economic empowerment of women. I did not see the division of money in the household between women and men as an appropriate question to ask, though I originally had planned to raise this issue. How finances are distributed among

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<sup>23</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/7342902.stm>, 15.04.08

family members is part of the private domain and at least formally seen as men's responsibility and prerogative. From conversations with male NCA staff it was definitely seen as judgemental to question men's altruism in dividing assets in the family. Men have the religious and moral duty to provide for women and children in the Afghan society and acting otherwise is seen as losing honour and status (Dupree 1990, Moghadam 2003). However, I touched upon this subject briefly when discussing with the BSE Khaled (Maliha's brother) (Interview 09.07.07). He meant that her salary as BSE was seen as an important contribution to the family economy and that her husband was pleased because he was rich due to her. Still the family was seen as one economic unit where individual gains belonged to all members.

Jamal from the NCA was convinced that the salary was an empowerment for women no matter if a man BSE or women BSE earned it, since poverty is the most disempowering of all (Interview 05.07.07). At meetings in the villages, Jamal and Abdullah would point out the children of the BSEs who often were better dressed and looked well nourished compared to the other village children. There is still no certainty that better economy will benefit the whole family to the same extent. Wylie uses the term 'feminized poverty' to describe the socio-economic position of women in Afghanistan. The extreme poverty dominating many Afghans everyday life hinders the realisation of rights in the present socio-economic context. Both cultural limitations and the war situations have disenfranchised women. One example is that women's rights to maternal care and literacy cannot be fulfilled because of lack of functioning medical and educational infrastructure, caused by government priority, and security and financial problems (Wylie 2003). The legitimacy for women to claim their rights, or as Kabeer notes their ability to make strategic life choices, are impossible if the basic needs of the household or community are not met.

Not all beneficiaries are part of the economic growth outlined by the men's *shura* in Bamiyan. There are indications that single women and the poorest are losing out, which expands the economic inequality in small rural societies. In three of the villages I met with women from female-led households, which are characterized by a female member who is responsible both in decision-making and for economic support (Klijn & Pain 2007). Female-led households are one of the most vulnerable groups in Afghanistan and the women I met from this group were either widows with male relatives who supported them or in a dire situation because of their own or their

husband's handicap. In the interviews with the *shuras* it was clear that poor women who had no husband to help them financially did not contribute or paid less to the monthly salaries for the BSEs. This was also confirmed in the individual interviews with BSEs from other places in Afghanistan.

Poor households and salaries for BSEs was a difficult subject to raise because the popular notion and ideal is that the local community helps out in giving these women and their children help. The men's *shura* in Jarukashan originally claimed these women were relieved of paying after a collective decision in the community (Interview 09.07.07). Later I learned that the women of the female-led households did pay whenever they had money. In one of the villages there was also a discussion about removing the solar panels from female-led households that could not pay. On the other hand many of the households with widows had sons, brothers or other family members who supported them in some way. Obviously the community might present widows and women as particularly vulnerable in order to receive more help from the NCA. Likewise they also have incentives to present themselves as good Samaritans as solidarity among kin and tribe is an important moral value in the Afghan society.

In Ladu, which is part of a conglomerate of villages where some do not have solar energy, one of the widows in the women's *shura* meeting illustrated the impact of the solar on families with few resources. Being a widow in a house that had implemented solar energy, she had no money for diesel and spent every evening without light. This was common for most poor prior the NCA project. Spending much of one's life in complete darkness affects opportunities for income-generating activities, but also has an impact on psychological well being and mental health. The men's *shura* in Habashi pointed out another vulnerable group in their communities; families with children under the age where it's possible to aid the family financially through carpet-weaving. According to the men's *shura* the children's carpet-weaving was "a matter of life or death" and they hoped that by working hard the next generation could escape child labour (Interview 10.07.07).

The Barefoot Approach has good strategies for sustainability by including the whole community and training skilled personnel to maintain the solar technology. On the other hand the project is also vulnerable to the economy of the communities. During my fieldwork it was soon apparent that the BSEs had problems collecting their salaries. Most of the time poverty was given as an explanation, especially in relation to female-



led households. Other times salaries were withdrawn because the Barefoot project had become entangled in internal disputes between powerful members of the communities. When the BSEs are not paid they might seek employment and opportunities elsewhere. It is further not unlikely that withdrawn salaries might hurt the women BSEs the most, as the man is perceived to be his family's breadwinner. Gender inequality in income despite the same skills and work is not an uncommon feature in most societies. It might be necessary to adapt the Barefoot Approach to the needs of the most vulnerable in the communities. The balance between not inflicting aid dependency and the need to assist poor communities further is not an easy task. Nevertheless, removing solar panels from people who are the poorest in a community, mixed with the fact that there is an increasing influx of refugees who are without solar energy, might provoke hostility in small communities and distrust towards aid agencies.

#### *4.2.2 Women and Children's Education: Benefits of Surplus Time*

An important aspect of the solar energy and women's social role is the impact on education. Women are affected both as mothers who wish for a good life for their children and because girls historically have been recurrently denied the opportunities of education. At present, primary and lower elementary school is a constitutional right and provided for free by the government (Hunte 2006). Still there are expenses for school materials, which in combination with the time spent away from helping the family making a livelihood, results in poor families being reluctant to send children to school. The possibility for children to combine carpet-weaving and school, due to extra work hours, has removed one of the economic obstacles against children's education. The children in the villages of this case study attend school either in the morning or in the afternoon while the rest of the day they help their families.

Education is an important national responsibility and together with health-care one of the main areas where the individual meets the state. Ensuring sustainable peace and development in Afghanistan is contingent on building mutual trust between the state and the citizens by providing the population with positive experiences through state provided social services. This is especially needed in rural decentralised areas. Though higher enrolment in school is one of the positive highlights since the 2001 intervention, there are vast regional disparities and girls are disproportionately represented (Hunte

2006). There are several reasons why girls receive less education than boys; distant school location, fear of negative gossip and traditions that girls should help their mothers at home are some of them (Hunte 2006). Though both girls and boys weave carpets the responsibility of production lies on women. They also supply the household with handicraft items and transfer the skill to younger women in the family, which steals time from other activities. Some places in Afghanistan the security situation also makes it difficult for girls to go alone to school. In the Southern region of Afghanistan there have been incidents of murder and kidnapping of children on the way to school (Hunte 2006).

My informants did not admit to a gender division or security problems, in fact they specified that girls now had more time for school, because they could help their mothers in the evening and go to school at daytime. Nevertheless girls in Pir Dad go less to school than girls in the other villages. At first they told me that the girls went to school just like the boys. Later it was revealed that girls did not go to school when families reside at summer pasture, because it was too far for them to go and because “girls are by nature weak” (Interview women’s *shura* 10.07.07). The school is located in the main village and several hours walk away for a child. Schools in Afghanistan are closed much of the winter, because the cold makes it difficult for the children who are often undernourished and tired to go far distances. In reality this means that if the girls are not taught the curriculum at home they are left behind the boys in learning.

In Pir Dad they were considering bringing a woman teacher to the summer pasture to teach the girls there. There were only men teachers in the public school and they implied that this also was a reason for keeping the girls in the village. Also in the other villages the need for a separate school for girls or a woman teacher was brought up. The presence of male teachers combined with the fear of negative social sanctions by people gossiping has also been found by others to be significant factors in keeping girls at home:

A primary concern for families is the strengthening of their social networks, which is often accomplished through the marriage of their daughters. If a girl does not conform to the traditional ideal of the secluded female and attends school in the public sphere, who will marry her? (Hunte 2006:6).

The solar light plays a significant role in women's education as well. All the villages previously had a literacy course<sup>24</sup> for women, and in Jarukashan the women's *shura* gave courses in handicrafts for the young women. The courses only lasted six months, which the women felt was too short. However they continued their learning as a group on their own initiative. With the surplus time in the evenings such schemes are possible and when facilitating opportunities for the women to attend such courses it enables them to organise themselves, and valuable help and information is contributed. The literacy courses included hygiene, child upbringing, pregnancy and maternal care in the course material. In the *shura* meeting rooms in Bamiyan there were posters with teaching material with graphic descriptions of health issues. The men and women equally saw these literacy courses for women as very beneficial for the community. One of the results mentioned was that now practically all the villagers boiled the water before drinking it, which prevented infections and diarrhoea.

The access to education for women and girls is important to obtain substantial empowerment that will pass the test of time. Friedmann refers mainly to obtaining knowledge, skills and information to provide human resources enhancing economic prospects. The unemployment rate in Afghanistan is frequently mentioned as high and still rising, which renders small hope of job opportunities compared to the time invested into education for small farming families. Still according to NAC literacy education is an important part in enabling women's confidence (Interview 28.03.07). Being able to read anything from price-tags in the market to health brochures about your children's health provide women agency and control of their lives. The empirical finding of positive correlations between literacy and education for women, and family health and well-being, is well established in development research and policy (Karl 1995). The other dimension of this is as Damsleth and Dupree describes, how Afghan women suffered mental health problems when they felt they were unable to be good mothers and care for their family due to poverty and war (Damsleth 2003, Dupree 1990). Any facilitation attempting women's empowerment in Afghanistan need to take the women's concerns for family in to the matter to have an impact. Creating surplus time for education is an evidence-based and positive approach to women's empowerment.

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<sup>24</sup> Provided by a NGO

### 4.2.3 Relief from Darkness: the Health Benefits of Solar Energy

One of the easiest visible positive impacts of the Barefoot Approach are the health benefits when switching from polluting sources of indoor light to clean solar power. The villages in Bamiyan reported improved health related to less respiratory problems, sore eyes, headaches, dizziness and trouble with tuberculosis. The indoor smoke from the lanterns had particularly been problematic for the children and elderly. Without relating it to health the informants also mentioned that the women's cooking was greatly improved as they now had light in the kitchen. According to the men the food tasted better, which reflected well on the women's status. This also adds to health improvement as the food earlier often was raw, which meant it could be infested with parasites or bacteria as salmonella. The women in Pir Dad expressed that they thought the solar energy was good, because they had been provided with good and healthy technology (Interview women's *shura* in Pir Dad 10.07.07). In their own words this technology made them more civilized.

The health effect of the Barefoot Approach is also related to the increased income of the households. This gives prospects for more and better food. Malnutrition is according to Human Development Report 2006 a vast problem in Afghanistan, especially for children. The under-five mortality rate in 2004 was 257 per 1000 live births. Children under five suffering from moderate and severe malnutrition were 39 % in 1996-2005.<sup>25</sup> In Jarukashan I learned from the villagers that a recent survey of the Red Cross indicated that 50 % of the children in the village had eye problems because of vitamin and mineral deficiency, which impeded their learning in school (Interview men's *shura* 09.07.07). The distance from Bamiyan city and the altitude of about 3300 m above sea level makes it impossible to transport or grow fresh fruit and vegetables. Jarukashan also have economic problems due to lack of resources and equipment for carpet-weaving.

When asked how they spent their increased household budget, several of the informants reported that access to financial resources had provided more food. In Pir Dad one of the families said that they could now buy sugar (Interview women's *shura* 10.07.07). As the breakfast in the villages consisted of only tea, the addition of sugar provides an important source of calories before the day's work. In Habashi they reported

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<sup>25</sup> Human Development Report 2006

that they were able to eat cooked meals with rice, beans and wild vegetables once a day (Interview women's *shura* 10.07.07). Earlier their diet consisted of tea, naan made from wheat, and milk products such as yogurt and cream. A cooked meal was generally few times a week and meat only for special occasions. This diet is still common for many in the villages. Even for the informants with relatively good resources the prospect of buying vegetables and fruit from the market was claimed to be too expensive. In contrast some of the men would buy chewing gum or school books to encourage their children. Necessities like clothes were also mentioned as something the men felt they better could provide for their family after the introduction of solar energy.

In addition to overall health benefits the solar energy has specific benefits in relation to women, because of their responsibilities in caring for house, children and livestock. The women's chores of cooking, cleaning clothes, making handicrafts, keeping the offspring of the animals, milking and preparing dairy products is hard physical work. Women with children start the day's work after prayer at 4 a.m. and end the day by making the dough for tomorrow's naan-bread at around 11 p.m. Young women at around 13 years living with her parents start the workday at 6 a.m. and end it around 11 p.m (Interview women's *shura* Pir Dad 10.07.07). Sustainable and environmentally friendly energy solutions that ease women's work burden gives surplus time for other activities important to health such as education, visiting health care facilities etc. In addition relieving hard work is beneficial to a person's health in itself.

The main part of Afghan women's health problems are related to their reproductive role. In the period 1997-2005 only 14 % of Afghan women had skilled attendance when giving birth and the maternal mortality in 2000 was 1.900 per 100.000 live births, a ratio only higher in Sierra Leone.<sup>26</sup> Each of the villages I visited had at least one *daiah*<sup>27</sup> that assisted at births. The solar energy also provides women proper light during the birth itself (Interview 05.07.07). In the villages closer to Bamiyan city the women who had "pain or problems" would seek help at a health clinic during the pregnancy, but the women in Jarukashan never went to health clinics. When someone is seriously ill it is common for all the villages to send someone to sit at the road to stop a car passing and ask for a lift to the hospital. Still there is hours of drive on humpy roads with minefields on the sides and therefore impossible to do during pregnancy and birth.

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<sup>26</sup> Human Development Report 2006

<sup>27</sup> Traditional midwife without formal training.

Pregnancies and births for poor Afghan women are also frequently problematic due to small bodies because of malnutrition and early marriage.<sup>28</sup> This gives higher risks for complications and maternal and prenatal death. Especially one of the *daihs* in Pir Dad was regretful of the tradition as in her experience giving birth it is dangerous for mother and the baby at such a young age. Pir Dad and Habashi had the lowest age of female marriage ranging from 11-16 (Interviews women's *shuras* 10.07.07). Marriage after 15 was considered old for girls. The median age of marriage for the women BSEs is 16,5 years and the men BSEs 24 years. The solar energy has, as mentioned, potential to decrease the health problems related to malnutrition, but has also possible affects on early marriage if surplus time and financial resources provide opportunities for education. The introduction of girls' education has given empirical evidence that women's age of marriage and birth of first child is delayed (Karl 1995). On the other hand tradition is given as an explanation of the age of marriage and it seems this weighs stronger than what the women wish for the younger generation:

Our daughters when they are small, they are in our hands and responsibility. When they are 14 they get married and then it depends on the husband if he allows them to go [to school] or not (women's *shura* in Pir Dad 10.07.07).

Only long-term changes in Afghans' perception on appropriate age for marriage or suitable total education for girls can alter traditions informing communities of when a girl becomes a woman and therefore is ready for marriage.

The solar energy also frees time for watching television or listening to radio, which the government uses for information campaigns that relates to health and family well-being. Despite poverty, electricity has given several families access to radio, TV and DVD. About 60 % of Afghan families are believed to own a radio.<sup>29</sup> The women who had access to TV expressed that this empowered them because it provided a place of learning. The TV explained and gave understanding of important aspects of life; when they should get married, *mahr* and educational information about hygiene and literacy. One of the local *daihs* in Pir Dad explained that she had learned about the birth on TV and obtained useful information on the delivery, the baby's size, weight and other important information (Interview women's *shura* 10.07.07).

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=72775>, 17.11.07

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.umsl.edu/services/govdocs/wofact97/4.htm>, 15.04.08

Friedmann only indirectly mention health as a part in households' empowerment, nevertheless women in Afghanistan and particularly in rural areas, health inflicts serious problems and quite often death for them and their children. Ensuring access to good health is an important contributor to women's empowerment and the implementation of sustainable energy sources has multiple good effects on women's health. A logical next step would be to aid solutions for heating and cooking. This would increase the benefits of the solar energy further, as collecting *butah* is time-consuming and causes problems with mountain erosion and unhealthy indoor smoke. *Butah* and firewood are also scarce commodities. The BSE Soraya explained from her community that there was not sufficient fuel for heating at winter-time from animal dung, *butah* and trees (Interview 17.07.07). Consequently the winter was often so cold that children and elderly became seriously ill. Fetching firewood was the women's responsibility in her area and they spent a lot of time and effort gathering fuel for the winter. This was in Soraya's view a great frustration for women. This also relates to women's mental health, which is contingent on a sense of being able to care for children and family. Research on women's health in the Middle East has shown that depression and suicide are more frequent among Muslim women than men, because factors as forced marriage, polygamy, living with parents-in-law and societies biased expectations of women as having primarily function as mothers and wives (Hansen 2008).

#### *4.2.4 Women's "New" Empowerment and the Curse of Time*

The basic-needs approach presented in 1976 included electricity as a necessity (Friedmann 1992). The implementation of solar energy in the communities of this case-study has brought material changes in the beneficiaries' lives, which has opened up space for increased access to resources needed for empowerment of households. For the 'regular' household the Barefoot Approach practically fits a text-book description of empowerment by enabling households control over the resources for their development, and improvement in their living conditions and livelihood strategies. Applying Friedmann's approach of the women beneficiaries' empowerment has increased their bases of social power as shown in Friedmann's figure on page 24. The Barefoot Approach has provided women (and households) new opportunities for: a) surplus time as every day tasks have become easier to do with the aid of light and because the

responsibility of cleaning and maintaining lanterns is gone, b) knowledge and skills through literacy courses and children's education, and in the case of the BSEs technological training, c) appropriate information through media and education, d) new instruments for work and livelihood such as portable lanterns, household lamps and machines for yeasting butter, and e) financial resources by saving costs for diesel and more time for income generating activities.

Afghanistan is in need of extensive aid provisions to alleviate poverty. As Afghan women are particularly disadvantaged compared to men, aid projects that seek women's empowerment are particularly important. When women's life conditions are improved in this way they have a space to use their agency to advocate for their own and children's rights, because the impediments of hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy and lack of time is removed or lessened. There is little doubt of the significance of the positive aspects the implementation of the solar energy has had on the women beneficiaries. Nevertheless there are also still major constraints before women experience substantial empowerment in the sense of as Kabeer points out ability to make strategic life choices. The benefits of the solar as discussed above do not benefit all households to the same extent. Female-led households are representative of such a disadvantaged group. Households with very few resources might not have had the means to pay for diesel in the first place, which make the monthly salary to the BSEs a new expense. On the other hand if there is enough human resources in the household to utilize the light to increase income-generating activities this will outweigh the costs. People without such resources have so far been able to keep the solar energy and benefit from having proper light on equal basis as the rest of their community. Poverty is disempowering and on household level the access to financial resources for many of the communities has increased considerably after the implementation of the Barefoot Approach.

Friedmann argues that albeit special challenges for women's empowerment that increased access to power for household is also relevant to women's struggles (Friedmann 1992). Still he mentions that women often are excluded from health-care and education and their reproductive role means they have disadvantages relating to health and time-consumption. The women informants had insufficient health-care either because of the practise of *purdah*, transport problems or just lack of health services in their area. The example of Pir Dad shows that girls are still not given the same opportunities to go to school as boys. Apart from these challenges the empowerment of



households does not necessarily empower women in the same way. Resources attained by the household are divided between its members on the basis of gender and age (Friedmann 1992). The general trend of development discourse to perceive men to be less altruistic in dividing resources within their families than women is not applicable with Afghan culture and norms. Still, whether such division benefits all women of the household it does not necessarily empower the female side to the same extent as men if they have little influence on household decision-making. Even when women have the resources and agency to exercise choice, the achievements of their agency can be subversive to gender equality and that way work against women's empowerment.

### 4.3 Network, Family and Marriage-relationship

Introducing light in the home does not only benefit women's health, educational and financial situation, but alters peoples' social life by providing new mobility and time to tend to extended networks, family and marriage relationships. The self-efficacy of the women BSEs and dispersion of confidence among the women beneficiaries potentially changes social life qualitatively. This was one of the main issues I brought up in the interviews, and it was a desired topic with the informants as it was not earlier touched upon by the NCA. All the beneficiaries felt electricity had changed their interaction within the family and between extended family, neighbours and friends. TV and radio were new element in many informants' daily life, which provided possibilities for information, knowledge and entertainment. Most stressed by the informants were the possibilities to fulfil domestic chores and the encouraging effect on the family relations.

#### *4.3.1 Scaring the Wolf Away: Women's New Mobility and Networks*

An important feature affecting women in Afghanistan's everyday life is the subject of freedom of mobility. The "sexual geography" of men in the public sphere and women's confinement to the private sphere made the question of my women informants' mobility central. Friedmann does not mention mobility among factors of access to social power, but for Afghan women limited social mobility results in lack of access to health-care, education, income generating activities and violates their human rights (Moghadam

2003). Before, during and after the Taliban the practice of *purdah* limited women's mobility. Still women living in rural areas generally had more freedom of movement because of mutual trust between members of small communities and because women's contribution to agriculture and livelihood favours practical solutions. The use of *chaddari* or full enveilment has traditionally been associated with women in the higher strata in Muslim societies (McLeod 1991). This was an important factor in the upper class identity as opposed to rural and working women who because of hard labour could not wear all enveloping veils.

The women in Jarukashan illustrate the seclusion of many Afghan women. They never set out far beyond the village according to the men (Interview men's *shura* 09.07.07). The women themselves said they did not go to the *bazaar* or local clinic, but sometimes they would go to visit relatives or the village of their fathers place (Interview women's *shura* 09.07.07). Often the women of Jarukashan marry within a short distance. Visits to relatives were always in the company of a *mahram*. In reality, apart from Maliha no woman has left the village or close surrounding areas, except in marriage. It seemed likely that the restrictions for women's movement in Jarukashan were related to women's reputation and chastity. Maliha explained in the individual interview that the men's *shura* were thinking of tearing down their new meeting house built by Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Interview 17.07.07). This was because the meeting house, which also functioned as a village guest house, had been placed near the local shrine where the women went alone. The shrine and the ADB meeting house is a few minutes from the village and in eyesight. Still the men saw it as problematic that men staying in this new house could see the women walking alone. In Pir Dad women's mobility is comparable to Jarukashan and the women seldom move outside the boundaries of the village or summer pasture.

In Habashi and Ladu the mobility of women was different. Both villages are in remote areas, but they are closer to Bamiyan city, which probably has an influence. The women travel by bus to the *bazaar* or local health clinic for vaccines during pregnancies or if there was a "problem" (Interview women's *shuras* 10.07.07, 11.07.07). On the occasion of weddings the women had started to go in groups without a *mahram* to buy the wedding clothes or attire of the bride as "men do not always understand what women want". According to the men informants there has been a change in women's mobility, as women are becoming less frightened and more independent in doing errands to

pasture, relatives or the *bazaar* without the escort of men (Interviews men's *shuras* 10.07.07, 11.07.07).

After the women BSEs' stay at Barefoot College in India, the perceptions on whether women could leave the village for education had changed. None of the villages in Bamiyan, or the BSEs in general, have high schools. Now both men and women said they would consider sending their daughters away for higher education or to learn skills. Still marriage was seen as more important than education if the girl reached a certain age. This is the case with Maliha's daughter. During the daughter's childhood they were refugees in Iran, where she received no education. She now went to school in the village, but if she continues her education she will be 26 before she can go to university. Her father and mother said they will not send her to high school, because she might not get married if she waits that long (Interview men's *shura* 09.07.07 and with Maliha 17.07.07).

In contrast, an unmarried teacher in her late teens, who is member of the women's *shura* in Ladu, has concrete plans to go to the university in Kabul to study physics and mathematics (Interview women's *shura* 11.07.07). She will then live with relatives. It was emphasized by the women's *shura* that a girl seeking higher education was only a possibility when the parents were educated, resourceful and open minded. The relation between the Barefoot Approach's contribution to increased opportunities for girls education, and the changed perception of the value of girls education, has potential to enhance women's mobility and thereby empowerment to exercise agency in strategic life choices. One of the women in Ladu said; "when we do not leave the village we are blind". When I later asked their view on whether their daughters could leave the village to learn the answer was promptly; "yes, of course we do not want our daughters to be blind!" (Interview women's *shura* 10.07.07). The realisation of their ambitions still depends on changing the practise of girls marrying at a young age.

Another and more immediate effect of the implementation of the solar energy is the increased mobility for women within the village. The solar energy plays an important role in this as the houses of the villages are lit by both indoor and outdoor lighting. With the aid of the portable lantern villagers visit other families' houses in the evening. There they discuss, plan and take decisions collectively. In the opinion of the informants the relations between neighbours and friends have become more visible and important. The sharp electrical light outside the houses gives the village a new character

in the evenings as houses and alleys are lit. Another dimension to this was that the outdoor lighting and portable lanterns scares the wolf away, making house-calls after sunset safe. Consequently the women felt safer when they went to milk the livestock after dark.

I was interested in the wolf stories, because it seemed that Jamal and Abdullah thought this a naïve fear. Abdullah offered the explanation that the women were frightened of the dark because they are often superstitious in this area. The women told me that the wolf only attacks when in packs and always far from the village. In Afghanistan the wolf is considered to be an endangered species and illegal to hunt, but the animal have allegedly been responsible for deadly attacks on humans in the South<sup>30</sup>. Winther's experience from implementation of electricity in Uroa in Zanzibar revealed a difference in the villagers' new sense of safety after dark. The older men in the village in particular named the electric street lamps 'security light', because it scared away larger animals and evil spirits (Winther 2005). The Uroeans believed evil spirits could take any shape and preferred the shelter of the darkness, which explained the villagers fear when in dark or unfamiliar places. The light literally became a symbol of protection against any kind of evil.

The wolf can be part of superstition or it might symbolise other fears at night. It was suggested that this might also spring from a fear of rape and violence dating back from the Soviet occupation and the Taliban period (Interview Synnevåg 05.07.07). In these times there was systematic sexual violence against women in Afghanistan (Amnesty 2005, Dupree 1990). The men related to the fear of wolf as women's fears. On the other hand the caring of livestock is the woman's responsibility. Whether the women's fear of wolves in Bamiyan is fear of the actual wolf, superstition or an allegory of the fear of physical harm of other people, is a question that remains open. If the light changes beliefs that obstacles mobility it gives new and valuable space for women to meet other women for socialising.

The extended network is important for Afghans both as part of the weight they put on hospitality, but also as a social security network in times of trouble. Rostami-Povey and Damsleth bring up the importance of relying on extended family or network in times of crisis. Salvaging these relationships offers mutual support for money and food as women's networks did during the civil war (Rostami-Povey 2007). Afghan

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<sup>30</sup> [http://wolfsongalaska.org/wolves\\_afghanistan.htm](http://wolfsongalaska.org/wolves_afghanistan.htm), 15.11.07

refugees in Pakistan often stayed with relatives in small crowded apartments to avoid living in the refugee camps (Damsleth 2003). The sexual segregation in Afghanistan also gives the women opportunity to be alone discussing, celebrating and socialising, which strengthens the network of women in the villages, as illustrated below:

Everything is lighter now. When we come home from work the men are going to other families' houses and sit there. And the women do the same. The women go to other women's houses discussing and talking together. Before everything was dark and we did not leave the children alone, because of the dark they might get scared. Now it is light and the children are not scared and we leave them alone (woman in Pir Dad *shura* meeting 10.07.07).

As the light in the house provided more time to do chores, it freed up time to be with other women or relatives and neighbours. Many stated that the network of women was getting stronger now and that women worked together in groups, doing weaving or discussing.

The women from Bamiyan also emphasised that the establishment of the women's *shuras* through the NSP program promoted new bonds between women, because the *shura* represented a good environment for women to be together and discuss ideas and problems in the community and everyday life. All the women BSEs interviewed from NSP villages were members of their village women's *shura*. The NSP program is at present the main vehicle for rural development in Afghanistan and the government continues to extend it in order to strengthen local democracy and citizen's ties to the central government in Kabul.<sup>31</sup> Only half the BSEs interviewed from other provinces came from villages that had established women's *shura*. This issue will be raised in chapter five in relation to exploring changes in the women beneficiaries' political role.

Women's surplus time as an effect of the solar energy has a direct impact on their possibilities to participate in local political structures. However both Bibir Gul and Maliha wished to minimize their responsibilities in local decision making and prioritize their role and livelihood as BSE (Interviews 17.07.07). They preferred to attend *shura* meetings only when asked and did not perceive this as a process of empowering women in the village, though helping their fellow sisters was something they longed to do. However, Bibir Gal and Maliha are 45 and 50 years, grandmothers and old in Afghan

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.shtm>, 15.03.08

standards, which might serve as an explanation. They felt time was too scarce with the job as BSE and the *shura*. Friedmann's point about lack of time as a major constraint on women's empowerment is valid in this context. Though women beneficiaries have more access to social power by means of psychological resources in confidence and awareness of ones possibilities, and economic resources of better income, a tight time schedule effectively slows the progress of empowerment. Still the solar energy provides women with possibilities to catch up work-time lost during *shura* meetings, thereby creating an important space for women to be active.

#### 4.3.2 *Illuminating Family Life*

I also explored the informants view about the impact of the solar energy on their family life. The institutions of family and marriage play a crucial role in all Afghans lives and identity: 'People are loyal first to the *famili*, then the *keshawand* [extended family, relatives], then the *quam* [tribe] and finally the *millat* [nation]' (Damsleth 2003:100). The family, household or extended family's importance to both personal and collective identity makes them the micro-unit of women's empowerment.

My informants felt that the implementation of solar energy had brought positive elements to family life and the marriage relationships. All the informants, men and women, said the extra time in the evening gave them more opportunity to talk together, to see each other regardless of the dark, and that the light brought happiness of mind which strengthened the family. During the summer, the men are out in the field during daytime and when the family-members were all gathered in the evening it was in the obscure light of a lantern or in complete darkness. In the winter season the dark inside the homes lasts round the clock and one woman is to have said to the NCA that for the first time she was able to see her husbands' face during the gloomy winter months (Interview Synnevåg 05.07.07). One of the old *daiahs* emphasised the combination of physical and psychological health benefits and affect on the family:

Before we had the lanterns and we brought the *butah* and burned it inside the room and sat around the fire and ate in the smoke. Now it is better, because we are cooking outside and bring the food inside to eat later. Everything is light and we are happy (Interview women's *shura* Habashi 10.07.07).

Before the implementation of solar energy in the village the informants' days ended right after dinner because of diesel costs. The daily routine would then only leave room for meals and work and very little time together in communication between family members. For all the beneficiaries the introduction of solar light had strengthened the family bonds as they could exchange ideas, and they felt stronger because they could share their problems. The regular topics discussed in the families in Bamiyan were about changes in the society like the solar energy, new agriculture methods and different cultures. The latter subject had emerged as an effect of media and the foreign presence in Afghanistan.

Relaxing and entertainment now reorganizes the social life in these villages and women take on a new role and identity that is linked to modernity. Listening to radio or music was used by the women when working in the home at daytime giving a new touch to strenuous chores. Winther points out how the new habit of entertaining guests to watch TV, gives women in the household new status as hostesses that reflect and produce values, identities and power relations (Winther 2005). Being the hostess of a home with TV signals power and status, both due to the importance laid on hospitality and extended family networks, but also the resources to perform in a particular way.

On the other hand, despite more time and tools for efficient work the women in Ladu felt an increase in women's work burden as they now had new standards for their home interior and cleanliness after watching TV (Interview women's *shura* 11.07.07). However, after an adaptation period this brought hope in their lives and more positive feelings. In the women's view the benefits of the solar energy greatly outweighed any disadvantages. Still there is a possibility that a "modern" lifestyle might also create new expectations to which women have to conform without removing women's traditional responsibilities, which effectively steals their new-won time.

Media also has positive effect as the influx of information is part of shaping new roles for women in their family life, which strengthens their position and empowerment. For women the access to media that electricity provides can give women new awareness of their situation and rights women have. Friedman describes access to information as an important part of social empowerment from which women often are excluded (Friedmann 1992). From the men in the joint *shura* meeting in Jarukashan I learned that the TV gave them a new perspective on women as they now saw women on TV in different settings and in different roles than before such as women journalist and

politicians (Interview joint men's *shura* 09.7.07). The men in Pir Dad also enthusiastically talked about how Indian soap-operas created new understanding of women's lives and hardship, especially concerning difficulties in living with a mother-in-law (Interview men's *shura* 10.07.07). Unfortunately a ban has recently been put on these series because they are in conflict with the country's Islamic values, or as President Karzai has publicly stated: "These television programmes, which contradict the daily life of Afghans and which our people do not accept, must be stopped".<sup>32</sup>

Women's access to resources of information is crucial in order to promote women's rights. As Hazaras speak and understand a Farsi dialect, many of the Bamiyan informants discussed women's rights in relation to Iran, either through TV or from experiences from being refugees in Iran. In their view Iran is progressive for women's rights. Iran has one of the highest numbers of women with higher education in the region and women constitute a good part of the labour force (Mir-Hosseini 2000, Rostami-Povey 2007). Rights concerning marriage, inheritance and mobility are also better for women in Iran than rural Afghanistan. The BSE Farzana who is from outside Bamiyan also brought up women's rights in relation to Iran (Interview 16.07.07). The connection between Iran and women's human rights offers Afghan women a space to advocate for equal opportunities in many parts of life within the morally accepted religious discourse and with reference to an actual society practising complete adherence to *shari'ah* on family law.

The introduction of new media also produces new class-divisions as definitely not all households with solar energy had TV or radio. In Jarukashan ten households had the opportunity to watch five TVs and in Pir Dad three TVs were shared by six households. In Habashi there were six TVs and most of the village had possibility to watch now and then, while in Ladu two TVs were watched by seven households. This means approximately an average of 12% of the households in these villages have access to TV. Who in the villages that has access to TV is decided by the different villages' practises concerning private and public space. Visiting homes of villagers who are not part of the extended family might be felt as intrusive for the visiting part. When electricity is provided by external aid, the introduction of new technology deepens or creates new socio-economic disparities within communities. It is also problematic to generalise awareness of rights and access to social power through information when it

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<sup>32</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7348389.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7348389.stm), 16.04.08



only benefits a small section of a community. The connection between media and rights was stressed by my informants in the Bamiyan *shuras*, but whether these women claim their rights on behalf of women as a group, or their rights as a privileged informed elite is difficult to determine. Still media has a potential to influence the overall status of women if used well, as access to information provides social power for women and households (Friedmann 1992).

#### 4.3.3 *Privacy and Expectations in the Marriage Relationships*

I also investigated the impact of the solar energy on the relationship between husband and wife. The intention was to explore whether the cooperation between married couples had improved, and thereby changed the existing gender relation in favour of women's empowerment. Marriage is a central institution in Afghan society and a duty prescribed by the Qur'an. Rural women enhance their social status by matrimony, motherhood and by becoming a mother-in-law and ultimately a grandmother (Dupree 1990). Dupree's research found that women living in exile in Pakistan during the civil war felt their lives had become marginalized because their close relationship with men diminished when men were away fighting, or doing work the women had little knowledge of. More time and improved interaction in the domestic sphere has the potential to enhance communication between the "nuclear" families within the larger household. This could give women the resources to participate in family decision-making.

The topic of husbands and wives' relationships was interestingly something the informants were excited to talk about, though at times the subject dealt with serious and sensitive matters. Both women and men emphasised the same benefits for married life for the family as a whole. The relationship had improved because of psychological benefits of the solar energy on the marriage relationship; "with the light our minds are brighter and it is better between the husband and wife" (Interview women's *shura* Habashi 10.07.07). More time together and better communication led to a better common understanding and the informants said that because they talked more together women also participated more in family decisions. A married teacher in the women's *shura* in Ladu explained how the relationship had improved due to shared understanding of women's rights (Interview women's *shura* 11.07.07). She had tried to explain to her husband about women's rights, but earlier he did not accept this. With the solar light she

could study in the evening while her husband was home and showed him her book about the topic. According to her this has made a change between them since he now believes her and respects these rights. Most of the informants also felt that they were less tired, which enhanced the quality of their relationship. The men in Habashi also focused on the improved livelihoods and economy after the implementation of the solar energy as good for the marriage relationship. One man described poverty as; “the root to all bad things”, meaning also inflicting disputes between family members (Interview men’s *shura* 10.07.07). Because there is now less poverty there is also less conflicts between husband and wives.

When we discussed other effects of the solar energy some of the men and women had different perspectives. Several of the men brought up that husband and wives had more privacy now which was good for the marriage relationship. When I asked about the impact of solar on the marriage during the men’s *shura* meeting in Ladu they were all very eager and there was a lot of laughing. The women present also laughed. After some time I understood that they were talking about new opportunities for privacy. Because of light in all rooms in the house the children could stay in different rooms than the parents. This gave the parents more space to be alone and from the setting it was very clear that they were in fact talking about new opportunities to have sex. The women in Pir Dad were the only women who said the same thing. Why no other women mentioned this could mean they interpreted the question differently than men. It could also mean that this was not a proper subject to discuss with me, the translator or the men who in Jarukashan and Habashi were present in our meeting. In Ladu the children were constantly watching us from the windows and the men came and served us tea, which gave them ample chance to pick up on our subjects of conversation. However, the light in every room was mentioned frequently as a new element in everyday life by my informants without any further explanation.

Many of the women on the other hand put much weight on the relation between new opportunities to fulfil the standards of keeping a good home and being a good mother, and a better marriage relationship. The BSE Soraya describes how the relationship between husband and wife was improved in these words:

...it has changed because most of the women, if the men need something for example their clothes or other things they wash [them] at night. And the relation is also getting

better between husband and wife, because she can make everything on time (Interview 17.07.07).

The solar energy's effect on helping women to do chores also enhances a positive relation between the spouses. After the solar energy was introduced it was easier to comfort the children at night when they were crying. Now the women can comfort and breastfeed their children in less time and confusion, just by turning on the light. The women can now also prepare things more effectively, making other occurring problems easier to handle. Most of the women and a few of the men found the source of improvement in the relationship in the fact that chores were done adequately causing less annoyance and complaints.

Domestic violence was by a very few of the men and one of the women brought up in direct relation to this topic. One of the woman BSEs' statements illustrates this:

...earlier the men often beat the women. The electricity has changed this, because earlier when the children cried in the night or wanted something this took more time to do in the dark. The men got angry and impatient. Now this takes shorter time and the women can prepare things.

After some time in the conversation she said this had been a frequent problem for more or less all the women in the village including her. Though there is little scientific research done on the extensiveness of domestic violence against women in Afghanistan, there is good reason to believe that her story is not exclusive. Several reports and examples suggest it is a fairly common problem, but nevertheless a taboo. The NAC supported health workers in Ghazni often encounters cases of violence against women, which are explained by falls and accidents (Interview Kjølnner 28.03.07). The focus of many informants about the importance of fulfilling expectations of husbands might be related to fear of violent sanctions in the home.

This illustrates that finding solutions for making everyday life easier for women (and men) is important in evading violence against women. Nevertheless, it will not alter the cultural practices giving legitimacy to violence against women. Many of the women have though expressed that influence from NGOs, TV and education brought new ideas such as awareness of women's rights and value. One of my men informants also said directly that he no longer hit his wife, because she would not accept this anymore. His wife's new courage stemmed in his opinion from empowerment as a result of influence from resources as women's literary courses and women's *shura* and media.

Together with improving everyday life routines and livelihoods this is a good step towards helping families and ending views that support domestic violence against women.

#### *4.3.4 Empowerment from Networks family and marriage relationship*

Friedmann emphasises the importance of women's networks, but does not mention the aspect family and marriage life plays upon women's empowerment. Dupree (2002) questions the legitimacy and possible success of international aid and its' tendency to exclude men when they start up women's projects. Afghanistan is not just a collectivistic society, but has great emphasis on the family and the division into categories men and women when dealing with important aspect of life is artificial and essentialist. Dupree claims without men's cooperation and understanding they will fear the "worst":

I remember a health project among refugees where the women had six weeks of basic health training. At the end of the training each graduate was given a plastic basin and a cake of soap. Immediately the men were grumbling: 'what are they doing in there? They are training our women to be prostitutes! Why else would they need a bar of soap?!' (Dupree 2002:13).

A cultural perspective that grasps the importance of family and marriage for women's well-being is crucial when working towards women's empowerment. Cochran (1986, in Hughes 1987) emphasises that a critical factor in empowerment process is facilitating informal exchange of resources among individuals and families. This is because most people find meaning in their lives through families, neighbourhoods, churches and voluntary organisations. These institutions are also best adapted to provide appropriate assistance (Berger & Neuhaus 1977, in Hughes 1987).

Without including both genders in the process the women often do not see the point and men may easily be a destructive force. An example from Jarukashan illustrates this; the women's *shura* had been offered micro-credit loans to buy livestock from an international NGO (Interview Maliha 17/7-07). The *shura* differed in their view if they should give the money from the micro-credit directly to their husbands for his decision on how to put them to use, or as intended originally, keep it and have the responsibility for the loan themselves. In the end the women's *shura* decided to the NGO's surprise to decline the loan, because of the internal disagreement within the women's *shura*.

The strengthened family ties also gives women better chance of being heard and seen in family decisions. Improved family and marriage relations can provide better social resources needed to make choices. Kabeer sees women's empowerment as ability to exercise choice. Like Friedmann Kabeer consider empowerment as access to resources enabling control to set and attain goals concerning one's own development. According to Kabeer these resources can be obtained through arenas of social relationships like family and community. However, this could also go the other way as patriarchal traditions are enforced and the divide between public and private sphere is increased.

When I discussed with the women informants they described increased access to resources in their agency concerning strategic choices. Through awareness brought by influences such as the women's *shura*, training as BSE, education, foreign NGOs and media women's agency is empowered. Still the ability to decide when their daughters should marry was out of reach. According to Dupree, Afghan women have a considerable agency in deciding on marriage of younger women within the household (Dupree 1990). This is also the general belief in the stereotype view of Muslim women's informal power in patriarchal societies. The findings of this research contradict this as all the women, and many of the men, wanted their daughters to marry later in order to extend their educational opportunities. Saadallah brings up how women potentially choose their and other women's inequality in Muslim societies for instance by denouncing their de jure right to land, to male relatives. Any achievement of women's exercised agency has to be within the cultural parameters of their society. When women struggle for their own or children's rights to a good life it has to be within the community's common cultural language, and the women fronting it has to be perceived as rooted in their collective identity of woman. Acting otherwise, the community will not only reject their claims, but socially sanction women as something Westernised or unfamiliar, a threat to religious moral and cultural traditions. Girls who reach late teens before marriage are considered as potentially less worth and immoral.

The women of Habashi had through the women's *shura* put focus in the village about the negative effects on forced marriage (Interview women's *shura* 10.07.07). They felt that after seeing more the world through new Medias and foreign influence they no longer accepted that young people should marry against their will. They claimed there now were several examples of "love marriages" in the village. Not being forced to marry

someone against your own wish does not necessarily mean girls are free to choose a life partner. Marriage is still to a large extent a family affair and arranged with the family's consent only.

#### 4.4 Concluding Remarks

Solar energy offer women benefits in several important aspects of life, such as new livelihood opportunities, educational and health benefits and easier everyday life and surplus time. This fits well within Friedmann's framework for women and households empowerment to control their development. One of the foundations, which frame the positive benefits of the Barefoot Approach on the women's beneficiaries, is mobility as this decides access to education, networking, health care and several income generating activities. Still new access to resources only partially gives women the empowerment to make choices.

The question of women's mobility goes far beyond introduction of solar energy as it is deeply embedded in the cultural expression of women and in the sense of women's personal identity. However, the new aspect of women's improved mobility within the village is positive for acquiring the advantages of social networks and fulfilling chores. Through women's networks women as a group can offer solidarity and support, and give women a chance to conceptualise and articulate priorities and perspectives, as well as plan for their future. Due to establishment of women's *shura* in relation to the NSP program, and the solar providing new mobility and surplus time, the women beneficiaries described access to political power with new possibilities to take part in decision-making within the women's *shura*. These acquired resources, though only giving limited political power, also change future claims and expectations, which alters the gender discourse in communities, and enables women new bargaining power in negotiating the division of power in the community's gender relations. This issue will be raised further in the next chapter.

As mentioned the informants felt their family life and marriage relationship getting better because of the effect of the solar on poverty, time together and possibility to fulfil family duties and expectations. This potentially empower women as better understanding and communication between family members might increase women's agency to make choices in family decision-making. Still women, and men for that

matter, seem to have difficulty in making strategic life choices concerning marriage both for themselves and their children. The cultural traditions concerning who and when to marry is taken for granted in society and thus not part of individuals' sphere of decision-making.

## CHAPTER 5.0 DISCOURSE AND NEGOTIATION

We used to think our women were a little stupid, but now we see on TV Afghan women in the Loya Jirga and we have a woman governor in Bamiyan and they are just like our women. This encourages our women and the education of our daughters becomes important (Man in joint *shura* meeting near Jarukashan).

I now have the ability to repair the electricity and give the people light. That's why the people respect me a lot. They say that when you brought light to us we were very happy because of you! ...Earlier people thought that women can not do anything. But when I went there (India) and learned [solar energy technology] and came back, the people talked together and said she is a very strong lady and she has done good service for the people (Soraya BSE).

In the following chapter I will by using a feminist geography approach explore changes in women's political role in relation to implementation of solar energy and or training as a BSE. Politics is here understood in a broad sense as a process of decision-making within communities and the power relations that underlies this process. Investigating my women informants' political role in their community embodies an understanding of the collective identity that defines their rights and responsibilities to participate in local political institutions at decision-making level. The values that inform these rights are subject to the communities' gender discourse on women's abilities and status, and women's agency in negotiating the gender roles through bargaining, manipulation, consent and resistance. The process of discourse and negotiation that form women's "sense of place", or as Moore puts it the cultural category "woman", is interrelated and simultaneous (Moore 1988, in McDowell & Sharp 1997). New elements in society create new values and perceptions. Applying gender discourse and negotiation as a frame of reference to the data from the informants, shed's light on new spaces for increased local political participation.



## 5.1 Restructuring Perceptions on Women's Status and Abilities in Rural Life

The shift in society from completely marginalising women in formal public decision-making to the present where women in small communities organise themselves to participate in local political governance, involves a parallel alteration of the acknowledged perceptions of women's political abilities and responsibilities. Both the men and women I interviewed described a change in women's role in their communities in terms of freedom, social status and participation in local political structures. This was most evident in Bamiyan, as all the villages in this case study had implemented women's *shura* through the NSP program. The extent and effectiveness of women's participation still varies greatly, but according to my informants there is a change in communities' discourse of women's role in society due to impact from women's *shuras*, women BSEs, media and general influence from NGOs' taking part in Afghans everyday life. These changes in perceptions regarding women were mainly found in acknowledgement of women's abilities beyond their traditional domain of house and family. Education of girls and women were also winning ground as communities experience accompanying benefits. Communities who have women in professional occupations, such as teachers or BSEs, value their experience and see women taking more control in community participation, which alter their views on women's political role and responsibility.

### 5.1.1 New Directions in Maternity and Educational Discourse

Bourdieu's idea of the *doxa* as traditions and beliefs that exist beyond discourse or argumentation has its counterpart in the Afghan society's conception of women's role within the family sphere. Afghan women's responsibilities and rights in their community are mainly based on their roles as mothers and wives in line with patriarchal and Islamic values manifested in Afghan culture. Damsleth's (2001) work 'coping with disrupted lives', which explored young Afghan girls' identity in relation to war and migration, describes the socialised and constructed gender identity labelled *khub dakhtar*; good daughter, that young unmarried Afghan women are prescribed to conform to:

A *khub dakhtar* is obedient, respectful to her parents, helpful in the home, kind hearted and mild mannered and she is a virgin, moral and chaste (Damsleth 2001:107).

The norms of *khub dakhtar* (except virginity) continue into married life with a new set of parents, the mother and father in law. Afghan families display patriarchal values where the father is the head of family and families have a clear gender and age hierarchy. Women are central to the family's honour and should avoid any situations that might jeopardize the reputation of their chastity (Dupree 1990, Moghadam 2003).

The gender discourse has especially in rural areas been informed by values that see women's main accomplishment in life to be married and have children to secure the next generation. Women have the main responsibility in the family to raise children in conformity to religious and cultural values ensuring that they will reflect positively on the family honour (Wakefield 2004). The importance of maternity and care for family in relation to the category of woman and the appropriate behaviour attached to its person, was revealed by both men and women informants' concern for child nurturing and domestic chores as part of women's domain. When the informants explored their benefits of the solar; the women stressed the opportunities solar energy gave them to be good mothers and meet family and husbands' expectations. Even when directly asked if they felt change in their status they related this to fulfilling expectations as good women. This was exemplified in how the men earlier were often angry when women's duties were not performed adequately. The women felt the light had increased their status because they received greater respect and treatment from their husbands and other family members when they had more time to work.

This gender discourse that place women in the domestic sphere has ramifications for perceptions on women's contribution in the public sphere. Researchers doing a case-study in the Panjao district of Bamiyan province found consensus within the villages that women's domain was the household (Wakefield 2004). That is where their responsibilities lied and where the production of their experiences and knowledge took place.

'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 firewood and one of them should bring grass for the animals and one should work on the land' (Abdul Mohammad from Obtoo village Panjao, in Wakefield 2004).

The women in the Panjao case-study consequently had no formal local decision-making power as they were perceived by both women and men to be “without knowledge” on such matters and because women’s leadership was refuted in Islam (Wakefield 2004).

According to Lorde (1984, in Wadud 2006) maternity is the main social power open to women within patriarchal structures. Albeit the importance laid on maternity and marriage, my informants described a change of setting where new space for women was gradually occurring, and laid the foundation for new perceptions of women’s meaningful contribution in the local community outside woman’s affairs. All my informants were parents and an important aspiration for practically all Afghans I met was the future education of their children. The collective identity of *khub dakhtar* remains, but most of the informants had hopes for their daughters beyond marriage and motherhood. The BSEs Noorahmed description of changes in his community was illustrative for most my informants’ statements: In his village they used to think that girls should never leave the house because the girls would be very changed (Interview 18.07.07). Especially sending a girl to a foreign country would destroy her (Afghan) mind and culture. After he and his aunt Bibir Gul came back from India, the villagers were less frightened of letting girls learn and most of the girls were sent to school. He felt Bibir Gul had done a big achievement for Afghanistan and he was proud of her. She has appeared on local TV and radio to talk about her experiences from the Barefoot Approach, in order to increase awareness of illiterate, poor and women’s abilities. Noorahmed himself aspired for his 12 year old daughter to go to university and become either a doctor or an engineer.

All the men I interviewed who had experience with women BSEs, unanimously said their perceptions on women’s capabilities had changed. Men BSEs who trained with a female partner or observed other women training in India, was especially impressed as they thought technology was incomprehensible to women. Further several of the men emphasised that it was very good that women have knowledge about things like solar energy and by that could “provide services to the people”. The BSE Shukrullah’s reflection on the subject was descriptive:

I used to think women should stay at home. Now I think that our community is clear in their mind that women can do everything. Women are more independent now... When we (him and his sister) went to India there were women from many countries there, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Cameroon... Then I thought girls can do anything and serve their country. For me this was a new thought. The girls were very young and good at

learning.... When I saw the other girls in Tilonia I saw that women and men are equal in this and that women have capabilities (Interview 15.07.07).

The concept of providing services to community and country was mentioned several times, especially in relation to women and education. Challenging the *doxa* of accepted space for women's knowledge seemed to be legitimate when it had the logical purpose of benefiting more than just the individual or women.

Education plays an important role in women's confidence and knowledge needed for political participation and collective action. The BSE Shukrullah who is from a region renowned to be conservative said he planned to send his wife to finish school autumn 2007 (Interview 15.07.07). His wife had only finished grade10 and the plan was that she would finish grade12. Since the school was a good distance from the village she and their baby son were moving to relatives during her studies. Shukrullah is an educated man by rural Afghan standards since he has spent 14 years at *madrasa* in Pakistan and has the title *mullah*. Islam values education and women have the responsibility for teaching the children and bringing them up as good Muslims, which might be an explanation for arranging for his wife to leave their home for education. Promoting women and girls' education in Muslim countries has been forwarded by Islamic rhetoric of this kind (Moghadam 2003). Nevertheless, not all families in Afghanistan consider sending children to school an option, because of poverty, security considerations and conformity to traditions for young girls. According to the BSE Ahmad many wanted to send their daughter to school earlier, but were afraid to break with customs in the village (Interview 15.07.07). His wife Farzana's training as BSE was in his words a shock to the community, but has encouraged them to let girls attend school. Ahmad had also hopes for sending his daughter out of the village for high school if the economy allowed for it.

Introduction of new perceptions on women's abilities is beneficial to women aspiring knowledge outside the traditional domain, but the concept of girls' education as mentioned in chapter four also raises the issue of when girls should marry. Most of the men and women wanted girls to finish their education or at least wait until 18 years before entering marriage. However, statistics and the informants' statements illustrate that the practice of girls' marriage at a young age seems to be a resilient feature in Afghan society. While the private domestic domain is where personal attitudes and relationships constructing gender relations are formed, rural Afghan women's political

role is also a result of collective identity informed by discourse in the society and community as a whole. This naturally impedes many parents' ambitions for their daughters as breaking social norms might mean devastating their daughters' chance of happiness as wives and mothers.

### *5.1.2 Women's Negotiation in the Domestic Sphere*

Women's space to participate in community decision-making is contingent on their space in decision-making within family and marriage relationship. The family constitutes the micro-level where the rules and mobility of individuals is formed. The gender relations within the family are according to Agarwal a result of negotiation (Agarwal 1994). This negotiation takes place continuously within the household and community discourse. One factor determining women's (and men's) bargaining power in gender relationship is possible alternatives if the cooperation in the gender relation should cease. Such alternatives can be found in land, ownership, employment opportunities or support from social networks, government and organisations. For Afghan women the alternative to cooperation with men is not just contingent on financial resources and social support, but honour and status in society and dependence on family relations. It is hard to discuss Afghan women's fall back options within the contextually given gender relations, as women without family relations in Afghanistan are viewed with scepticism and conceived as something threatening to society and good moral. Women who live alone, such as divorced or widows are dependent on the respect and security from their community. Single women often move into the home of other male relatives or remarry.

This was evident when I visited the NCA women's shelter in Kabul. The women were literally kept out of sight, even from the garden and balconies in the shelter. This was not just for their own protection (many of the family members who threatened their life lived in reclusive communities far from Kabul, some even in Pakistan), but because it was imperative that the neighbours did not see these women living alone, as this could have grave consequences. A house in one's neighbourhood, with only women residents who do not share family or community bonds, would lead to public protest. The residents also have serious problems of being integrated into society after fleeing from

violent family members. Abandoning the family is perceived as a crime for women, which renders little hope of support from family networks and government. If the women are not reconciled with their family, the shelters offers in reality secure 'prisons' and a lifetime of isolation from the outside world. This illustrates that breaking totally with the acknowledged gender relations is extremely problematic and more or less unthinkable, unless your life is at stake. Women's bargaining power is thus dependent on other options than to cease cooperation with husband, father or other male relatives to be successful.

The household might constitute a place of oppressive social relations for women in terms of hard (unpaid) labour and domestic violence. At the same time the home also represents a place of personal fulfilment and meaningful social relations that provide resources and status. The improved family and marriage relationship discussed in chapter four provides an opportunity for women to participate in household decision-making. As exemplified by Noorahmed (when talking about Bibir Gul) the improved communication and psychological well-being might lead to shared decision-making:

Before she had a walled mind, then she we went to India and saw the people there and their relationship with each other. When she came back she was different and changed. She was different in her relationship with people and her husband and children. I think this was a big difference... Before she did not care so much about the children and what they where doing, now she forces them to go to school and do their homework. Now she is also exchanging her ideas with her husband and they both take a decision. I think now it is better (Interview 18.07.07)

Several of the men informants said they now felt that the women's opinion had a bearing in any decisions in the family, otherwise the wives would "make trouble". This was related to women's new confidence, as according to the men; "we now have to discuss issues with our women. If we do no let women be part of the decisions, they will protest!" (Interview men's *shura* Pir Dad 10.07.07). One of the men said he had stopped hitting his wife, because she would no longer accept this treatment. Putting to much salt in the food or "turning their back" when they were going to sleep was mentioned as examples of women's protest in the villages. The men said women now were more courageous and made demands to their husbands. Influence from TV was also mentioned in relation to this as there were new standards for how to treat one's spouse. Turning the back or putting to much salt in the food does not go unnoticed by the men, though it is not done in public. By keeping the resistance in the domestic sphere the

power balance of the gender relations is seemingly intact, allowing the husband and wife to keep their appearance and honour. The silent disobedience or resistance from women shows, as Agarwal claims, that they do not necessarily perceive their husbands as entitled to make decisions over their heads (1994). The fact that the men saw this as a new situation reveals that this was not deemed appropriate for women earlier. The *doxa* of women's behaviour obviously did not encompass demanding to be part of family decisions. This does however not mean women were not asked before, and it does not reveal the hierarchical power structure among women in a household. However, women can realise their power and agency in line with their traditional domain within the family arena and "restore the dignity denied them outside in the public role" (McDowell 1999:89).

### *5.1.3 Extending the Base of Women's Traditional Knowledge*

According to the informants there has been a change in the local communities' discourse and institutionalising of women's traditional domain over the recent years, which extends women's political role. This change stem from two sources: First a change in the discourse of women's abilities, rights and responsibilities in local political structures. Second, an alteration of the issues local communities have to deal with on the political level, which challenges "old" leadership and knowledge.

Women's formal participation in local governance structures in rural Bamiyan traditionally has been linked to the concepts of knowledge and shame. Decision-making at community level was perceived as outside women's base of knowledge and therefore would bring shame on herself and consequently on her family and community (Wakefield 2004). However, the concept of women's knowledge was interlinked with age. Elder women were perceived to have more experience and knowledge and therefore more legitimate space to take personal initiative and participate in household discussions and public life. In fact the elder women in the Panjao case-study could act outside the cultural gender norms without inflicting shame upon themselves and their family, because their accumulated life knowledge deserved villagers respect. Still the researchers from the Panjao case-study revealed that women had no legitimate political role in their community. In fact men holding power and authority in the communities formed structures excluding the social groups of women, landless and young people

from community decision-making, based on their lack of “complete knowledge” (Wakefield 2004:17). This does not necessarily mean women had no means to participate or influence local political decision-making, and it is easy to be deceived by the assumption that women’s confinement to domestic and informal sphere has been static in Afghan history. The women in Panjao to some extent overheard men’s conversations about community affairs in the local mosque and brought this conversation up in their home later to give their opinion of the matter. Previously there had been both formal and informal systems providing women political space in society. In all societies, also Afghan, there are and have been women with special charisma and knowledge exercising influence on local decision-making. At present the traditional conception of women’s knowledge as defined within household and family matters must be seen in relation to the Taliban’s era when women were banned from all political participation. It is only close to seven years since Taliban was ousted from power and the legal framework inhibiting women’s political participation was removed.

Still the Panjao case-study and my own findings coincide in revealing that only a few years ago politics on any level was not a recognised part of women’s ability, rights or responsibility. It was simply not a feature attached to a woman’s person in the understanding of the collective identity of the category woman. However the women’s *shura* have brought new perceptions and institutions, which changed the political participation of my women informants considerably. There was now an acknowledged space for women to discuss their ideas and consent or contest decisions affecting themselves and the community. As my case study relates to the Barefoot Approach most of my interviewees had experience with having a skilled woman BSE in their community and women’s *shura*, which was a valuable source of knowledge and confidence. The women informants expressed improvement of their status because solar energy enabled a sense of self-efficacy in their roles as mothers and wives, but also because of new space in society to be heard and claim their rights:

Before the *shura* and the solar, the men were not listening to us. Before we were not able to understand anything, but now it has changed our lives. We have our *shura* together, we have meetings together and they listen to us and we listen to them, and we work together (leader of women’s *shura* Pir Dad, Interview 10.07.07).

The women’s *shura* in Pir Dad related this to shame, explaining that in the past; “no woman in Pir Dad could sit in a meeting or gathering with men, because this would



mean shame for the family and the people” (Interview women’s *shura* 10.07.07). Similarly, in another part of Afghanistan, the BSE Soraya became the first woman in her village to be present in a men’s *shura* meeting. This was on a request from one of NCA’s partner organisations and in this meeting Soraya and her husband Assef was chosen to go to India. After her training in India she has continued to be present at the men’s *shura* meetings about once a month; “If there is any problem they ask me to come, to talk and to give my idea” (Interview 17.07.07). In her village a women’s *shura* had yet to be established, but she claimed that at this point in time other women had an opportunity to discuss community issues in the *shura*. She particularly stressed that only issues relating to the whole community were appropriate for women. This suggests that the threshold for women is still high unless they have a special competence outside the traditional limits of women’s knowledge. The notion of shame was also discovered to be an effective barrier for women’s local political participation in Panjao (Wakefield 2004). Women and men frequently mentioned that they feared being “laughed at” when stepping outside their traditional domain:

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 (Wakefield 2004:23).

These social practices of shame that defines who is “out of place” and who is “in place” according to the category of woman are changed by invented spaces that challenge dominant power (McDowell & Sharp 1997). The formal establishment of women’s *shuras* by NSP has played an important role in evading this problem for the women I interviewed. In the mid-term evaluation report of the NSP program, Bamiyan province was mentioned as one of the places that gave room for optimism. Bamiyan had the highest recruitment of women to the CDC, and where women actually had influence in local political affairs through their *shura* (Barakat et al 2006). The women interviewed in the evaluation report related this to confidence. One reason given was that they were encouraged by the appointment of the woman provincial governor in Bamiyan. She served as a role model and created a new space for women to be political active, while still adjusted to local traditions and norms asserted by her Islamic dress and Hazara origin. According to the evaluation report experience from other societies show that when communities observe women in official management positions it encourages

women's participation and demonstrates for men that women have the abilities needed for political responsibilities (Barakat et al 2006).

Several men informants put weight on the positive impact of the establishment of the women's *shura* and the social change due to having women BSEs. The BSE Maliha's training was seen by the leader of the joint men's *shura* of Jarukashan and surrounding villages as constructive: "It is very good; women have a new role and take more responsibility" (Interview 09.07.07). He felt it was beneficial to all parts that the establishment of the women's *shura* facilitated by NSP made it clear which responsibilities women actually had to their community as this was earlier a problematic issue associated with different values and rights. He also stressed how TV had brought images of Afghan women politicians directly in their home and demystified women's political role. This indicates new perceptions of women's capacity to assume political positions in society. Some men also stated that the establishment of the women's *shura* was positive because men and women together enhanced each other and gave better problem-solving when both gender's perspectives were heard. In Ladu the men compared it to a football match, stating that the dual *shuras* gave better results, because the competition enhanced each other's performance (Interview 11.07.07). Whether the men's positive perception of the women's *shuras* was a desire to seem modern when faced with a Western woman or reflected an alternative discourse on women's political role was unclear.

The extension of women's domain to include participation in the women's *shura* still had clear limitations. The BSE Maliha explained that the women's *shura* and men's *shura* of Jarukashan had separate meetings and decided on different things "belonging to women or belonging to men" (Interview 17.07.07). The term "belonging to" women or men was used frequently by the translators in relation to informants' description of roles and responsibilities divided by gender. One such case was the micro-credit loan offer to the women in Jarukashan village mentioned in chapter four. The study in Panjao found similar examples regarding an Oxfam established Village Organisation (VO). The women in the VO only decided on issues "linked to women", such as approaching NGOs for women's projects related to weaving or sewing (Wakefield 2004). Despite the communities' definitions concerning what "belongs to women" and what "belongs to men", there was little discrepancy between the issues and priorities of my informants. Also the study in Panjao found that men and women largely agreed on the main issues

regarding the village as a whole. Development aid and opportunities for a better life were something all my informants desired. Men also wanted women teachers for their daughters and literary courses for women, contradicting the assumption that women and men have different perspectives of benefits for their community. On the other hand since I met with *shura* members who deal with NGOs and developmental issues regularly, this was not surprising.

The NSP evaluation report revealed that even though women's *shuras* were acknowledged, and that the women leading these *shuras* were seen as a legitimate representative for the women, women were not seen as legitimate leaders for the community as a whole (Barakat et al 2006). This was also the case for women who sat in a mixed *shura* of both men and women. In addition to factors such as lack of education, knowledge and experience there was an apparent cultural limitation to the acceptance of women in such leadership roles. In fact many of the interviewed in the NSP report defended the gender separation of the *shura*. A statement by women from a CDC in Balkh province illustrates their concerns;

'It would be very difficult to sit with the men... then they are superior and we would have no voice in decision making. For now it is better to work separately' (Barakat et al 2006:71).

This is also a less confrontational approach and could give women a chance to participate fully on equal terms later, rather than being discarded in the first place. Alternatively it might institutionalize and reproduce the existing gender cleavages.

The notion of knowledge as a product of experience, age and gender is challenged by the influence of the women BSEs and their political role in local communities. The BSEs Farzana is an illustrative example of added value to the Barefoot Approach. Farzana is, despite her young age, the leader of the women's *shura* in her village. She said she was actively participating in the women's *shura* and had been aiding the whole village in deciding what to do with the Block Grant from NSP (Interview 16.07.07). Though the women and men's *shura* met separately her involvement was also desired by the men in the village. The invitation to assist the community was linked to her status and experience as a trained BSE. Her leadership in the women's *shura* was also based on her involvement prior to being a BSE, because Farzana has given advice on health and treated sick people in her village. Her older

sister is a gynaecologist who was trained during the Soviet occupation, and Farzana has learned from her and by helping her community become valuable and reputable. She has continued to use her influence to teach women in her community about their rights. She explained that this led to a change in the village as girls are more and more sent to school and the women are trying to share their work burden with the men. This shows how women BSEs can impact on the discourse of women's knowledge and political responsibilities. All the women BSEs I interviewed had positions in the women's *shura* or participated in the men's *shura*. This was not the case with the men BSEs. On the other hand it also reveals the importance of recruiting women who already are resourceful and assertive persons. The women's *shuras* all had some women who appeared to be "idealistic" and served as main contributors to the community. For instance one of the teachers in Ladu actively worked to raise awareness of women's rights in the community, taught children at the local school and was leader of the women's *shura* (Interview women's *shura* 11.07.07).

The challenge of women's traditional knowledge and affect on women's political role also stem from women's new roles in public. During the Taliban rule women's resource and competence in public sector disappeared. The women in Afghanistan are slowly starting to reintroduce themselves in public roles and the labour market. When women were marginalised from the labour market, the place for dialogue and making patriarchal forces understand women's important role in public life also disappeared. The result has been that the majority of women in Afghanistan are illiterate, unskilled and uneducated (Moghadam 1992). This has constituted a major barrier for women's participation in local decision-making in the NSP *shuras*, because many places both men and women felt women had little meaningful to contribute (Barakat et al 2006).

The traditional *doxa* in Bamiyan and other places has been challenged by the influx of new discourses and practises. Both in terms of having skilled women in technology in their midst and the fact that there are women in the *shuras* that has professional occupations such as teacher and BSE. All the women's *shuras* also included *daiahs*, who are important persons in rural communities. When the women's *shuras* are represented by skilled women who contribute to the community, the *shura* gain respect and recognition. The BSE women as illustrated by Soraya, Maliha, Bibir Gul and Farzana enter into struggling societies with valuable experience outside the traditional women's knowledge of the domestic sphere. As Afghanistan is in deep need

of people with knowledge and education to promote growth and development, building women's competence as part of the development process has a good chance of being a valuable resource to local communities and lessens opposition to the change of women's role in society. Agarwal points to how claims by individuals need to be socially legitimate to give bargaining power (Agarwal 1994). My women informants' bargaining power had changed as women increasingly undertook political roles and decision-making in their local community affairs. Their claims for rights were beginning to be perceived as more legitimate, because their valuable contribution was proven to the community, changing the gender discourse. The Barefoot Approach has in this respect been a facilitator for women's political participation in local decision-making, though their influence is still restricted compared to contemporary democratic principles. This affect communities on many levels: Women as active agents in local politics, women as professional skilled labour, women as income generators in their family, women as role models for women's capabilities and the projects positive affect on women's health and access to education and information.

#### *5.1.4 The Impact of Intervention and the New Local Political Agenda*

The women BSEs valuable knowledge also relates to a shift in the issues community leadership has to deal with. Traditionally at village level in Bamiyan the elders and religious authorities like *mullahs* have had the power to deem what is appropriate community issues, and the villagers' access to participation according to the local norms and values. This *shura* of elders has also traditionally dealt with social issues and disputes, settling feuds over land, marriages and water. In the aftermath of the US intervention in 2001 the aid presence has with its aim of reconstruction impacted local communities' priorities. The Panjao case-study found that there was a weakening of the elders' traditional authority, as prioritised community issues in the rural villages increasingly dealt with developmental plans, such as infrastructure, well drilling and building of bridges and schools (Wakefield 2004). The "new" *shuras* appeal to many villagers desire for a more inclusive system of participation, especially marginalised groups of young, women and very poor. At present new issues in new *shuras* open opportunities for women to participate without being "laughed at" or inflicting shame.

Community organisations facilitated by the aid community also requires new leadership and knowledge. The establishment of CDC<sup>33</sup> by the Afghan government and World Bank was created to develop capacity at the community level to identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects through a Community Development Plan (CDP). Formulating a CDP is an exercise that allows the *shura* to plan out its development needs and prioritize them. The NSP evaluation report found that the *shuras* were fully recognized in the area of community development, while traditional structures retained the political control, resulting in coexistence (Barakat et al 2006). In the villages I visited the “NSP *shuras*” were responsible for dealing with developmental issues and cooperation with NGOs. The NGOs facilitation of village councils building on *shura* as local governance institution has the formal requirement of including women, which has resulted in the establishment of women’s *shuras*. After the NCA implemented solar energy and aid agencies put attention on including or helping rural Afghan women, the gender discourse framing everyday life and practices changed.

The influence of aid projects brings in their values and ways of business, which changes what issues women can negotiable about. Aid projects with women as direct beneficiaries such as providing solar energy, training women’s BSEs or establishing women’s *shura* all contribute in shifting the attention on women. According to my women informants foreigners paying interest in them plays a significant part of changing their life for the better:

When NGO people and the NCA people are coming and having meetings with us, that also increases our confidence. Because of that slowly our life is improving and we are learning. Before that the women did not understand anything (Interview women’s *shura* Ladu 11.07.07).

When women offer beneficial knowledge to the community as a whole the objective and natural presentation of the good Afghan woman is changing. Women are to some extent allowed into the community decision-making as their political space is redefined to accommodate new requirements and new perceptions in the community.

This means that women also can actively be more part in producing a formal gender discourse than before. The power and authority that defines important aspects of life such as family, mobility and status, is also subject to change when women have new negotiation power. This brings a shift in the gender relations and ‘new truth’ is

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<sup>33</sup> The CDC is labeled *shura*, or NSP *shura* in the villages.

produced. To some extent the characteristic of appropriate behaviour has been transformed as women can be important contributors to a local community also regarding issues outside the traditional women's domain. As the solar alters women's socio-economic conditions the power balance between men and women also changes and women have space to speak up for their group and move more freely. Women *shuras*, women teachers or *daiahs* enjoy their communities respect, which gives other women confidence. Still there are two major limitations: The first is whether these changes will be absorbed into the process of socialisation that creates gendered identity? Although new values might be perceived as legitimate for adult women in a certain time and context, the gender and age hierarchy within the family where gendered socialisation takes place can put constraints on the continuation of these values. Secondly, the changed perception of women's political role is oblivious to the difference in opportunities for women. As discussed in chapter four very poor women or young women are examples of social groups who will have difficulty in using new space brought on by new discourse.

Local communities remain resistant to changes at the higher unless the individual or group of women have the confidence, resources and energy to fight for their cause. If this results in negative or positive, and deep or superficial impact is an important question to address. The welfare function of the Afghan state has always been dependent on foreign aid. This shows the potential impact aid has positively, but also reveals foreign aid's potential to strengthen patriarchal structures in society and women's limited space to negotiate. The present focus on Afghan women in relation to GWOT has increased the politicisation of gender roles in Afghanistan, which might be subversive to women's own claims for rights and opportunities. In order to give women the necessary empowerment and access to resources that enables political participation, aid has to include using the women's competence and experiences as active agents in their own development. This is important to give the communities' possibility to absorb the changes and not reinstating existing prejudice against women. The Barefoot Approach focuses on preparing the community and builds (BSE) women's confidence, competence, experience and authority. This is also done in line with a great benefit to the whole community and without a provocative formal agenda of changing gender roles.

## 5.2 Women's Political Participation and Peace-building

The question if the Barefoot Approach has affected women's political role in a way that has resulted in women having more access to political participation is at the core of this thesis' motivation. In the introductory chapter the importance of women's participation at decision-making level was argued as a precondition for democracy and peace. Women's participation in local political structures is equally important as including women at national level, since many conflicts are locally based. Insurgents like Taliban exploit local conflicts over water or land by providing weapons to communities in return for loyalty and armed opposition to the government (Giustozzi 2008).

Political structures in the rural villages of this case-study form institutions that restrict social groups in the communities' access to decision-making. These structures are both influenced by and inform gender discourse and women's power in negotiating gender relations, but their institutionalised governance are also self-sustaining power structures based on patriarchal networks of men. The presentation of village leadership with responsibility for social disputes or development issues is not based on regular elections, but other considerations the community perceive as legitimate. As such they form independent units, and though women are partially included, there are several mechanisms that ensure that power is mainly distributed among old leadership and men. Women are especially excluded from the village governance that relates to issues of conflict, which limits their potential role in local peace-building, regardless of other local political participation.

### *5.2.1 Structures from the Past: the Authority to Decide Women's Participation*

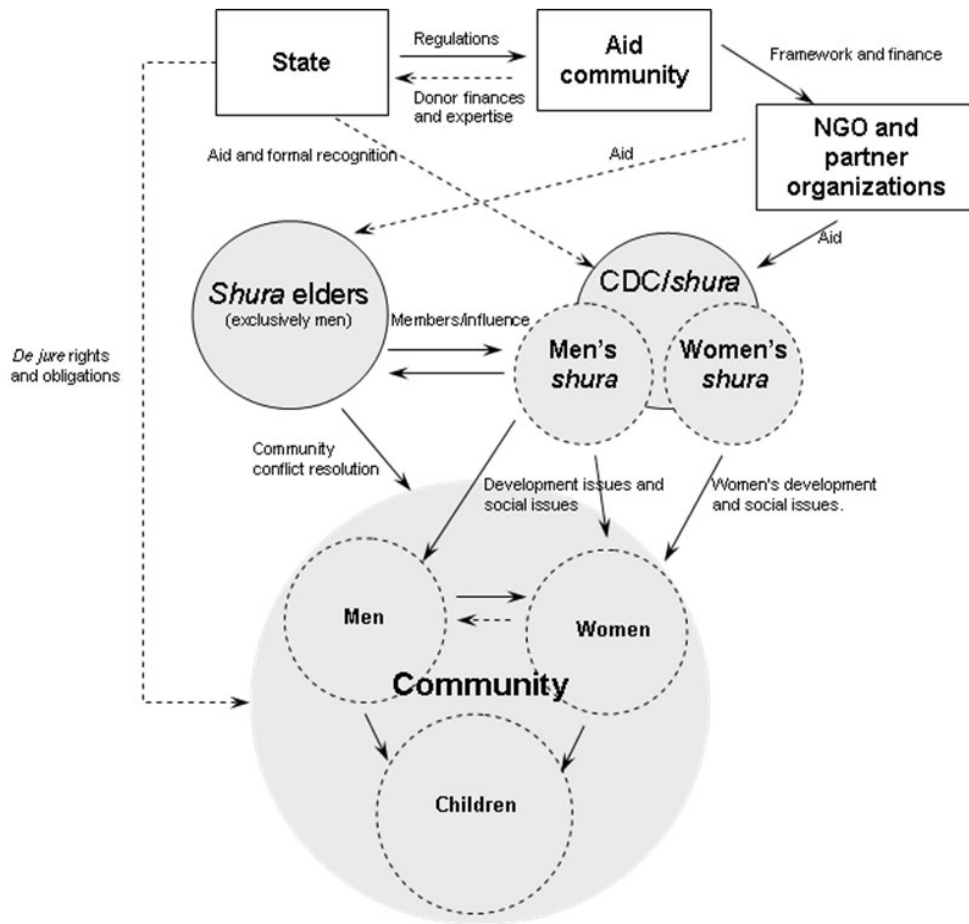
The discourse framing Afghan women's space to participate in community level decision-making is as Foucault states produced by a mutual process of power and knowledge. This struggle in communities over ideas concerning gender roles and influence over community decisions and politics, reflects communities' perceptions on what are appropriate and relevant issues concerning community welfare and priorities, as well as who are accepted to put issues on the formal agenda. Discerning the actors in the rural communities who have power to influence the discourse of women's political



role is difficult and was beyond the scope of this thesis. The secondary literature exploring community political structures in Bamiyan province, place emphasis on the community institution of the *shura* as mentioned in the introductory chapter.

Though the *shura* is a fairly new concept emerging during the civil war, the *shura* is today an acknowledged community governance structure in Afghan society (Ehsan 2001, ICG 2003a). A serious challenge for promoting women's inclusion in local political structures is that the set up of alternative mechanisms like CDCs and women's *shuras* threatens existing power structures that have continued conflicting interests. The controversy of changing the *shura* and *jirga* to different and more Western valued systems also raises the possibility that patriarchal and conservative religious forces will be in violent opposition. From my visits to Bamiyan I learned that the villages had parallel *shuras*, both the NSP *shura* I was allowed admittance to, and the *shura* of elders consisting only of prominent men in the village. These parallel community governance structures were overlapping as the community have trust in these men and they have the necessary experience. Villages also often have many considerations to take when selecting men and women members for the *shuras*, such as respect among the villagers, special competence, economic status, and tribal and kin representations, which the principles of equal elections not necessarily solve.

The Panjao case-study and NCA's material from Hazara communities in Bamiyan and Daikundi shows similar patterns of local governance being influenced by traditional male *shura* of elders and religious individuals (Wakefield 2004, Nyborg, Akramy & Gotehus 2008). The findings from Panjao revealed that the men elders had a powerful significance over villagers' level of participation, what was appropriate for public discussion and what was in the sphere of non-decisions. This created barriers to raising issues that were in opposition to their authority. These community authorities make up local civil society and depending on their base of legitimacy; inform the rules, norms and practices that form women's opportunities to participate. In Figure 2, I present a simplistic description of the structure of community authority in Bamiyan based on my findings:



**Figure 2: Structure of Community Authority in Bamiyan**

Source: Fieldwork

The arrows depict power, control and flow of resources. Though the state and the international aid community is placed on the top according to their hierarchical position the figure reveals that members of communities are less directly influenced by these institutions, Instead NGOs, partner-organisations and notably the parallel *shura* structures form the “true” community authority. The parallel structures of the *shuras* compare to the cleavage between *watan* and *ummah* that creates different citizenships for men and women. The CDC is formally recognized by the government as a civil society organisation, and with it women and men have the same legislative rights. Still women are only partially included and male prerogatives reside in these structures limiting women’s participation at all levels.

The NSP evaluation also revealed that the program had resulted in the coexistence of two political institutions in rural communities; the new *shura* and the old *shura* (Barakat et al 2006). The nature of this coexistence ranged from shared to contested community leadership. In the areas were there was a presence of religious

members in the *shura*, women were to a larger extent excluded from decision-making and substantial participation in the CDCs. When it comes to NSP and CDCs requirement to include women, the evaluation report revealed that the project had mixed results throughout the country (Barakat et al 2006). Many places women were merely symbolic participants in order to allow communities to receive the urgently needed Block Grant, or women in the new established *shuras* were coerced into giving support to husbands or male relatives view in local *shura* affairs.

How the *shura* functions also reflects their effectiveness and the access women have to participate. The *shuras* my informants belonged to all met regularly, ranging from every fortnight, to every second month. The women in Pir Dad said the women and men's *shura* usually had joint meetings (Interview 10.07.07). In Ladu the women and men's *shuras* also met regularly and discussed issues together (Interview 11.07.07). In Habashi the women had meetings with the men from time to time and were asked to give their perspective of issues, but the women also had separate meetings (Interview 10.07.07). The case was not the same in Jarukashan, where the women only met without men and dealt with issues "belonging to women" (Interview Maliha 17.07.07).

The women BSEs interviewed from outside Bamiyan also said women and men were separate in community governance both physically in meetings and concerning themes of discussions and decisions. In the BSEs Bibir Gul and Noorahmed's community the women were only allowed to approach the men's *shura* by writing them a letter when there was something they felt were of special concern or wanted to give their view on (Interview Bibir Gul 17.07.07). The men's *shura* discussed and evaluated the suggestions and decided upon appropriate action:

In our village we have a women's *shura*. When they have some problem they can discuss it in the *shura* and then they write a letter and send to the men's *shura*. So the men's *shura* send it to the relevant office or NGO... Earlier we also had this system, but it was not so effective. Since the Taliban government changed this has become better (Interview Noorahmed 18.07.07).

The village of Bibir Gul and Noorahmed is in fact a NSP village and the democratic process should have included women in all community decisions as part of the NSP *shura* establishment.

Though being trained as a BSE has given women confidence to participate in their local *shura*, it is still questionable how far their influence reach in local decision-

making, both in terms of the traditional *shura* of elders who present the existence of the “old discourse” on women’s knowledge, and the separation of the men and women’s *shuras*. Another limitation is the time women have at their disposal. Women’s vulnerability to time consumption can hinder participation effectively. If women’s *shuras* do not affect community decision-making in a substantial way, evidently women will lose interest and find their time better spent elsewhere. As mentioned in chapter four, the BSEs Maliha and Bibir Gul wanted to minimize their responsibilities in local decision-making and prioritize being a BSE. If women “only” attend such village organisations at the request of external aid organisations it might disempower women as it steals time from other activities that could give empowerment. On the other hand most of my informants expressed that the women’s *shura* played an important part in galvanising women’s networks and slowly challenging the political space defined by their community’s category of woman.

### ***5.2 2 Women’s Local Political Participation and Peace-building***

Women’s formal contribution in the Afghan peace-building today has been through the women who have been elected by quota system into the *Loya Jirga* or other government positions. Due to great divisions between women concerning the rural-urban, class, age and social status there is no insurance that these women speak on behalf of the women living in remote rural areas. Many conflicts derive from local conflicts about land, water, and indebtedness and family feuds, which often spill over into ethnic polarisation and cause great grievance in loss of resources or even life for the losing part. This in turn destabilises the fragile peace in the country, especially since most local communities are heavily armed. As women are excluded from the local decision-making that influence negotiating and outcome of local conflicts, women have in some cases been part of solving them by being surrendered to marry the opponent (Amnesty 2005, ICG 2003a, Moghadam 1992). This addresses the need to include women in local political participation, in terms of a democratic and human rights perspective, and to attain lasting peace.

The popular conception concerning third world women’s participation in peace-building processes is that women often contribute on grass-root level and through

informal processes. Women are further believed to be very good in initiating networks with cross cutting bonds overcoming ethnic, cultural and religious differences. They instead focus on discourses and values that connect women together under concepts as motherhood or widows. Women are also believed to be more active in demonstrations and quiet civil obedience and to be “naturally more peace-loving”. For reasons of poverty and lack of education this has often been the truth for women’s participation in the South. This is not the case for Afghanistan. The conservative interpretation of women’s role in Afghan religious and cultural ideology matched with a history of armed conflict and sexual violence targeting women, has not created a friendly setting for women to create networks or initiate activism to influence the peace-building or political processes. Even if this is slowly changing and women’s status and freedom is improving, Afghan women obviously do not fit the homogenization and popular beliefs concerning women’s influence. Average Afghan women have very little space in society to form working civil society groups that can have substantial influence.

With this information, the question for international donors, governments and aid community is how commitments to include women in peace-building processes can be put into practice? And more specifically how this particular project the Barefoot Approach can help to insure rural women’s influence in Afghanistan’s peace-building? It is important to remember that the Barefoot Approach does not have a gender and peace-building agenda per se. Still this project has restructured community’s perceptions on women’s abilities. The development of women’s *shura* by NSP is also a central factor in this, and in Bamiyan the two projects in many respects compliment each other. BSEs offer beneficial knowledge in rural communities’ new priorities, such as development issues and they are given a position in community decision-making. In addition providing solar light and energy for media, such as TV and radio gives access to important resources that give women empowerment, which is a necessary precondition for participation and peace. The Barefoot project’s achievement of including women BSE in local political decision-making might be explained by the positive aspects of pragmatism. Afghanistan poses the challenge of working with the unlike-minded when it comes to gender relations (Goodhand 2003). The discourse of local Afghan communities on women’s status in society and the international agenda of GAD, CEDAW and UNSCR 1325 are miles apart. The need to balance, on the one hand the perspective of gender equality as a basis for development and peace-building, and on

the other hand the fear that fronting gender will lead to renewal of the conflict, is challenging. Checking values and agendas at the door to work toward a pragmatic solution is often neglected in the field of international discourse, donor requirements and perception of intervention at the local level. To obtain a common level necessitates a dialogue and challenge of notions. This comes down to a question of language that all can speak from international institutions to the local beneficiary. The Barefoot Approach has a dual rhetoric of both having an important gender perspective in the international arena and the image of just “plain sustainability” towards the local communities regarding the inclusion of women as BSEs. If the down-playing of gender rights is part of enabling women’s political participation is hard to say, but it is an interesting fact. The Barefoot solar energy project does not work directly to promote women’s political participation, but sending women away from their village and home to learn technology and give them the authority to maintain an important community resource, sends a potent message to women beneficiaries and rural communities. Still the existence of old village leadership constitutes an important barrier for women to have a natural place in local conflict resolution. This *doxa* continues to dominate which issues of participation is negotiable in the communities’ gender relations. Issues concerning conflicts and security remain outside women’s acknowledged abilities. Nevertheless, women’s agency negotiating gender relations, influencing gender discourse and participation in decision-making might incorporate conflict resolution in time if women and men’s basic needs are met.

### 5.3 Concluding Remarks

The Barefoot project has influenced the women beneficiaries’ collective identity as perceptions on women’s abilities change. The existence of women BSEs has shown communities that women have knowledge and competence outside women’s traditional knowledge challenging the barrier for women’s political participation. Women’s claims to be part of community decision-making are also seen as more legitimate since women have new spaces to prove their abilities and because communities deal increasingly with development affairs and NGO cooperation. For Afghan women support from NGOs constitute a new opportunity to use their agency. As discussed in relation to empowerment, discourse and negotiation, the Barefoot project enables women ability to

control their development, and new opportunities enhance their bargaining power in gender relations. Nevertheless the Barefoot Approach does not encompass deep changes in the rooted structure of gender relations in Bamiyan or other places in Afghanistan. The local political institutions only partially include women and patriarchal, religious, economic conditions and insecurity present several limitations to women. On the other hand it is important to see the beneficiaries as not products of a developmental project's success or failure. The women beneficiaries have several other resources independent from aid schemes, such as kinship, social status and religion.

Conversely it would be wrong to claim the Barefoot Approach has only superficial impact. The alternative would be implementing the project and just training men BSEs as many aid projects with technological assistance does. This in the rural Afghan context is the same as excluding women and undermining the very democratic principles we export as the solution to end conflict and start peace. It would also further marginalise women's legitimacy in local decision-making as the aid project would entrench discriminative practises. In addition it would disrupt sustainability because men are often away from the village and men BSEs cannot go into homes of other families to repair equipment if women are there by themselves.

## CHAPTER 6.0 CONCLUSION

This thesis has tried to capture the effect implementation of the Barefoot Approach has had on the social and political role of the women beneficiaries. By investigating women's everyday life and relation to family, networks and community governance structures, I have tried to map out how solar energy implemented in rural Afghan homes can lead to empowerment and local political participation. I have introduced an analytical divide between women's social and political role, applying empowerment and feminist geography approach as theoretical framework. Women's social and political roles are inter-dimensional and such a divide does not exist in the beneficiaries' life. However the analytical and theoretical division has provided the opportunity to see the data from different perspectives. Discourse and negotiation reveals nuances and details of how gender roles are produced, which development approaches do not capture. The empowerment approach on the other hand provides a conceptual framework that works well in exploring technical aid projects like the Barefoot Approach and access to resources that provides social power. During my fieldwork I found that there are clearly changes happening in the lives of my informants concerning the women's status socially and politically. An underlying theme in this thesis and in the narratives of my informants has been that life seems to have been changed from a constant fight for survival, to a life with more surpluses of energy, resources, time and leisure.

### 6.1 Barefoot Approach's Impact on Women's Social Role

The main findings of this thesis are how the implementation of the solar energy has changed women's everyday life. The light from solar energy has provided women and their families' new livelihood opportunities and increased income, educational benefits, health benefits and improved material life conditions. In addition the project has increased women's mobility within the villages and provided more time for empowering activities, such as socialising within women's networks, galvanising extended family networks and for some access to participating in the women's *shura*. Perhaps most interesting was how the solar energy impacted on the psychological well-being of women in relation to interaction with their family and husband. My informants stressed



how the burden of housework was lessened and how TV, radio and indoor lighting developed time for leisure and conversation between family members. For some women this had led to drastic changes such as diminishing domestic violence.

On community level the Barefoot Approach gives Afghan rural societies technological innovation in the sense of training local residents and providing responsibility and ownership to the rural communities themselves. The impact is diffusion of technological knowledge that facilitates opportunities for creating new machines and equipment, enhancing their competitiveness and efficiency in for instance making of food and handicrafts. Access to information through media also links the urban population to political and economic affairs in Kabul and the outside world. For the women trained as BSEs, the project has a clear capacity and confidence-building aspect that strengthens their self-esteem and status.

Introduction of new energy sources has profound impact on societies, though not to the same extent for the entire population. The poorest in the rural communities in this case-study are still disadvantaged because they are partially excluded from the benefits due to extreme poverty, lack of time or low status. Solar energy also has its clear limitations because the panels installed in this case only provides energy for light and appliances such as TV, radio and machines for yeasting butter. On the other hand solar energy is an environmentally friendly and sustainable energy source with low costs of implementation and maintenance. Extending the project with new energy solutions in the future, such as solar cookers or solutions for heating, would increase the benefit for women even further.

## 6.2 Barefoot Approach's' Impact on Women's Political Role

The political role of my women informants is also changing. Women are slowly given space in community decision-making as the gender discourse and negotiation changes in rural communities. This is not attributed to the Barefoot Approach alone. The entrenched structures of Afghan gender relations are resilient to changes from outside. Nevertheless the composition of the Barefoot Approach's gender perspective and the establishment of the women's *shura* has transformed women's political role from being only informal and outside women's traditional base of knowledge, to formal acknowledgement of women's ability to provide services for their people, such as

maintaining the solar energy equipment and in community decision-making regarding (women's) social and developmental issues. Being trained as BSE builds women's confidence, competence, experience and authority. Consequently all the women BSEs had political positions either in their women's *shura* or as Soraya cooperating with the men's *shura*. The women's valuable skills when returning from BSE training sends a potent message to women beneficiaries and their communities about women's abilities. This is also done in line with a great benefit to the whole community, and without a provocative formal agenda of changing gender roles. In addition it is important to analyse women's status in accordance with poverty. Insufficient material resources gives painful trade offs between important dimensions of choice. Providing women beneficiaries with empowerment through financial resources provides women's opportunity to use their agency politically. On the other hand it also reveals that for the poorest in the communities, poverty will still limit their political participation and ability to exercise choice.

My material also reveal that even though solar energy is part of a gradual transformation of the discourse and negotiation that forms women's political role, women in this case-study are far from being included in conflict resolution at local level. As on the national level, heavy politics such as peace-building, insecurity and opium issues are considered as outside women's natural place in decision-making. This endangers women's human rights and the peace-building itself as women's perspectives risk being ignored. Hopefully this will eventually change when women's place in the *shuras* who deal with other social issues is consolidated.

### 6.3 Concluding Remarks

The title of this thesis, *Light and Hope*, is illustrating to the findings of my research. As a woman from a country where gender equality has been on the agenda for over a century, it is clear that though there is hope there still is a long way to go before women have equal rights and can fulfil their dreams and capacity. *Light and hope* stands as opposites to *darkness and despair*, which for the poorest in Afghanistan continues to be part of everyday life. But hope also means that uncertainty remains over the expected result. The future history is still to be written and the *jus post bellum* in Afghanistan is far from complete in any way. The challenges endangering the promotion of women's

empowerment in Afghanistan seems to be increasing in force as the GWOT is the main priority and the stability of the whole region is at risk because of the situation in Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. Altering discriminative gender relations limiting women's social and political role is not a change that will manifest over night. Ideas have however been introduced and it seems the ideals for women's identity are slowly changing towards an interpretation of women's value to be equal to men's in regard to basic rights and opportunities. The greatest change is that the gender discourse now is more actively performed by women themselves.

This thesis also relates to the bigger issue of women and peace-building and the role aid plays in this. The question of which approach and on what level one should work to include women in the developmental and peace-building process has global relevance, as women suffer from conflict, poverty and discrimination around the world. While many projects have been directed into capacity-building of women in politics and government, this has often only helped women in the cities with higher social and economic status, whereas rural women fight to sustain everyday life. In conflict countries with weak states and strong local autonomy, the need to enhance women's social and political role at national and local level are not separate missions, but intertwined and complementary processes crucial to create a state accountable to all its citizens, while at the same time achieving sustainable peace. Advocacy for women's rights and participation to ensure democracy and peace-building is considered a central part in reaching lasting peace. Conversely some also fear that clear advocacy for women's rights creates tension between traditional forces in society and the new discourse, which might intensify and spread the existing conflict. This raises the question of how to realise international gender priorities into practice in a meaningful way. Projects working from values of providing basic needs are viewed as a logical step to provide development and economic growth that could help end the conflict. Providing resources such as electricity is an important link between the government and the population, and has multiple positive effects on development.

This thesis has provided information about this case based on a limited time frame. Further research is needed to investigate how aid projects and building local democracy can work as a pragmatic solution to include women over time. Aid coordination and investigating how different projects can work together to strengthen women's position also needs more focus. It would be especially interesting to explore

the dimension of community governance structures and women's participation in relation to other conflict contexts where women have socio-economic, cultural and religious limitations to participation.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>burqha</i>	loose garment covering a women's body, face and hair
<i>butah</i>	mountain bush used for heating and cooking
<i>chaddari</i>	Term for proper Islamic dress that covers a women's body, face and hair
<i>daiah</i>	Traditional midwife without formal training
<i>gilem</i>	flat weaved carpet made by women
Hazara	ethnic group in Afghanistan
<i>jihad</i>	term for Islamic holy war
<i>jirga</i>	consultative tribal council
<i>khub dakhtar</i>	good daughter
Loya Jirga	Grand Assembly, Nationwide gathering of notables and/or elected representatives, revived institution from the monarchical period.
<i>mahr</i>	brideprice the grooms family pays to the bride or her family
<i>mahram</i>	practice that women should be accompanied by their husbands or relatives when leaving their home or village
Meshrano Jirga	the upper house of the bicameral National Assembly of Afghanistan, revived institution from the monarchical period.
Mujahidin	Holy warriors, an Islamic term used to describe the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation
<i>mullah</i>	religious official of a small community
<i>namad</i>	felt carpet made by women
<i>pashtunwali</i>	Pashtun tribal law
<i>pardah</i>	segregation of the sexes by physical segregation and requirement for women to cover their bodies
<i>Qur'an</i>	the holy book of Islam
<i>shari'ah</i>	Islamic jurisprudence
<i>shura</i>	consultative tribal or local council. Based on an Islamic concept
<i>ulama</i>	plural term of <i>alim</i> , meaning Muslim scholars
<i>ummah</i>	community of Muslims, Muslim world
<i>watan</i>	homeland

## ABBREVIATIONS

BSE	Barefoot Solar Engineer
CDC	Community Development Council, referred to as <i>shura</i> , or NSP <i>shura</i>
GAD	Gender and Development
GWOT	Global War of Terror
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force led by NATO in Afghanistan
NAC	Norwegian Afghanistan Committee
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
NSC	Norwegian Save the Children
NSP	National Solidarity Program of the Afghan government and the World Bank to establish CDC
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution (1325)
VO	Village Organisation (facilitated by Oxfam)
WID	Women in Development

## APPENDIX

Table 2: Interview Overview

Informant	Attachment	Interview type	Location	Date
Ahmed	BSE village B	Individual Interview	Kabul	15.07.07
Asim	BSE Ladu	Individual Interview	Ladu	11.07.07
Assef	BSE village C	Individual Interview	Kabul	17.07.07
Band-i-Amir villages* joint men's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Jarukashan	09.07.07
Bente Damsleth	NSC	Individual Interview	Oslo	15.05.07
Bibir Gul	BSE village D	Individual Interview	Kabul	17.07.07
Farzana	BSE village B	Individual Interview	Kabul	16.07.07
Gry Synnevåg	NCA	Individual Interview	Kabul	05.07.07
Habashi men's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Habashi	10.07.07
Habashi women's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Habashi	10.07.07
Hassan	BSE Habashi	Individual Interview	Habashi	10.07.07
Ingebjørg Kårstad	NCA	Individual Interview	Oslo	29.03.07
Jamal	NCA	Individual Interview	Kabul	05.07.07
Jarukashan men's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Jarukashan	09.07.07
Jarukashan women's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Jarukashan	09.07.07
Khaled	BSE Jarukashan	Individual Interview	Jarukashan	09.07.07
Ladu men's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Ladu	11.07.07
Ladu women's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Ladu	11.07.07
Leilah	BSE Ladu	Individual Interview	Ladu	11.07.07
Liv Kjølner	NAC	Individual Interview	Oslo	28.03.07
Maliha	BSE Jarukashan	Individual Interview	Kabul	17.07.07
Noorahmed	BSE village D	Individual Interview	Kabul	18.07.07
Petra Storstein	NRC	Individual Interview	Oslo	15.04.07
Pir Dad men's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Pir Dad	10.07.07
Pir Dad women's <i>shura</i>		Group Interview	Pir Dad	10.07.07
Rasheed	BSE Pir Dad	Individual Interview	Pir Dad	10.07.07
Shukrullah	BSE village A	Individual Interview	Kabul	15.07.07
Soraya	BSE village C	Individual Interview	Kabul	17.07.07
Taher	BSE Habashi	Individual Interview	Habashi	10.07.07
Thora Holter	NCA	Individual Interview	Oslo	29.03.07

\* Joint men's *shura* meeting with Jarukashan and two neighbouring villages surrounding the Band-i-Amir lakes in Bamiyan.