

PROGRAMME (LRRD) IN AFGHANISTAN

Why and how to improve programmes for women: enhancing income generation activities and improving food quality

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Women's issues are central to operational and the strategy policy in current reconstruction period in Afghanistan. Many development programmes are promoting a approach' and empowerment' but are these programmes relevant and suitable? A significant number of so-called 'women's programmes' are failing to achieve their objectives because women's real needs have not been fully understood. Many programmes appear to consider women as a homogeneous group rather than taking into account inherent diversity amongst the female population.

Moreover, in this post-conflict context, current 'food security' programmes primarily focus on the quantity of food rather than on the quality of diet. However, in the long term, the accent really needs to be placed on nutrition. Indeed, if the issue of 'nutrition security' was dealt with alongside food security, this may well prove to be an effective way of improving links between a relief approach and a development strategy. To achieve this objective, women need to be targeted, as they are responsible for many farming and non-farming production strategies and for providing food for the household. The majority of women's tasks are food related, and food preparation is their most important responsibility. Is it possible to improve nutrition security through women's programmes?

Finally, the main objective of development programmes is to reduce household vulnerability. It is important therefore that women's programmes can subsequently be

transformed into programmes that benefit both men and women.



Women harvesting wheat in Baharak valley

This paper is based on a five-month survey (June to November 2005) in Baharak district in Badakhshan (North-East Afghanistan). This research was carried out thanks to a partnership between two research institutions, namely Groupe URD and Afghanaid in Baharak.

This study aims at obtaining a better understanding of the diversity of women's roles in agriculture and in the household economy, especially with regard to decision-making roles both inside and outside the home.

Moreover, the food issue was studied from a qualitative point of view in order to understand the diversity of eating habits between different types of household and the main challenges facing food security programmes in rural areas. Finally, this study tried to evaluate women's programmes implemented by Afghanaid and to formulate recommendations in order to

improve women's programmes in Baharak valley.

Baharak is an attractive valley lying in a range of medium-sized hills (1,500m) and there are opportunities for agriculture, comparison to other areas. The cropping system is mainly based on irrigated fields, and the favourable climate also allows farmers to cultivate fruits and vegetables. Since Baharak is located at the crossroads between five districts, the bazaar is quite large and a goods considerable proportion of exchanged. This explains why many families have settled in the valley over the past century. This area can be qualified as suburban but it is also characterised by constraints that are typical of remote areas, such as limited access to some of the villages and high levels of illiteracy amongst women.

What difficulties do women's programmes have to overcome in rural Afghanistan?

Women are 'hiding behind walls'

In Afghanistan, women have to contend with considerable social pressure, especially in rural areas, and this places constraints on their activities and movement. The interpretation of the Muslim religion in Badakhshan, where people are relatively conservative, has an impact on women's access to agricultural activities, markets and decision making within the household.

"My grandmother told me that women did not wear the burka when she was a chid. At this time, we were simple and primitive folk... When families from other provinces like the Pashtun arrived in the 1930-50s, we became like city-dwellers and since then, women are not allowed to show their faces to anybody outside their home." Woman in Sar-Char village.

Moreover, as a result of 25 years of war, women have become accustomed to hiding. In the valley, women tend to wear the *burka* and they only work in fields with protecting walls. It is more difficult for women to carry out commercial and income generation activities compared to men.

Nevertheless, over the past five years, the situation has been changing gradually. For example, half of the teachers in Baharak's school are women and all the NGOs operating in the area employ female staff. Returnees from Pakistan or from Kabul became accustomed to a different lifestyle and have a more liberal perception of women's role.

Women's activities do not generate 'visible' incomes

Most women in rural areas are involved in some agricultural activities and are responsible for livestock inside their compound. Men generally undervalue women's work as it does not generate large amounts of concrete products nor cash revenues. Yet, for some time now (over 50 years), lots of women work in kitchen gardens and are responsible for irrigation, weeding, harvest, processing and cooking vegetables. When it comes to crops, such as wheat, fodder and potatoes, women are involved in cleaning and drying seeds at home, storing grain and baking bread. Women have also to clean the litter in summer, making and drying cakes of dung (tchapack) and are breeding, milking responsible for processing the milk. Women sell dairy products (yogurt, qrut¹) to local traders and villagers but most transactions are carried out on an exchange basis rather than for cash.

The household work and handicraft's activities rarely generate income because women do not have enough time and material to produce surplus. Moreover, men do not allow women to exchange high value products. Nevertheless, the goods that are produced by women in the home reduce household expenditure on imported goods, such as food and carpets.

Women are not a homogeneous group

At present, the valley has all the advantages and constraints of both urban and rural areas. This ambiguous situation has had an impact on the rising inequality and the complexity of women's issues.

The diversity amongst the female population is actually linked to their role in decision-making processes both inside and outside the household. This role depends on different factors which affect women's involvement in household activities, compared to men. These factors, which are discussed in an AREU report² on gender roles in agriculture include social, geographical and economic indicators.

One of the social indicators is the child-bearing role of women which evolves over her lifetime and has a strong impact on the type of activities she may be involved in. For example, from puberty until their wedding, girls generally have less room for manoeuvre and less freedom than their mothers. Within the compound, the eldest woman is responsible for

Grace J., Who Owns The Farm?, February 2005

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¹ *Qrut*: dried cheese made in Afghanistan with milk from sheep, goats and cows.

the distribution of household tasks to the younger women and she participates more easily in discussions and sometimes decision making. Widows enjoy a greater freedom than other women and often play a leadership role within women's groups.

Moreover, the relationship between women within the village depends on the history of the village (old or new village) and its composition (whether the same families have been present for many generations or whether new families have arrived from other villages or districts). Although some internal systems of solidarity amongst women generally exist, whether relations are harmonious or not differs from one village to another. As a result, women's groups that are set up by NGOs often fail because they do not take into account the different power relations that exist between women within each village.

Household composition and wealth also influence women's role in decision making. All these factors have to be taken into account when implementing women's programmes. As such, organisations need to invest more time understanding the diversity that exists within communities and propose more flexible programmes.

Relevance and sustainability of women's programmes

If women do not really feel a sense of ownership for the programme, there is a high risk that these activities will not be sustainable in the long term. Most of the programmes are based on a limited understanding of women's activities and expectations as the assessment phase is often too superficial. As a result, a large number of women's programmes are abandoned after few months because they fail to take into account the whole spectrum of women's issue. NGOs often work with women as individuals without taking into account their role as an economic worker within the household. Women generally dedicate all their in kind and cash incomes to improving the living conditions of their household.

For instance, literacy courses are relevant for women's education but not for improving women's income generation capacity in the short term. Yet, many households are too vulnerable to have a long-term outlook. As a result, many women are not motivated to attend these courses and teachers are confronted with high levels of absenteeism. One of the teachers responsible for a literacy programme in Baharak valley said: "If women do not receive any oil, wheat or other goods during the courses, they are not motivated to

come. Women would rather stay at home in order to take care of the children and do the housework."

Madjân, head of a women's *shura* in Chapchi-Yardar

She has been a widow for twelve years and mortgaged her husband's for her eldest son's marriage. She rents a shop in the village which is run by her youngest son. She likes to say: "I am my own boss."

Furthermore, the sustainability of women's income generation programmes is questionable because these programmes do not always take the whole of the production chain into consideration.

Taking handicraft activities as an example, six years ago in Baharak, a group of women was trained in carpet weaving over a six-month period. However, today nobody produces carpets in the valley because people do not have looms at home and nor do they have sheep to produce wool. Moreover, weaving these carpets takes a lot of time and they must be of a high quality (hard-wearing wool, fashionable or original designs) to be sold. The interviewed trainees also said: "There is no market here for these products, nowadays everyone buys Iranian or Pakistani carpets because they are cheaper and modern." In this way, it would be appropriate to support handicraft activities in areas where women are highly skilled and have access to the necessary materials, such as wool.

Lack of coordination between NGOs is a disadvantage for beneficiary participation

Finally, women's programmes are confronted with global strategy problems. After years of widespread free food programmes, one of the difficulties that the development approach has to overcome is making people aware of their responsibilities. For example, free food distributions in schools and literacy courses³ generated a degree of passivity amongst beneficiaries. Also, girls involved in the Afghanaid's Women's Resource Center (WRC) in Baharak retorted to Afghanaid staff: "Why you do not give us a free sewing machine after the six months training? Our friends received

³ "These distributions refer to the World Food Programme operations, such as food-for-education which includes school feeding (where food rations are used to encourage attendance, notably of young girls) and food-for-training programmes where women receive food rations to attend literacy classes and training on income generation skills." Dufour, C., Nutrition Update, LRRD, Groupe URD, June 2005

one from another NGO." and: "This neighbour earns every month 50\$ to teach a literacy course, for two hours a day whereas I earn just 20\$ for the same work but with another NGO, it isn't fair!" Not only is there a risk of creating jealousy between women, but communities may finally loose confidence in NGOs and international organisations.

Moreover, knowing that in Afghanistan there are plenty of NGOs, if there is no real programmes coordination between operational strategies, true development is an unrealistic goal. For example, it is common to visit one village in Baharak valley which benefits from three different programmes, for example health education and embroidery courses, while a neighbouring village does not anv kind of assistance. These inconsistencies are often indicative of sense of competitiveness between different organisations.

How women's programmes can move on to nutrition security programmes? Why women should be a key element in food programmes?

Women, in rural areas, are involved in both farming systems and in preparing meals. So they have a thorough knowledge of production and consumption units. Cooking is also considered to be a real skill in the Afghan culture and women's culinary skills can increase their standing in the eyes of men. Women are more concerned by food quality compared with other members of the household.

Furthermore, women alone are responsible for children's health from breast feeding onwards. As a result, women are often interested to learn how to improve their food hygiene practices and to achieve a balanced diet.

What are the main challenges for nutrition security programmes?

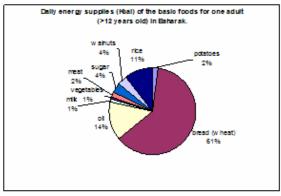
According to C. Dufour, 2005⁴: "The population of Afghanistan suffers from one of the poorest health and nutrition situations in the world. Levels of chronic malnutrition, also referred to as stunting and characterised by a low height for a given age, are extremely high: between 45 and 59% of children under 5 (<-2 Z-score height-for-age). Micronutrient deficiency diseases are very widespread. (MoH, 2004)."

this chart, cover on average mor usual energy requirements⁵ for bot women (2554 Kcalories).

"Food diversification strategies aimed at vulnerable households are a key strategy in the fight against micronutrient deficiencies. An increasing number of agencies are supporting such activities, through community-based food security programmes, but also through income generation programmes targeted at women, where women learn how to produce and preserve certain foods so as to sell them, for example. Nutrition education on the use of diversified foods and food preparation methods are also being integrated in other projects. through women's Community Development Councils set-up as part of the National Solidarity Programme. But these projects are still implemented on a small-scale, and their impact and sustainability remains to be assessed."

Dufour C., Nutrition Update, LRRD, Groupe URD, 2005

The following figure presents the results of data gathered from twenty households in Baharak valley. According to these eating habits surveys, more than 50% of most households' daily diet is composed of bread, and this is followed by oil and starchy food. These figures indicate that, on average, the household diet is not very diversified and this can cause problems of micronutrient deficiency.



In comparison with other areas located at a higher altitude, such as the Shewas (pasture lands in Baharak district) and other areas in Afghanistan where food insecurity remains high, the population of Baharak valley is less affected by food insecurity. Indeed, the daily energy supplies of basic foods mentioned in this chart, cover on average more than the usual energy requirements⁵ for both men and women (2554 Kcalories).

⁴ Dufour C., Integrating nutrition in food security and livelihoods interventions: why and how in Afghanistan?, Groupe URD, 2005

⁵ The WFP food distribution programmes in Afghanistan provide portions of 2100 Kcal/day for an adult.

Therefore, more than a lack of food, people in Baharak valley are suffering from poor quality of diet. Even if their local agriculture provides many vegetables and fruits, women are not accustomed to cooking vegetables in large quantities. Likewise, if they grow vegetables in small quantities, households choose to sell these products and purchase imported goods, such as a bottle of coca-cola rather than eating their home produce.

Furthermore, these new imported products (fizzy drinks, biscuits, sweets,) are seen as high value goods. In Afghan society, the type of food consumed by the household is an indication of their standard of living and image is of great importance.

Therefore, in Baharak valley and in similar suburban areas, food programmes need to focus primarily on food quality rather than quantity. Improving the quality of food mainly implies focusing on food hygiene and well-balanced diet in order to prevent infections and reduce nutrient deficiencies. Indeed, nutrition education remains a priority in this area. At high school, some of the science classes include basic nutrition education and students pass on this knowledge to their parents. For example, a woman living near the new city of Baharak said: "My eldest girl goes to school and she advises me to cook more vegetables with less oil. Thanks to her, our health is better." Unfortunately, at present not many girls have the opportunity to attend these classes.

If women were involved in nutrition security programmes, they would benefit from two main advantages: they could improve the health of all members of their household and they could enhance their culinary skills.

How to implement nutrition security programmes with women in rural areas?

In order to improve the quality of food in rural many organisations are already areas. developing agriculture programmes to boost vegetable and fruit production. For example, Kitchen Garden programmes for women implemented by Afghanaid increased both the diversity of vegetables grown in the valley and women's knowledge about vegetable cultivation. Nevertheless this type programme is not appropriate for all women because many of them have no land and no access to water to grow vegetables.

In order to involve more women in these programmes, there are two main points which need to be taken into account.

First, eating habits vary according to a number of social factors. To this end, efforts to improve people's diet must involve the community in a way that is respectful of their customs, skills and specific requirements. For nutrition courses, women could gather in groups and exchange their own knowledge on nutrition, under the supervision of a nutrition expert.

Given that many women do not have access to vegetables or fruit (they can neither purchase these goods nor produce them at home), they are not able to diversify the household diet. Indeed, nutrition issues are also linked to household revenues. For example, women refugees who have returned from Pakistan and Iran, where they used to cook many different types of food, especially vegetables, can no longer buy these ingredients because of their limited financial resources. In addition to nutrition education, development programmes also need to focus on improving household income generation?



General recommendations for women's programmes

Including men in mixed programmes

Prevailing social mores are really one of the key issues for the sustainability of women's programmes. Indeed, in Badakhshan, most NGOs realised that the agreement of the men's *shura* was a prerequisite for all new projects for women. In Baharak, communities are sometimes against the principle of women's programmes and operators need to work closely with men to explain what they stand to benefit from these programmes. For instance, Afghanaid, which is known for its community-based approach, always asks for the approval of the men's *shura* before opening a Women's Resource Center⁶ in a village.

⁶ In the WRC, women and girls attend training programmes.

Moreover, all programmes with a gender approach need to be careful not to disrupt the fine balance between men and women's roles. As women's and men's roles are interlinked, it would be beneficial to design and implement programmes that provide support for both men's and women's work at different stages. Indeed, no income generation programme can implemented without prior acknowledgement of men and their involvement.

Supporting an integrated approach

Integrating a diverse range of activities in a single programme can have several positive effects and this may reinforce a programme's impact on income generation.

For instance, the Self Help Groups (cf. box below) combine micro finance activities with educational courses for women, such as writing and accounting. Furthermore, it would also be possible to promote nutrition education, provide advice on agricultural techniques or marketing for women and thus help them set up small businesses. These groups could also provide practical training, such as making jewellery and bags, baking cakes or building hen-houses.

The concept of Self Help Groups (SHG) is based on a model of credit provision which is used extensively in India, with an equal emphasis on empowerment and income generation.

In the case of Baharak, groups are composed of 15-20 women in villages off the new city ('vulnerable sections'). Women volunteer to abide by strict rules within the group and elect two agents and a secretary. Each member has to bring 10, 20 or 30 Afghanis to the weekly meeting, or they have to pay double next week. The money collected is given to one woman, who is selected by the group's members. This money can be used to start up a new business activity. For instance, some women buy ingredients and fuel, and sell bolonis and mantus to children at school or in the bazaar. Each week or month. SHG members have to decide whether the same woman is given the money or whether another woman should benefit. The woman who was given the money has to pay back the amount borrowed to the group, plus half of her profits.

Valuing women's activities

Thanks to micro credit programmes such as SHG and Afghanaid's cash grant, people's perceptions of women's activities have improved. As a result, women are making more decisions in the household and their

capacity to generate income has improved. Nevertheless, micro finance is limited in rural Afghanistan by two main problems.

Firstly, there is no bank and in many remote areas women have no access to monetary exchange. Secondly, the most vulnerable households are rarely involved in this type of programme because their situation does not enable them to save money. Indeed, they are dependent on short-term strategies and direct cash-flow.

In order to reduce household vulnerability, there are other types of equally relevant programme. For example, in Baharak, partnerships between aid organisations and the private sector could provide support for the setting up of a micro enterprise for processing fruit and vegetables. There is a good potential for local and national markets of these products and the raw materials can be found locally. Landless women and widows could be employed and trained in new processing techniques (such as jam, fruit juices, fruit dried with sulphur). Literate women and men could be responsible for accounting with men in charge of transporting and selling the produce. Such a programme would be ambitious and would require good coordination between the public and private sectors.

Conclusion

Women's programmes need to advance on a step-by-step basis. An in-depth assessment phase in order to obtain a comprehensive view of the main dynamics and diversity is the only way to address women's needs in an efficient and sustainable manner.

Also, programmes have to target their beneficiaries at a community and household level. For example, food security programmes should focus both on the quantity and the quality of diet. Indeed, the challenges facing programme operators in terms of nutrition are to improve the household's access to food supplies and to educate women on how to provide a well-balanced diet for the household.

Finally, the question of whether women truly want to be financially independent should also be raised. For Western women, this would be a symbol of freedom but Afghan women do not necessarily have the same vision of independence. They do not necessarily want to manage the household budget or be financially independent. Most Afghan women's main concern is to improve the household's living standards and not necessarily their own individual conditions.