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## **Apprenticeship and Literacy Model for Women in Afghanistan: A Grounded Narrative**

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# **Apprenticeship and Literacy Model for Women in Afghanistan: A Grounded Narrative**



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## **Abstract**

This study reviewed the Learning for Community Empowerment Project (LCEP-2), a five-year project designed by UN-Habitat and funded by the United States International Agency for Development (USAID). The project's major goal was to empower marginalized communities in Afghanistan through activities in integrated literacy, community saving and investment groups, apprenticeships, and business development training.

The study examined the empowerment model of this project. It first investigated the work the social organizers did with the men and women residents of the project implementation locations in transforming patriarchal norms in conservative areas to improve women's access to public space. It then looked at the impact of literacy and apprenticeship training on women's social and economic lives.

The study found that these social organizers, who were the front-line soldiers of the project, played a significant role in influencing the patriarchal institutions to encourage capacity development opportunities for women in the villages. It also found that this kind of community mobilization, which is crucial for the successful establishment of women's empowerment programs, especially in conservative areas, is viewed as a secondary need by program design stakeholders and donors. High-level stakeholders often pay more attention to the project implementation stage and any tangible outcomes such as number of students enrolled, number of teachers trained, and number of schools established.

Regarding the LCEP-2 empowerment model itself, in total, the study revealed that the model played a crucial role in the social empowerment of women. However, it produced mixed results in regards to improving the economic lives of women. The majority of women who were enrolled in the apprenticeship training struggled in marketing their products due to patriarchal norms and the crippling economy in the country. The study suggested that Afghanistan should institutionalize the social organizers' roles and the community mobilization process within its larger development framework by allocating sufficient resources and including them in any of its rural development activities. The study also recommends that program designers and policymakers involve social organizers in the design of women's empowerment projects. This step will help to reduce gaps between policy and practice.

Additionally, the study concluded that livelihood training, which in certain situations is more effective than apprenticeship training, has the potential for successful growth in rural communities.

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## **Introduction: Global Architectures and Women's Empowerment**

Women's empowerment is a high priority in the international development agenda. According to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), in 2013, donors provided 28 billion dollars (30% of the overall aid) to support gender equality with a particular focus on health and education (2015, p. 2). To expand and extend women's empowerment initiatives, in September 2015, more than 150 world leaders at the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Summit reaffirmed their commitment to empowering all women by 2030, an ambitious goal (G.A. Resolution, 2015).

One major goal of the initiative is to remove gender barriers and inequalities from development processes. Gender, a concept that has drawn the attention of many academic fields after the resurgence of feminism in 1970, refers to social, physiological and cultural norms that society assigns to women and men (World Bank, 2012). Gender equality means that both men and women, girls and boys enjoy the same rights and opportunities in society. According to the World Bank's Gender Development Report (2012, p. 55), gender equality has three key domains: "the accumulation of endowments which includes education, health, and physical assets, the use of those endowments to generate income, and the application of those endowments to take actions, or agency, affecting individual and household well-being."

Gender equality is crucial for development. Improving gender equality makes an economy efficient and effective, and it has a direct impact on other sectors, such as education, health, and governance (World Bank, 2012). According to the World Bank's Gender Development Report (2012), if women in Ghana and Mali have equal access to fertilizer and other inputs that men have, the production of maize will be increased in these countries by 17% (p. 237). Another research project conducted by Action Aid and Archer (2005) found that female literacy significantly impacted women's empowerment and health, productive livelihoods and mothers' support of their children, especially girls' education, which can save the lives of millions of infants and children. For instance, "if all girls in developing countries have completed secondary education, the under-five mortality rate would be halved" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 3).

The United Nations has played a significant role in coordinating efforts to empower women in the political, social, economic and legal arenas (Patton, 2002, p. 25). In 1975, the United Nations initiated the Decade for Women. During this decade, at international conferences on women in Mexico, Copenhagen, and Nairobi, participants agreed to increase the participation of women in political, social and economic structures (Patton, 2002, p. 12). Despite these international efforts and commitments, women, especially poor and severely disadvantaged, did not make substantial progress during this decade. One reason was the structural adjustment programs because it reduced government spending on social programs. According to Anastasakos (2002, p. 114), the structural adjustment programs in Mexico and Costa Rica shrank government funding to the social sector, thus contributing to the disempowerment of a large number of women who lost their economic power and experienced a backward trend in literacy and health.

In 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted a critical international bill focused on women's rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This law, signed by 140 countries, requires states to address the root-causes of gender-based inequality in sectors such as the economy, education, and health. Although the law increased the attention of many governments on women, there are two significant problems in its implementation. First, the majority of member countries are not complying with CEDAW's reporting requirement; second, some states have not

joined this convention because they have reservations, some of which conflict with the overall purpose of CEDAW (Suneja, 2002, pp. 31-38).

With the emergence of NGOs and several global policies such as Education for All (EFA), and Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the issue of women's rights was raised to the top of the agenda for international development. In 1991, and then in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Senegal, world leaders agreed to eliminate gender disparities in education by adopting different strategies (UNESCO, 2004). In 2002, world leaders adopted MDGs and increased their attention to remove obstacles that prevent women from leaving poverty (Turquet, Watt, & Sharman, 2008). NGOs played the role of lobbyists, advocates, and researchers, and women have made some progress since then. For example, the female literacy rate has improved, more girls are in school, and women have been promoted to top management positions. Moreover, in the economic sector, women now constitute 40% of the world labor force and produce 50% of the world food (World Bank, 2012, p. 3).

Despite this progress, gender disparities remain a significant issue across different sectors globally and in developing countries. For instance, progress for women has fallen short in the economic sector. Economic growth, which is a fundamental dimension of empowerment, has received little attention from donors in developing initiatives. Also, women work more but own less property. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) issue paper entitled, Women Economic Empowerment "women perform 66% of the world's work, and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income and own 1% of the property" (2011, p. 5). According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report (2017), if the world progresses at its current pace, gender gaps in the economic sector will not be closed for another 217 years (p. 10). This means that more resources are needed to close gender gaps in the economic sector quickly

Thus, although the women's empowerment initiative is widespread, on the ground, it has had mixed results. Empowering strategies utilized by states, national and international organizations have not helped all women to step out of poverty, especially poor and disadvantaged women in impoverished areas. In some areas empowerment initiatives have led to the disempowerment of women. For example, in Bangladesh, a microfinance program that has been used as an empowering strategy may have helped some women step out of poverty, but it also created strife in poor communities. Karim (2011), who examined the impact of microfinance on poor women in Bangladesh, argues that microcredit had negative consequences on rural women in Bangladesh.

# Literature Review: Women's Empowerment and Its Common Strategies

This literature review has three interrelated sections. The first section covers empowerment theory, its definition, stages, and dimensions. The second section explores female entrepreneurship, an economic empowerment strategy that is widely mentioned in the global policies related to women and has been used on the ground as a strategy by international and national organizations to help women step out of poverty and dependence. The third section considers informal apprenticeship training, which is the powerhouse of vocational training in developing countries and has been used to foster entrepreneurship.

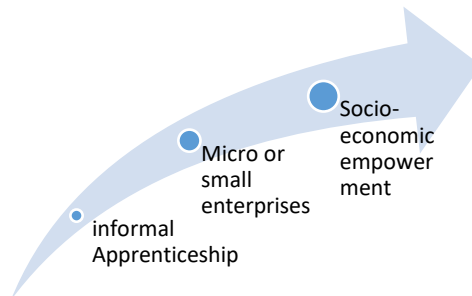


Figure 1: Empowering Strategies

## Empowerment Theory

### *Definition*

According to Sadan (2004), empowerment is a process that helps powerless people improve their abilities to control their own lives. Another definition of empowerment is “what happens when people, individually or collectively, conceive of, define and pursue better lives for themselves” (Tucker & Ludi, 2012, p. 4). It is a process through which marginalized people challenge the power dynamic and gain influence over political, social and economic institutions that are responsible for the distribution of resources. According to the United Nations, the empowerment process improves the self-worth of women; it helps women to make choices, it enhances the decision-making capabilities of women, and it empowers women to change the direction of social programs in ways that produce more just societies and processes (Datta and Kornberg, 2002, p. 4). Srilatha Batliwala’s definition of women’s empowerment focuses on the transformation of male-dominated institutions, such as family, schools, laws, and systems, which are responsible for producing gender discrimination in development processes (as cited in Datta and Kornberg, 2002, p. 2). To sum up, empowerment means power, participation, and control over productive resources, self-reliance, decision-making, autonomy, freedom, and capacity building.

### *Empowerment as a Process and an Outcome*

There are two major strategies that facilitate empowerment: “the structural approach and individual agency” (Tucker & Ludi, 2012, p. 4). The structural approach focuses on changing the culture, the mindset of discriminatory institutions that prevent people from being empowered. States can play a crucial role in this by introducing reforms. The second strategy, Individual agency, focuses on building the capacity of marginalized people by improving their access to skills and resources and thus build their confidence. Many organizations work in this area. They design and implement interventions that help people improve their skills. Zimmerman (as cited in Fetterman, 2013, p. 306) adds that empowerment is

both a process and an outcome. “Empowerment processes are ones in which attempts to gain control, obtain needed resources, and critically understand one’s social environment are fundamental. Empowerment outcomes refer to the operationalization of empowerment. It is the effect of interventions designed to empower participants.” In the empowerment process, marginalized people receive empowerment interventions to improve their abilities while in empowerment outcome, people enjoy the fruits of interventions they have received or the skills that have improved.

### *Stages of Empowerment*

Scholars further conceptualized the term empowerment. According to Sadan (2004), oppressed people go through several stages when trying to achieve what they want in their lives. The first stage is a “sense of frustration” caused by discriminatory structures. In this stage, people realize that they need resources and support to achieve empowerment. The second stage starts when people utilize those resources to build their capacity and skills to confront inequalities and control their situation. After this stage, people continue to mobilize resources to sustain the empowerment process. Kabeer (2005) agrees with Sadan. In *Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment* Kabeer (2005) explores three major concepts that are related to women’s empowerment: agency (ability to make choices), resources and achievements. She advocates for a transformative form of agency, which is not only the ability to make choices, but also the ability to challenge the existing power relations. She adds that to exercise agency, people need resources to build their capacity and challenge the current power relation. Without changing the power relations, equality will not be achieved.

### *Dimensions of Empowerment Theory*

To assess women’s empowerment in different programs, scholars have developed different domains of empowerment and illustrative indicators for each domain. Rehman, Moazzam, and Ansari (2015), who conducted a study in Pakistan to assess the role of microfinance in empowering women in Lahore, came up with four major domains of empowerment: social, economic, health and education, and political empowerment. For each, they had a number of themes or indicators. For economic development domains of empowerment, they list as critical indicators the purchase decision, home decision, asset possession, and income under women’s control. For social and political domains, they list women’s mobility, network, ability to negotiate a change in gender relations, and ability to participate in community voting or political awareness (2015). Santillán, Schuler, Anh, Minh, Trang, and Duc (2004) utilized a similar approach to that used by Rahman to evaluate empowerment of women in different domains in Vietnam. They came up with two sets of domains. The first is about women’s social and economic empowerment, which includes decisions about production, housework, expenditures, relations with family and community, and attitudes about the rights of husbands and wife. The second domain is related to the reproductive health of women. In this domain, the following themes are covered: decision-making about reproduction, communication about and control over sexual relations, maternal health behaviors, views of health services, and attitudes about reproductive health roles and rights, including domestic violence.

### *Demographic Variables that Influence Women’s Empowerment*

A growing body of literature shows that some demographic variables influence women’s empowerment on the ground. According to Rehman, Moazzam, and Ansari (2015, pp. 116 -125), age, level of education, and type of family are the main factors. In their research on Pakistan, they found that as a result of a self-help microfinance program women who were in the 41-45 age bracket were more empowered than women who were in the 20–25 age bracket in all four dimensions. They also found that women who lived

in nuclear families were empowered to a higher degree than women who lived in extended or joint families. Although both of these groups received the same intervention, there was a massive difference between their level of empowerment. Women in the 41-45 age brackets were five times more empowered than women in the 20-24 age bracket.

## **Empowerment and Female Entrepreneurship**

### *Benefits of Female Entrepreneurship*

There is a general trend in the literature that entrepreneurship is one of the best strategies to empower women because it has a multi-faceted impact (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002). According to Singh (2007), female entrepreneurship can improve the status of women in their family and community, address discrimination, reduce poverty, and create jobs for other women. Jerinabi (2007) adds that female entrepreneurship through self-help groups can improve the ability of women to make decisions, and it can increase their control over essential assets. Self-help group members that she interviewed reported improved communication skills, self-confidence, healthy competition among women and better self-reliance. She explains that in India women's entrepreneurship through self-help saving and investment groups contributed not only to national productivity but also to democracy. A survey of social enterprises in five countries funded by British Council found that social enterprises were used by women's organizations as a model to improve the economic status of women (Richardson, Tsui, Nazir, and Ahmed, 2017). According to the survey of both male and female entrepreneurs, 54% to 75% of respondents said that entrepreneurship increased their confidence, improved their status and gave them the power to make choices.

### *Outputs of Female Entrepreneurs*

Although the number of female entrepreneurs has increased since 1970, several studies found that female owned-enterprises are less profitable than those of men, even in developed countries. According to Haan (2006), female enterprises are weak and less productive in African nations in the informal economy which dominates most of the developing countries' market. She found that women were in the lower layer of the Informal Micro Enterprise (IME) sector, making less profit from their business activities compared to male counterparts. As a possible explanation, Klapper and Parker (2011), who reviewed women's engagement in entrepreneurship, found that women entrepreneurs were only confined to limited number of industry sectors. They found that almost 69% of women-owned firms are in the service sector and 14% are in the retail trade. Very few are in high technology. Their review highlighted that both in developed and developing countries earning for women entrepreneurs was less than men.

### *Women-owned Business and their Challenges*

Several studies examined the problems and constraints faced by female entrepreneurs. According to ILO (2008), women face several gender-based obstacles when they attempt to start or expand their current business activities. These obstacles are discriminatory inheritance laws, lack of access to financing or loans, lack of international networks, an unequal share of family responsibilities and limited mobility. In her study of India, Tiwari (2007) is in agreement with ILO on constraints that female entrepreneurs face, but she lists two other significant obstacles: dependence of women entrepreneurs on intermediaries, and lack of access to technology. Another issue that Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) has found is that women have weak business connections compared to men. As a result, they have fewer opportunities to be mentored by experienced entrepreneurs. GEM (2017) suggests that programs should increase access

for women entrepreneurs to qualified people who can mentor them and support them. GEM also found that women lack on their own abilities. They do not much favor to take bank loans. Instead, they get a loan from their family or other personal connections.

### **Informal Apprenticeship Training as an Empowering Strategy**

Apprenticeship is related to entrepreneurship. It has been used as a strategy to foster entrepreneurship in developing countries. Apprenticeships provide technical skills help people to start small businesses or get a wage-paying job in informal enterprises. According to Nkamnebe (2013), apprenticeship has worked very well in enterprise creation among Ibos, a major ethnic group in Nigeria. Many Ibo apprentices have been successful in creating their own enterprises, which are often sophisticated. Some of the artisans send their senior apprentices to foreign countries to ship them needed goods and supplies. Most of the large transportation and manufacturing companies in Niger are formed by Ibo apprentices who first started in informal apprenticeship trainings. Haan (2006, p. 179) also cites many studies of developing countries that show that apprenticeships yield positive results in enterprise development. A study of apprentices in Tanzania found that about one third started new businesses for themselves in the same trade in which they were trained. A study conducted in Senegal found that 69% of the apprentices find jobs after completing their apprenticeship training (Haan, 2006, p. 173). According to a survey in Nairobi, Kenya, almost 70% of IME operators got their training through informal apprenticeships training (Haan, 2006, p. 173).

#### *Significance of Informal Apprenticeship in Developing Countries*

Ample empirical evidence in the literature supports the view that informal apprenticeship systems are major sources of vocational skills training for marginalized people in developing countries of the world (Jaja, 2014). According to Palmer (2007), in Ghana, 90% of vocational skills training is provided by informal apprenticeship systems. Jaja, a researcher who completed a study in Nigeria, concurs with Palmer that informal apprenticeships are the most important vocational training hub for youth in Africa. For example, they account for 80 – 90% of vocational training for both educated and uneducated youth in Nigeria. In addition, this model of training is widespread in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India.

#### *The Socialization Role of Apprenticeship*

In general, the research on informal apprenticeship shows that these systems not only provide hard skills training to trainees, but also serve as agents of socialization. According to Ahadzie (2009), trainees in local workshops also learn about values, attitudes, rituals and work ethics from their master craftsmen and senior apprentices. He labeled this secondary socialization a means whereby a person learns values and norms that are acceptable within a broader community and result in improving social cohesion and stability. Secondary socialization augments primary socialization, values that children learn from their parents and family network and that set the ground for secondary socialization. Wallaert (2012), a researcher who studied traditional pottery apprenticeship systems within the familial context in Cameroon and Mexico, agrees with Ahadzie's view of the socializing role of the apprenticeship model. She adds that traditional apprenticeship has a comprehensive educational purpose. It transmits not only technical skills to new apprentices but also social values that build a cultural identity among them.

Several scholars who explored ground realities have found that in addition to technical skills, apprentices learn a wide range of occupational /intrinsic skills from their master craftsmen and senior apprentices. Haan (2006) highlights that in informal apprenticeship training, apprentices learn business culture,

organizational management, and business skills such as costing, marketing and customer relations, skills that will help them start a business or get a job. International Labour Organization (ILO) agrees with Haan that the apprenticeship training program is helpful because it teaches customer relation skills, negotiation skills, and work attitudes. When trainees graduate, they use the business contacts of their artisans. However, those skills are not sufficient for trainees to develop their enterprises. ILO suggests that vocational training providers should design an advanced course that focuses on entrepreneurship, business management, business plan development, and financial management for both trainees and their trainers (2012, p. 16).

### *Gender and Apprenticeship*

Research on the benefit of informal apprenticeship for women has shown mixed results. On the one hand, studies have suggested that traditional apprenticeship is a gender-biased approach to skills training. *Upgrading the Informal Apprenticeship Training in African Countries (2012)* by ILO explains that women often do not benefit as much as men do from informal apprenticeship because there are many logistical, cultural and economic obstacles that do not allow women to unlock their potential fully. For example, women are often busy with housework and childcare. They often do not have sufficient time to learn a trade in a workshop from their master craftswomen. Additionally, they have less access to financial resources and are surrounded by a wide range of stereotypical gender roles.

In addition, gender-based barriers in many developing countries have created male-dominated and female-dominated trades in informal apprenticeship systems. Male-dominated trades such as mechanics and carpentry are technology intensive and have the capacity to yield high incomes while female-dominated trades such as tailoring, embroidery, food processing do not help women benefit equally (ILO, 2012). These gender obstacles restrict women's choices. They cannot choose male-dominated trades. A study on informal apprenticeship in Malawi conducted by Aggarwal, Hofmann, and Phiri (2010, p. 8) analyzed gender patterns across trades in the traditional apprenticeship training in African countries. The study found that the percentage of female workers was very low in auto mechanics (2.3%) and carpentry (2%) but high in hairdressing (85%).

On the other hand, some studies/reports indicate that women have benefited from this system in some countries. According to Adams, Desilva, and Razmara (2013, p. 23), a large number of small businesses in the informal sector where informal apprenticeship is a major source of skills training belongs to women. They reported the majority of self-started small businesses in the informal economy in Ghana and in Benin are owned by women.

### *Apprenticeship as a Cost-effective Strategy*

Several studies found that traditional apprenticeship is a cost-effective strategy for skill training in developing countries. According to Haan (2006), some apprenticeship trainings are free. She highlights that trainees who are selected based on family and clan relationships pay no fee for their master craftsman because master men are socially obliged to train members of their clan or extended family in trades that they are professional. She adds that fees are charged in some modern microenterprises, and the rate of fees is different by trade. Trades such as welding, auto mechanics, and carpentry have high fees (between \$30 – \$60), while hairdressing and masonry have low fees (\$7 – \$15).

Adams, de Silva, & Razmara (2013) are in line with Haan on the subject of cost. They explain that apprenticeship training is the cheapest way to equip people with skills in a wide range of trades in developing countries. They found that training costs \$10 - \$20 per month in a sophisticated

microenterprise project. Costs are paid not by the government but by the apprentices and master craftsmen. Often the master craftsmen provide food and training for apprentices, and in return, apprentices provide free labor.

While most research on the subject of apprenticeship training is positive, some researchers raise essential questions about the actual effectiveness of these systems. Several writers mention that the apprenticeship systems suffer from low-quality training and outdated tools. Johanson and Adams (2004) claim that training in local workshops are not always useful because they are in traditional fields, which do not help trainees earn a productive income. Jaja's study on Nigeria (2014) charges that training in informal apprenticeship systems does not equip apprentices to an appropriate level because they are unstructured and apprentices do not learn all the necessary skills from their master craftsmen. As a result, these systems produce semi-skilled graduates who will have difficulty finding jobs. Nevertheless, Marope, Chakroun, Holmes (2015) maintains that apprenticeship is an effective way to help youth get training and jobs in an informal economy. Haan (2006, p.179) writes that apprenticeship training has helped many graduates find jobs although the result is modest. A study on Senegal found the 69% of apprentices found some sort of employment opportunities after graduations.

#### *Positions on Reforms to Apprenticeship*

Although some studies suggest reforms to traditional apprenticeship approaches, these reforms have yielded limited results because they distort the appeal of informal apprenticeship training. In a critical study of reform initiatives, Walther (2011) highlights key strategies for reform and provides recommendations for revising national and international agendas on skill development for youth. He recommends that informal apprenticeship training in local workshops be complemented by theoretical lessons in public or private vocational schools. He also emphasizes the need for standardization and certification of apprentice training. However, Johanson and Adams (2004) believe that efforts to formalize the informal apprenticeship program will distort its appeal. Sonnenberg (2012) explains that many of the reforms initiated by the government in Senegal and Ghana were biased towards urban middle-class youth and did not help marginalized people in remote areas.

#### *Pursuing a Holistic Apprenticeship Model*

In general articles, guides, and reports published by international organizations recommend that skill development programs should follow a holistic approach. By holistic approach, they mean that program designers should integrate skills training with other activities that would provide an enabling environment for apprentices, especially female apprentices. Johanson and Adams (2004) suggest that it is crucial to combine basic literacy training with apprenticeship training because doing so will increase the productivity of apprentices in the workplace and will help women and men to succeed as micro-entrepreneurs. They suggest that literacy instruction should be nested with necessary business concepts such as marketing, pricing strategies, bookkeeping, etc. to improve the results of skills training programs in the informal economy.

Ahadzie (2009) concurs. He believes when artisans are enrolling new apprentices in their workshops, they look for individuals who have had basic education, who are literate. According to Ahadzie, 64% of entrepreneurs prefer apprentices with basic reading and writing skills because they believe that such apprentices need less supervision and are able to solve basic problems in the workshops.

According to Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Mwangi, and Sall (2002, p. 10), who have reviewed different approaches, there are five approaches used by organizations to deliver literacy and skills development

training. The approaches are: “1) literacy as a prerequisite for livelihood, 2) literacy followed by separate livelihood training, 3) livelihood training leading to literacy, 4) livelihood and literacy integrated, 5) literacy and livelihood training in parallel but separately. The study mentioned that they are two important conditions that should be met in order to ensure success in the both literacy and livelihood training. The first condition is that programs have competent teachers and the second condition is that programs are based on the participants’ interests and conditions. The study advocates for an integrated model, rather than two separate projects. It highlights that an integrated model motivates learners and sustain learning.

## Conclusion

Women’s empowerment is a major priority in international development. Donor organizations, government agencies, and NGOs have been investing significantly to advance social and economic empowerment for women across the globe. Women’s empowerment is part of the world’s larger developmental framework of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

The many studies discussed in this paper explored a variety of empowering strategies for women in developing countries. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there are two main strategies to promote empowerment. The first one focuses on building the capacity of marginalized people by improving their access to skills and resources. An exploration of the literature revealed that there are several organizations that provide entrepreneurship and business development trainings for women that include information on how to improve women’s access to credit in order to help them start businesses and how to generate income. Some organizations use an integrated approach to empower women, providing basic literacy along with business and skills training in an integrated way.

One problem emerged in the course of examining the literature review in that the studies mainly focused on only one component of empowerment. They overlooked the second major component of women’s empowerment as cited by the OECD, which is the presence of the forces that prevent women’s development. There is little in the literature on how programs should work to change or circumvent the constraints that prevent women’s empowerment.

Therefore, this study was designed to address this gap by looking at this component in addition to its impact on the empowering strategies for women. The study examined an integrated model that included literacy training along with apprenticeship training for women in Afghanistan. This model was implemented through the Learning for Community Empowerment Project (LCEP-2) project. Research for the study included a look at how barriers such as patriarchal structures that perpetuate discriminatory norms were overcome by the social organizers involved in the implementation of women’s empowerment activities. It then looked at the impact of literacy and apprenticeship trainings on two empowering domains: the social and the economic.

## **Afghanistan and Women's Empowerment – A History of Struggle**

The previous section explained the global architecture for women's empowerment and initiatives related to women's empowerment. This section focuses on Afghanistan and its women's empowerment history, the context for my case study. Without looking at the history of Afghanistan, it would be difficult to make an effective contribution to women's empowerment, especially in rural areas, where traditional practices are widely followed. Therefore, in this section, I briefly explain Afghanistan and its history of women's empowerment in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time when a number of countries, such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, China, and India, were beginning to emancipate women. Likewise, several rulers in Afghanistan tried to emancipate women from the tyranny of patriarchal norms by utilizing different approaches, but they faced resistance from traditionalist leaders who did not want the old social order to be replaced by a more liberal one.

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, sharing borders with Pakistan and China to the east, Iran to the west, and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north. Afghanistan lies in the heart of Asia, a strategic location that has historically created problems for the country and its people.

There are no accurate figures for the total population of Afghanistan. However, best estimates show that it is 32 million, of which almost 71 percent live in remote areas (Ministry of Education 2016, p. 5). The population of Afghanistan is very young. An estimated 48% is below the age of 15, whereas elderly above the age of 65 represent 2.5% of the total (MoE 2016, p. 5).

In 1919, King Amanullah Khan (1919 – 1929), a ruler impatient with his father's gradual approach to political, economic and social change, launched a radical modernization program in political, economic and social realms. In the social arena, he took several drastic steps on female education and marriage system with an aim to change the status of women (Burki 2011, p. 46). This reformist ruler strongly advocated for female education in the country. According to Burki (2011, p. 46), Amanullah Khan secularized the Afghan education system by bringing secular subjects into the schools.

Burki (2011, p. 46) states Amanullah Khan established the first female school in Kabul and sent several young women to Turkey and Europe to continue their higher education in medical, vocational and tertiary areas. Burki (2011) adds that Amanullah Khan also changed the traditional marriage system, which was a controversial move in a traditional society at that time. He granted women the right to choose their life partners and banned child and forced marriage, as well as exaggerated expenses in the wedding and ritual ceremonies. Moreover, women were encouraged to file cases in court against abusive husbands. He also promoted unveiling of women in public. All these policies that focused on women's emancipation were contrary to tribal codes of conduct. In response, several tribal leaders and traditionalist Mullahs mobilized people against the king and toppled his regime by force. The king did not have a strong army and was not able to suppress revolts. As a result, he went to Italy where he lived in exile.

In contrast to what Amanullah Khan implemented, his successors, Nadir Shah, Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan, all from the Musahiban family, pursued a moderate approach to transforming Afghanistan into a modern state and gender equal society (Saikal, 2004, p. 100). The first ruler of this family who came to power through Jirga, a traditional way that Afghan leaders make decisions, was against radical reforms on all fronts and against the state imposing programs on society. Instead he wanted social change to be driven by Afghan communities. To maintain internal stability, he improved his relationship with religious and tribal leaders and implemented programs that better fit the Afghanistan context and the Islamic framework (Saikal 2004, p. 100). He increased the influence of religious leaders during his time. For

example, they were given the authority to monitor school curriculum in order to ensure compliance with Islamic values (Burki 2011, p.50).

When his son Zahir Shah (1933 -1973) came to power, he continued his father's path, a gradual approach to change and women's empowerment in Afghanistan. According to Burki (2011), he gradually initiated several programs focused on women's empowerment in the country. For example, he increased the number of schools and established the first college for women in Kabul. He also granted women the right to vote and to elect themselves to office. Additionally, he promoted women's participation in high ranking positions in the government. For instance, in 1966, a woman for the first time in the history of Afghanistan became the Afghan Health Minister (p. 50). However, the reforms he initiated were confined to Kabul and urban areas where there was support for the reforms by people. For instance, in Kabul women had more liberty and freedom in terms of mobility and making strategic choices, but in remote areas women's status remained unchanged.

When Daoud, the cousin of Zahir Shah (1973 – 1978) and the third ruler of Musahiban family, came into power, he undertook ambitious modernization and women's empowerment programs with the aim to create a gender equal society. During his reign, modern female education increased. For example, the number of female students in primary school tripled. Also, he increased women's participation in key positions: almost 500 women were working in high ranking positions (Saikal 2004, p 131). Unveiling of women was a main objective on his emancipation agenda. He wanted his reforms to penetrate the countryside that was under the influence of tribal social structure. As soon as he expanded his women's emancipation program into rural areas, the tribal and religious establishment opposed it. In response, Daoud took harsh steps against them: he isolated them from policy and state building agenda (Saikal 2004).

The 1978 coup opened a dark page of war and instability in Afghanistan. The PDPA came into power by removing Daoud in a bloody coup. This new political group pursued a Marxist approach, demanding revolutionary changes in Afghanistan. According to Hawthorne and Winter (2002), the PDPA established literacy programs to educate men and women in rural areas. The party also increased the number of schools and encouraged women to attend university. During this time, women made some salient progress in urban areas. According to Burki (2011, p.53), 70% of teachers, 40% of doctors and 65% of university students were female. With respect to marriage and family issues, the PDPA outlawed bride prices and give women freedom of choice in marriage. They also came up with an age limit for girls: girls below age 16 were not allowed to marry. Women's participation was allowed in police work, and army, intelligence, and government agencies, and social organizations and in the PDPA leadership. Female roles were also expanded in nontraditional fields such as engineering, logistics and law. However, these changes never penetrated the rural areas. Land reform, replacing village leaders with new institutions, and engaging in brutality and mass killings to impose communism sparked anger among people, especially in rural villages, and led to the formation of a resistance group called the Mujahedeen.

In Pakistan, where the Mujahidin, the enemy of the PDPA, had control over refugee camps, a different story for women. According to Hawthorne, and Winter (2002), the Mujahedeen did not want the presence of women in the public sphere. Instead they were confined to the domestic space, and family commitment and child care were their main responsibilities. Also, from the beginning, there had been limited opportunities for women to attend school and build their capacity and skills. For example, in 1988, 486 primary schools, 161 middle schools and 4 high schools were serving 104,600 boys, while 76 primary schools, 2 middle schools and no high schools were providing education to 7,800 girls (Hawthorne and Winter, 2002). In addition, at work and in school women and girls were under strict control of religious leaders and clergy associated with various Mujahedeen groups. Religious leaders did not allow women to speak with strangers, wear western clothes or wear perfume and jewelry. Despite all these pressures,

some women outside the refugee camps managed to work with international organizations funded by western donors.

In the mid-1980s, when the Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan, PDPA lost the direct military support of the Soviet Union. As a result, the Mujahedeen took over the country and “declared Afghanistan an Islamic state for the first time in its history” (Saikal 2004, p. 209). This changed the power dynamics in Afghanistan. For the first time in 100 years, regional and tribal leaders, including conservative clergy, attained power in Afghan politics. When Mujahedeen leaders failed to form a government, the civil war started, which almost completely destroyed Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan, thus reversing the initial progress on women’s empowerment that had begun as far back as the 19th century. Women were the primary victims of this war. During this time, almost most of schools were destroyed and criminal and human rights abuses were widely committed by warlords and their militias against women and children.

After the brutality of the communist regime and the civil war, in September 1996, a new radical group, Taliban, emerged into the history of Afghanistan. Their strict social polices brought Afghanistan to its knees. They were a knife penetrating the wounded hearts of the Afghan people. They confined the role of women to the home and eroded the status of women to almost zero for the first time in the history of Afghanistan. The first policy issued by this department was the banning of women from public affairs: women were prevented from working with government and western humanitarian aid agencies. Another Taliban rule was that all women must wear the burqa, a head-to-toe veil for women. In addition, women were not allowed to go to the bazaar or other public areas without a blood relative. In fact, they had to be accompanied by a relative whenever they left their homes. The religious police department also passed a decree that banned girls’ schools. Secret home-based schools were started, led by women; the few girls who could attend did so with great fear. As a result, millions of girls never went to school, a policy that our state now is paying the price for.

In 2001, after September 11th, the United States attacked the Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan and toppled their regimes. A new government was formed predominantly consisting of Mujahideen leaders who had been involved in the civil war along with technocrats with western education. The new government has been trying to implement principles of democracy.

At that time, the Afghan government with support from donors and international organizations initiated several policies and programs to improve the status of women. Women and men have equal rights in the constitution of Afghanistan. Article 22 of the Afghan constitution states “any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, men and women, have equal rights and duties before the law.” (MoFA, 2016). There are several other policies that focus on increasing female enrollment in schools, preventing violence and discrimination against women, improving the role of women in the economic sphere, improving participation of women in high ranking positions, etc. The government also established several institutions such as the Independent Human Right Commission led by a woman, the High Commission for the Elimination of Violation against Women, which has an office in each province, and special courts to address violence against women (MoFA, 2016).

Women have witnessed some salient changes in their lives in the past 15 years, mainly in urban areas. Today, 69 women are in the lower house of Parliament (almost 30%), 27 women are in the upper house (almost 28%), 269 women represent their constituencies in the provincial councils, and 4,700 women are serving in the army and police. With respect to education, there are 7,000 girls’ school in Afghanistan providing education to 3.5 million girls and 69 universities and 62 technical and vocational institutes (MoFA, 2016, p. 10). Although this progress is impressive, there is a great disparity among provinces and quality of education is a major issue. In rural areas, more efforts are required to empower women.

Historically the relations between state and society have been tense in Afghanistan. The history of Afghanistan shows that imposing programs from the top in a radical way on communities is ineffective. It is important to work with patriarchal structures to solve the problem of women. In the next section, I explained the LCEP-2 project, which was one of the largest projects aimed to empower women in rural and urban areas of Afghanistan. The project had a cadre of social organizers who were successful in penetrating the Afghan communities.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Ruler</b>	<b>Approach</b>
<b>1919 – 1929</b>	Amanullah Khan	Radical change and modernization
<b>1929 – 1933</b>	Nadir Khan	Gradual Approach to modernization
<b>1933 – 1973</b>	Zahir Shah	Gradual Approach to modernization
<b>1973 – 1978</b>	Daod Khan	Radical change and modernization
<b>1978 – 1992</b>	PDPA	Marxist approach, revolutionary change
<b>1992 -1996</b>	Mujahideen	Civil War
<b>1996 – 2001</b>	The Taliban	Totalitarianism (Anti-women)

*Table 1: Main Trends: Afghanistan and Women's Empowerment*

## **Case Study: LCEP-2 Project and Women's Empowerment**

Before I explain the LCEP-2 project, it is necessary for me to describe the National Solidarity Program (NSP), which was a large community development program in Afghanistan and paved the way for the design of LCEP project.

### National Solidarity Program (NSP)

NSP was launched in 2003 and continued until 2014. This project worked in remote villages in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan with an aim to improve local governance systems. The project had two major components: first it established Community Development Councils (CDCs) at the village level through elections. CDC is a governing body at the village level responsible for the management of overall development activities. Second, it provided CDCs with block grants (between \$40,000 - \$60,000) to implement village level projects in areas such as water and sanitation, transportation, power, irrigation, literacy and education, vocational training and other areas. The aim of the block grant was to increase villagers' access to basic services. Overall, the program established 32,000 CDCs in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan and disbursed \$33,000 on average to each village to implement a development project that is highlighted as a main priority in the CDC community Development Plan (Beath, Christia, & Enikolopov, 2013).

### Learning for Community Empowerment Program (LCEP-1)

Illiteracy and a low level of economic development were two major problems that CDCs faced in most communities. Thus, they requested a program to address these problems. As a result, the Learning for Community Empowerment Program was designed in 2004 to work with men and women and empower women in remote areas. LCEP-1 was a pilot project funded by USAID and implemented by EDC and UN-Habitat in five of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan. The project provided integrated literacy, governance and economic opportunities to 10,000 youth and adults (60% female) in communities. The project ended in 2007 (EDC, 2007). According to the final report (2007), the program contributed to the empowerment of women. Women who participated in the program gained grade-four level fluency in reading and writing, and they became active in the local governing institutions.

### Learning for Community Empowerment Program (LCEP-2)

Based on lessons learned and best practices of LCEP-1, LCEP-2 was designed in 2008 after a one-year gap. LCEP-2 was a five-year project that reached 312,000 youth and adults with no or minimal literacy skills in both secure and insecure areas of Afghanistan (UN-Habitat 2010). Approximately 60% of the target beneficiaries were supposed to be women. The program put considerable effort into reaching this target in the Afghan communities (UN-Habitat, 2007).

The program was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the United Nations Office for Human Settlement (UN-Habitat) in partnership with the Afghan National Literacy Department. This initiative was designed to reduce high rates of illiteracy and poverty among marginalized people in 3,000 rural and urban communities through activities in integrated literacy and productive skills. Literacy was defined as "skills of reading, writing and numeracy, and critical thinking". Literacy instruction was nested within broader economic development concepts such as formation of Self Help Saving and Investment Groups (SHSIG), saving and investing, and entrepreneurship. Productive skills were defined as "occupational, vocational, and business development skills and/or training, and/or services" (UN-Habitat 2007).

Under the productive skills component, literacy students formed Self Help Saving and Investment Groups (SHSIG). SHSIGs were encouraged to save money for small investment purposes. Members of SHIGs were selected to participate in apprenticeship training in small craft workshops in their villages. They hoped this training would lead to their employment by local enterprises or even the opportunity to start their own business in that trade by using the savings in their SHSIGs with little or no support from outside. The project ended in 2013 and there was no additional funding in this area due to overall change in the policy of USAID. USAID shifted its attention to early grade reading and adult literacy became an orphan child

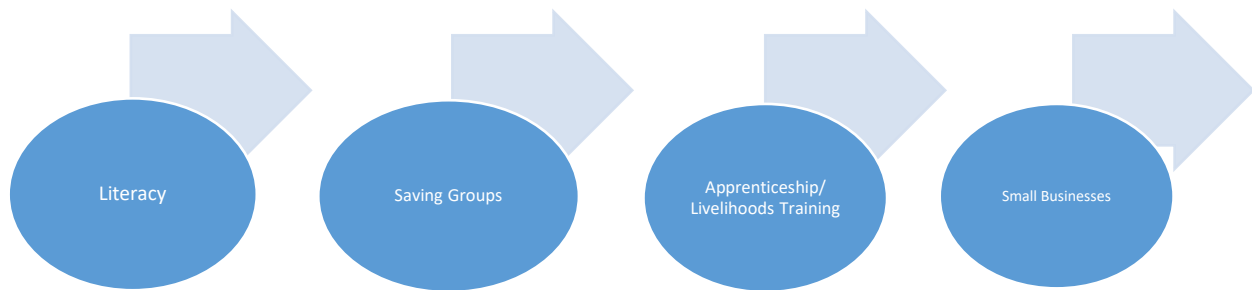


Figure 2: The LCEP-2 Empowerment Model

This study analyzed the empowerment work of this project in two areas: first it analyzed how the project worked with Afghan communities to mobilize women. Second, it assessed the impact of literacy and apprenticeship on the lives of women. The next section explains in detail the methodology, the data collection procedures and the data analysis strategies of the study.

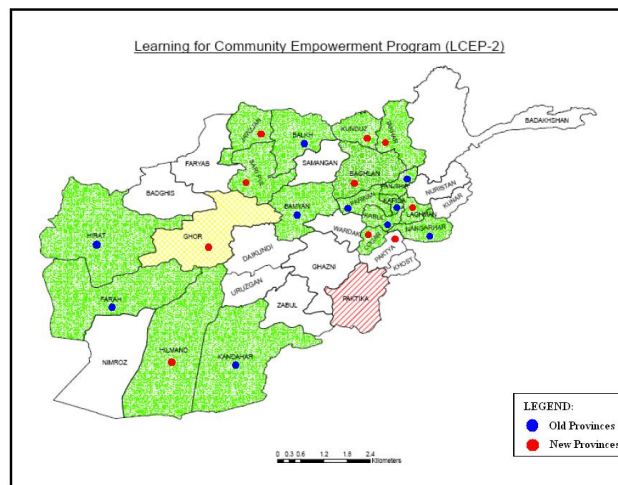


Figure 3: The LCEP-2 Coverage Areas

# Methodology

## Research Questions

This study examined an **apprenticeship** model integrated with literacy and saving and investment initiatives that were implemented as a part of the Literacy for Community Empowerment Project (LCEP-2). **The aim** of the study was to understand the perspectives of different stakeholders, especially ground-level stakeholders, towards community mobilization and the use and impact of both apprenticeships and literacy trainings to empower women in rural and urban areas of Afghanistan in order to support future policy-making initiatives on skills trainings that are integrated with literacy for women in Afghanistan. To achieve the aim of this study, I collected responses to the following research questions by conducting a case study in an LCEP-2 program initiative carried out in a single province in that country:

- What makes the role of the social organizer critical in the implementation of women’s empowerment programs?
- To what extent do women who have participated in the apprenticeship and literacy training feel empowered in the social domains of their life as a result of attending the program?
- How have women who have completed this program found sustainable livelihood opportunities and to what extent?
- Based on the results of this study, what can be learned and what can be proposed as recommendations for improvement in the future?

## Conceptual Framework

I utilized the OECD empowerment framework to examine research data. According to the OECD, there are two approaches to empowerment: the structural approach and the agency approach. The structural approach focuses on changing the forces that prevent people from being empowered. The agency approach focuses on building the capacity of marginalized people by improving their access to skills and resources and thus building their confidence.

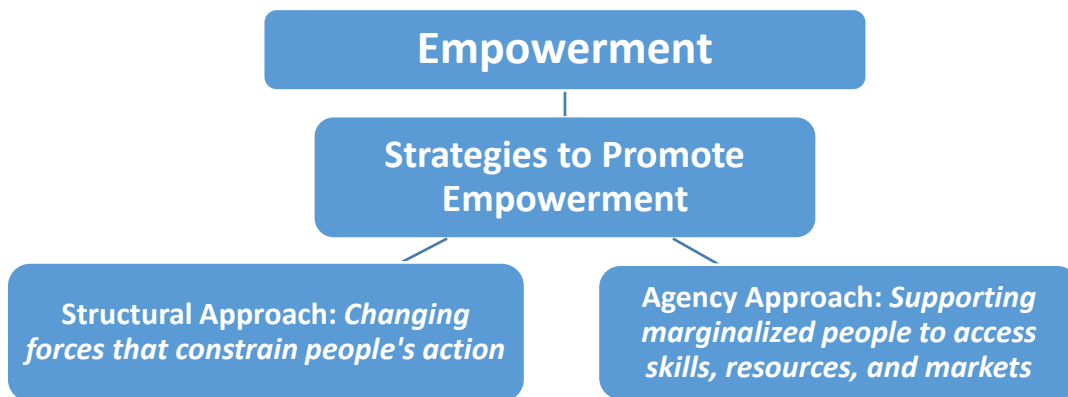


Figure 4: The OECD Empowerment Frame

## Research Design

## *Case Study Method*

To answer the research questions, I utilized the case study strategy, which is a prominent approach in education and sociology (Zainal, 2007). According to Yin (2014, p. 16), “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” Rossman and Rallis (2017, p. 91) define case study as “an approach that seeks to understand a larger phenomenon through intensive examination of one specific instance.”

The case study method has been utilized in the field of developmental anthropology as exemplified by Patnaik (1990) in an article entitled “Relevance of Case Study Method in Anthropology of Development.” The author used this approach to investigate the impact of development programs on marginalized people in a community in India. Patnaik (1990) explains that a case study research provides an opportunity to explore in-depth the impact of development programs at their lowest level on individuals, families, and communities by obtaining intrinsic and descriptive data that would not be possible to do by survey or other statistical analysis. Delgado (2001) is in agreement with Patnaik (1990), adding that doing a case study provides an opportunity to reflect on an actual practice in the field by identifying its strengths and problems and drawing lessons learned from that practice.

According to Yin (2014), a case study has five major components. The first component concerns the actual research questions. Research questions in a case study mainly focus on ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions and are often linked to a theory. The second component focuses on the prepositions of a study, which helps researchers define the boundaries of a case study. Without a preposition, there is a risk that the research may collect data that are not relevant to a case study. The third component is related to the unit of analysis. There are different units of analysis for a case study, such as an individual, an event, a program, an organization, or a community. The fourth and fifth components pertain to linking data to prepositions and developing criteria to interpret findings. These two components are related to data analysis and interpretation and are the most important part of a case study.

Yin (2014) explains four general strategies for analyzing data in case study research. The first strategy for analyzing data is based on the theoretical proposition. In this strategy, researchers use a theory to analyze their data. The second strategy relies on an inductive data analysis. In this strategy, key concepts and patterns are drawn from the data that are collected for the study. The third strategy is related to developing a case description in which researchers organize their data according to a descriptive basis. The fourth strategy, which works in combination with the other three mentioned strategies, explores rival hypotheses.

In my study, I used the first strategy to analyze data. My primary theoretical proposition stated that the role of social organizers as educator and change agents is crucial for women’s empowerment programs. The literature has not paid enough attention to the role of social organizers in the effective implementation of women’s empowerment programs in conservative areas. Therefore, this study investigated the question of whether their role would be useful in women’s empowerment program in conservative areas. The second part of this study examined the impact of the LCEP-2 empowerment model on women.

To examine the theoretical preposition and impact of literacy and apprenticeship on women, I selected the LCEP-2 project. The LCEP-2 program was a five-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development and implemented by UN-Habitat in 20 provinces of Afghanistan out of an overall 34 provinces. The project had two phases. The first phase was implemented between the years of 2004 and 2007 and the second phase began in 2008 and ended in 2013. The aim of the project, which was designed based on neoliberal values such as democratic citizenship and economic productivity and competition, was to empower women and men in rural and urban communities through activities in

development-focused literacy, saving and investment groups, apprenticeships, and business development trainings.

I collected data by using several different methods. Conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with social organizers, mid-level managers, and high-level managers was my primary source of data collection for this study. Each interview lasted 60 minutes. I supplemented the interviews by examining project documents such as the project proposals, quarterly reports, annual work plans, and midterm and final evaluations as well as the learning guides and materials on apprenticeship trainings. Reviewing program documents helped me cross-check information from interviews with evidence in the documents. When information from interviews contradicted the evidence in the documents, I referred back to the study participants for further clarification. I interviewed three out of 12 of my respondents for a second time in order to clarify issues that were raised in the data analysis phase. I wanted to re-interview additional respondents, but I was not able to do so due to time limitations and other commitments that my respondents had.

I did not conduct any direct observations, but when I was involved in this project in Kabul, I traveled to several provinces, districts, and villages and observed Community Development Councils (CDC), literacy centers, saving and investment groups, and apprenticeship trainings that were in the preliminary phase at that time.

#### *Geographical Scope of Study*

This study was conducted in Afghanistan in the Balkh province (one of the 20 provinces where the LCEP-2 project was active). The province has 15 districts and is one of the most populated provinces in Afghanistan. The total estimated population of the province is 1.2 million and includes all major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. This study focused on one district. It is close to Balkh City and is divided into many small villages.

There were two major reasons why I selected Balkh from the pool of 20 provinces that LCEP-2 targeted. The first reason was that this province contained populations of all the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan and was relatively secure compared to other provinces. I intentionally chose to explore the impact of women's empowering strategies in a secure province rather than in insecure one since often insecurity is given as a justification for the failure of development interventions. The second reason for the selection of this province was that it was more feasible for me to do a study there because I was able to easily find study participants and arrange my interviews. There were a few other provinces that I wanted to select but finding the right participants who worked with the LCEP-2 project proved to be difficult.

#### *Sampling*

I used purposive sampling to select my respondents. There are different strategies for purposive sampling such as typical case sampling, critical case sampling, snowball or chain sampling, criterion sampling, extreme or deviant case sampling, maximum variation sampling, stratified purposeful sampling, homogeneous sampling, theory-based sampling, politically important case sampling, and convenience sampling (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I used a criterion sampling strategy for my study. I selected 12 participants based on their knowledge of the apprenticeship and literacy programs and their experience with the LCEP-2 project. I used one major criterion to select my respondents: staff and beneficiaries must have actively participated in the program and have had sufficient knowledge of the apprenticeship model. Staff who stayed with the program for more than three years were selected because they were able to provide the most detailed information. I made sure that the beneficiaries of the program had completed their apprenticeship training cycle.

My interview respondents correspond to four categories: 1) high-level project staff, 2) mid-level project staff, 3) grass-roots project staff, and 4) project beneficiaries.

- **High-level project staff:** This category of staff included both national and international staff with a high-level Western education or education from regional countries. This category included the project director, deputy director, productive skills advisor, monitoring advisor, materials development and training advisor, productive skills manager, and gender advisor. They provided overall technical expertise in the areas of literacy training, materials development, saving and investment initiatives, apprenticeship training, and business development services to LCEP-2 provincial, district and community level staff. They all had significant experience in designing and implementing community development projects in Afghanistan. They participated in coordination meetings /policy dialogue forums and provided inputs for strategies and policies on apprenticeship trainings and integrated literacy for adults and youth. From within the high-level project staff, I interviewed two senior staff because of their knowledge of the design of the projects and community mobilization.
- **Mid-level project staff:** This layer of stakeholders was made up of provincial managers, district managers, and lead trainers. They served as a bridge between the grass-roots staff and the high-level management staff. The majority of them were mainly educated in Afghan universities in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. They had bachelor's degrees in law, journalism, and education. Only a few of them had master's degrees from regional countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and India. Each provincial manager supervised all the functions of the project at the provincial level and was in close contact with his or her district managers (approximately three to four per province). District managers led and supervised a large team of social organizers in their respective districts and reported to provincial managers. From within the mid-level project staff, I interviewed two lead trainers (one male and one female) because they had a multifaceted role in the project.
- **Grass-roots project staff:** This layer of staff included social organizers, village literacy teachers, and Community Development Councils (CDCs). Social organizers were in close contact with communities and regularly communicated the project problems upward with the district, provincial, and higher-level management staff. They were chosen because they were recognized as influential people from the local communities who had established good relationships with the other residents of the communities and villagers. When local communities opposed the introduction of learning centers for females or any other project activities, these social organizers used an informal network to persuade local leaders to open female literacy centers. Almost all of them were educated by primary schools, colleges, and universities in Afghanistan. The majority of them had attained a high school or post-high school grade level education in education, science, and pedagogy. A number of them had completed a bachelor's degree. Beside formal education, they had religious education in the madrassas (Islamic religious schools).

At the village level, the CDCs held great power and therefore had a high degree of influence on the villagers. A CDC is a village-based institution responsible for the governing and development of each village and consists of an executive body—a chairman, a treasurer, and a secretary—as well as several community members. Since they are the main gateway to reaching local people, without their permission, it would not have been possible to implement social programs in the villages. The CDCs provided in-kind contributions to the project. They provided space for learning centers and regularly monitored classes. The majority of CDC members lacked any

formal education. Those who could read and write received their education through madrassas or mosques. However, there were a number of CDC members, especially in urban areas, who had been educated through grades 12 or 14 in Afghan schools. At the time of this study, very few of them had bachelor's degrees.

I interviewed six social organizers who had extensive experience in working with community leaders and religious Mullahs (clergy) in remote villages in Afghanistan. Each pair of social organizers (one male and one female) was responsible for coordinating project activities in 10 villages. In each village, there were four literacy centers, five to eight community self-help saving and investment groups, and four literacy teachers. Overall, a pair of social organizers oversaw 40 literacy centers, 40 village facilitators, 80 self-help saving and investment groups, 1,000 literacy students, and 100 apprentices.

CDCs were given an important role in the implementation of apprenticeship programs at the village level. They identified appropriate trades, selected trainees, and then monitored the apprenticeship process. They also helped project staff in identifying male and female literacy teachers in their villages to run the literacy centers. Literacy teachers worked closely with the CDCs in their villages. They ran literacy classes and regularly attended the CDC monthly meetings to discuss and resolve issues that were related to the learning centers. Youth and adults, both females and males, were the beneficiaries of the program. They received the interventions. The majority of the community-level stakeholders, with the exception of the village literacy teachers, had none to minimal literacy skills. Only a few of them had completed school or a bachelor's degree.

- **Project Beneficiaries:** They were men and women with no literacy skills. The majority of them had never gone to school due to extreme poverty, patriarchal norms, or a lack of schools in their communities. A few of them had attended primary school but had dropped out early on. In rural areas, men worked on the land and women worked only within the home. Women had none to limited access to public spaces. The majority of the project beneficiaries, especially the women, lived below the poverty level. From this category, I interviewed two female beneficiaries. I listened to the stories of program apprentices who had completed the apprenticeship cycle under the project.

Most of the study respondents were from the mid-level and community-level stakeholder categories. Only two top-level project staff were interviewed. From the interview results along with the direct accounts from project beneficiaries, I built grounded narratives of the entire project cycle.

<b>Project Staff</b>	<b># of Respondents Interviewed</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>High-level Stakeholders (Senior Managers)</b>	2	2 Male
<b>Mid-level Project Staff (Lead Trainers)</b>	2	1 Male & 1 Female
<b>Grass-roots Project Staff (Social organizers and CDC)</b>	6	3 Females and 3 Males
<b>Project Beneficiaries (Apprentices)</b>	2	2 Females

## *Table 2: Study Participants*

### *Data Collection Process*

I recorded all interviews by using a voice recorder. Therefore, all the conversations were recorded verbatim. After completing the interviews, I translated them from Farsi to English and simultaneously transcribed them in detail.

One limitation I encountered was that the internet connection in Afghanistan, especially in remote areas where the study participants lived, was slow. I first tried to conduct the interviews by using Messenger, Skype, and Viber, but none of them worked well as the participants were often disconnected during the interviews while discussing important points. To mediate this issue, I looked for other options and found Boss Revolution. I decided to go with this inexpensive phone service because it was cheaper than others and the connection was much better.

To improve the credibility and rigor of the study, I used two different strategies as explained by Rossman and Rallis (2017). The first one was triangulation. I collected my data from multiple sources such as document reviews, interviews, and personal experience. I also used participant validation techniques. When I transcribed the interviews, I shared them with my participants.

As I conducted all my interviews by phone, I did not have an easy way to establish a good rapport with the informants that I had not known previously. Since rapport is very important and has a direct impact on the type of information a researcher obtains from participants, to improve my rapport with the participants, I employed different strategies such as sharing detailed information about the study with participants, giving them time to think about the study and questions, and connecting with them through people who knew both me and the participants. Among these rapport-building strategies, the latter one was the most crucial. The people who knew both me and participants introduced me to the participants and requested of them to provide me with any information that my study required. This helped me significantly in obtaining quality information from the field.

Because the majority of the interview participants often talked about issues in a more general fashion, I applied the technique of asking ‘for example’ in my questioning in order to understand the under-the-surface issues. Asking for examples made the participants think more deeply. When I felt that there was more information available, I posed clarification questions. These two techniques improved the quality of data in my study and helped me identify important themes. If I had not used these techniques, I would have ended up with considerably more general statements.

### *Data Analysis Procedure*

The OECD empowerment frame guided the data analysis and interpretation in this study. I looked at two components of empowerment: how social organizers transformed traditional institutions and what was the impact of apprenticeship and literacy trainings on women.

I applied the techniques suggested by Rossman and Rallis (2017, p. 227): “(1) fully knowing the data (immersion); (2) organizing the data into chunks (analysis); and (3) bringing meaning to those chunks (interpretation).” I first reviewed the data several times in order to get a firm grasp of the issues. After that, I organized my data into small sub-themes that were then embedded into larger themes that I had established. I created folders for each sub-theme and as I was reviewing the data, I labeled any data that were related to these sub-themes.

### *Limitations*

One major limitation of this study was that I did not conduct observations, which is an important aspect of the qualitative method. I wanted to go to Afghanistan to visit two communities, but logistics and growing insecurity in target areas were two major obstacles that prevented me from conducting the observations.

Getting participants' signatures on the IRB informed consent forms was a sensitive issue in Afghanistan. I did not ask my participants to sign the IRB form. Instead, I asked for and received oral consent from the participants and recorded them before conducting any interview. Before getting their consent, I shared the consent form with all participants in the local language and explained the contents of the form point by point before conducting interviews.

#### *Positionality*

Education is my passion. I started my career in education as a teacher and have held various positions in this field in the past 15 years. My focus in education was on literacy and vocational training for marginalized people in Afghanistan.

I am acquainted with the LCEP project because I worked with it in Afghanistan. I worked with LCEP-2 with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) as technical officer between 2009 and 2011. USAID was the funding agency for both LCEP-1 and LCEP-2 projects until they ended in 2013. I attended several workshops organized by the LCEP-2 project, where I met most of its senior staff and mid-level managers.

When I was the technical officer for the projects, I visited the activities of the projects in a number of provinces, and I often reviewed the projects in quarterly and annual reports. The people who worked in senior positions of this project that I interviewed knew me well, but most social organizers did not know me. I was introduced by senior managers as a graduate student to those social organizers. Overall, conducting this study provided me with an excellent opportunity to reflect on my own experiences through a scholarly lens.

## Data Analysis

This section explains major findings of the study. It includes an analysis of the LCEP project empowerment model. It first explains how female and male social organizers in the case examples changed the forces that constrained women’s development in their villages. The section then looks at the social and economic impact of the LCEP-2 empowerment model on women in Afghanistan.

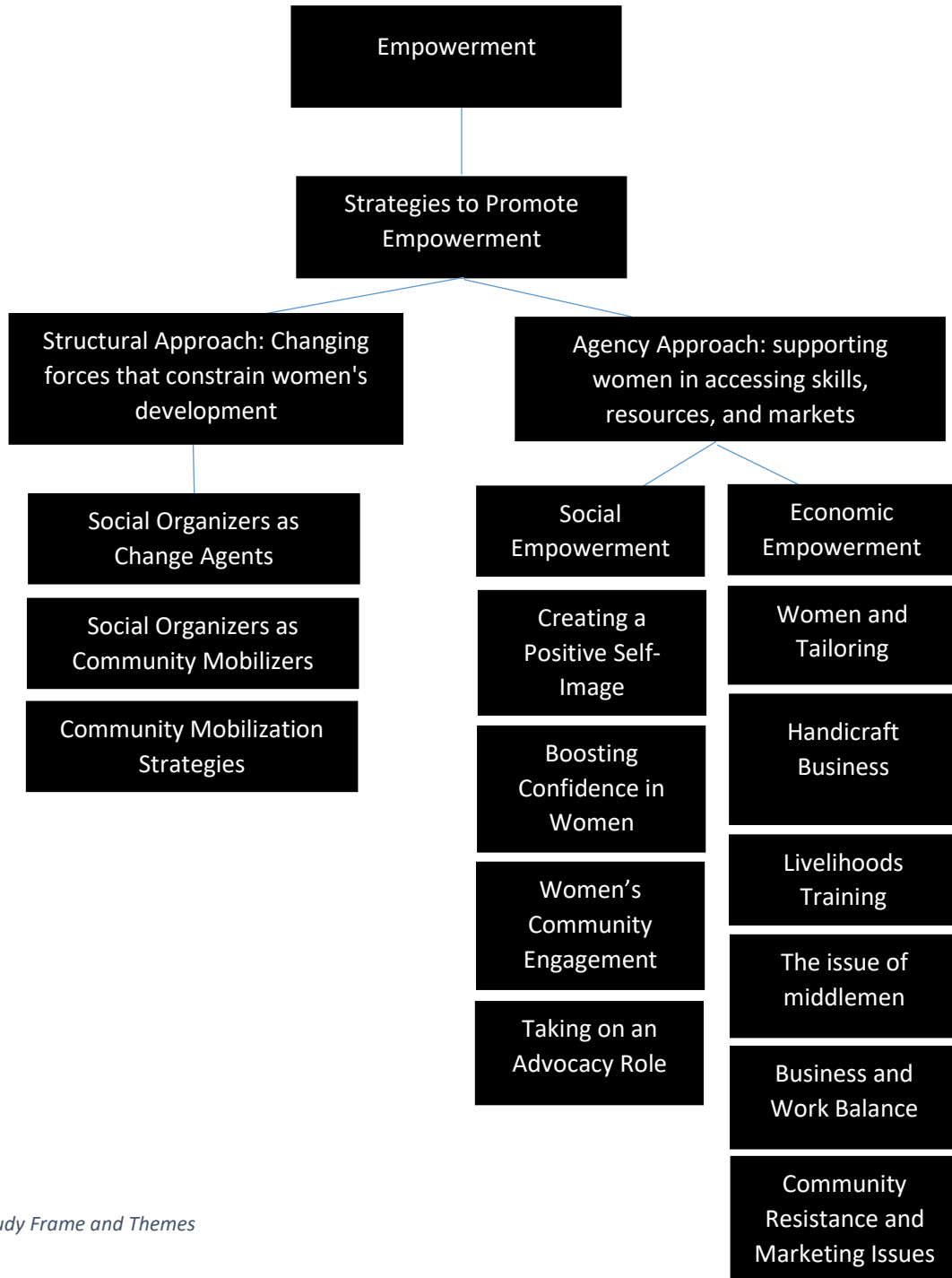


Figure 5: Study Frame and Themes

## Section One: Changing Forces that Constrain Women’s Development

### *Social Organizers as Change Agents*

Although social organizers were the lowest-ranking staff of the project, as seen in the organizational chart, they served as the catalyst for positive gender changes at family and community levels both in rural and urban areas in the target province for this study. Social organizers first worked to change community structures in favor of women and then supported the project in the implementation of an empowerment model that focused on individual empowerment and market access through activities in literacy, saving and investment groups, and apprenticeship training. Senior project managers believed that social organizers made significant contributions in changing forces that prevented women from development in areas where patriarchal institutions and norms controlled the behavior of women and created a major barrier to women’s personal development. The majority of respondents in this study said that without social organizers the project would have not been successful in Afghanistan—especially in remote and conservative areas—because they were the ones who persuaded community leaders to allow women to attend the literacy and apprenticeship trainings. In the remaining part of the section, I drew on my interview data from front-line representatives of this project to highlight the role of the social organizers.

### *Social Organizer as Community Mobilizer: Consensus Building*

Senior managers in the project described social organizers as the front-line soldiers in the LCEP-2 project because they were in direct contact with local communities and tribal and religious leaders. High-level managers mentioned in their interviews that they hired both male and female influential local leaders to fill the social organizer positions in order to remove gender barriers. The project paid each of them and trained them in the areas of community mobilization, gender, and literacy and management topics. They added that by applying this strategy, both the project and local leaders who worked as social organizers benefitted. The social organizers received training and a salary, and the project used their knowledge of community social structures, facilitation skills, and influence in the communities to resolve key issues within the communities in order to open up opportunities for women.

Lead trainers explained that social organizers were considered to be insiders to members of the communities. They lived in these communities and followed the same language, and religious practices. They participated in times of grief and happiness within the communities. When somebody died in the community, they went to the funeral and helped the family. Communities invited these social organizers to important village events such as meetings about a village issue, social audits, etc. These social organizers not only had close ties in their own communities but also had close relationships with members of their neighboring communities. One of the social organizers that I interviewed was an active member of her village. She served as a deputy chairman in the executive body of her village’s CDC and had a small tailoring enterprise. Women in the village highly respected her and referred to her as their guide. When women in the village were faced with any problem, they reached out to her for advice.

Lead trainers confirmed that these social organizers had very good relationships with communities and villagers. Through their informal networks in the communities and excellent “preaching” skills, they were able to successfully influence local leaders in their decisions to open female literacy centers and allow them to join apprenticeship training. When necessary, they brought different stakeholders together in order to discuss conflicting issues. They worked with communities to build consensus and find options that were agreeable to the majority of those involved in governing issues within the communities.

Other respondents told me how these social workers were able to mobilize people in the communities in order to implement different community services projects. A male social organizer that I interviewed told

me about a number of community service projects that he had implemented in collaboration with youth in his village before joining an NGO as a social organizer. He had launched a cleaning and tree planting campaign and had organized a group of youths who replaced a damaged ceiling in a mosque in their village. Most of these social organizers were still involved in different community service projects in addition to their work with NGOs.

Respondents added that social organizers were known and respected for the sacrifices they made for their communities in helping their community members face the hardships they endured during times of war with the former Soviet Union or with the Taliban. They were known for their ability to solve problems and were famous in the eyes of the community members for their acts of heroism and their commitment. This kind of prior community reputation gave them another advantage in being able to bring together major stakeholders in order to discuss conflicting issues. When these social organizers talked about an issue about which there was not a uniform consensus, people—even tribal and religious leaders—listened to them attentively because of their political and personal power, as well as their insider status and identity.

Villagers viewed social organizers as their close allies and as people who brought resources to the villages. Social organizers were the ones who spread the word in the communities before a project started. They also worked with the CDC to improve their relationship with stakeholders outside of their villages such as NGOs, government officials, and high-ranking project staff in order to bring development projects to their villages. They gave them contact information or brought other NGOs' representatives to the communities for possible partnership with CDCs.

Social organizers had sophisticated social skills. They managed their existing relationships and built new relationships with the members of the communities that they worked in. They used different strategies to build new relationships in the communities. One social organizer told me that when he went into the villages, any time that he met new people, he chatted with them and explained his work. This bond was strengthened when the newly met person invited him to his house for a cup of tea.

Making new friends in the communities expanded their network. When they needed support, they tapped into their network and received that support at the village level. Another social organizer told me that in three villages in which he worked, the community leaders were his close friends. He used his friendship with those leaders to get the support of communities to start literacy centers for women, establish female saving and investment groups, and enroll women in apprenticeship trainings. I heard the same statements from the female social organizers. They met different women and put every effort into expanding their network. A female social organizer mentioned in her interview that “when I went to villages, I paid high attention to village women. They talked about their problems. I listened to their problems and showed them my empathy. When we finished discussing their problems, then I discussed work-related issues. I never started directly with my work agenda.” She explained that this strengthened her relationship with women and the key stakeholders in the villages.

### *Community Mobilization Strategies*

Changing the forces that prevent women's empowerment is a key part of the women's empowerment initiative. No one can do this work better than social organizers.

Social organizers explained that they first negotiated with the members of the local CDCs, the majority of whom were men, to convince them to allow women to participate in the program. The CDCs were formed in nearly every village between 2003 and 2013 by the National Solidarity Program (NSP) in Afghanistan. Each CDC had a community development plan that articulated the major needs of the respective community. Social organizers and lead trainers told me that before the establishment of the CDCs, malik or arbab systems were dominant in the villages. The malik or the arbab was the community leader, again

mostly men, with considerable land and power over villagers. When CDCs were established, some maliks or arbabs became the chairmen of CDCs either as a result of an election and/or through personal power.

The majority of social organizers mentioned that women were previously not actively involved in the CDCs' decision-making processes in the communities that they were working with because of *pardah*. *Pardah* is a practice concerning women in most remote areas in Afghanistan as well as in many of the urban areas. The literal meaning of the word *pardah* is curtains. The custom maintains that when women see a stranger of the opposite sex, they are obliged to cover their body (head-to-toe) with a *chadar* (long scarf). In conservative communities, *pardah* norms dictate that women should completely hide themselves from men that they do not know and avoid interacting with them.

Social organizers added that in a few of the more open-minded communities, women did become part of the CDC. For example, there would be one CDC in a village but with two executive bodies: a female executive body and a male executive body. In the less conservative communities, women and men worked together to make decisions. However, in the more conservative ones—which were the majority of cases in my study—CDCs were led by men, and there was no meaningful communication between male and female executive bodies due to the cultural norm dictating the seclusion of women. In these communities, the male CDC chairmen were theoretically obligated to solicit the opinion of the female executive body, but in reality, they did not involve the female executive body in the decision-making process. When I inquired how women were involved in the decision-making process when the LCEP-2 project first entered the communities, social organizers told me that they first contacted the male CDC members. After that, female social organizers met with the female executive body.

*When we talked with the male executive body of a CDC, they told us what women's needs were, but when our colleagues (female social organizers) met with the female executive body, they had different needs. The reality was that the male executive body told women what to say when they met us or other representatives from NGOs. (Male Social Organizer [1], interviewee)*

To facilitate communication between a male and a female executive body in a CDC, social organizers told me that they made an arrangement that best fit the village context. They identified older women in the female CDC to sit in on the male CDC meetings and discuss with them the community's issues related to women. Social organizers highlighted that restrictions on the mobility of older women are often less rigid in the traditional social system of villages than for those in their child-bearing years. Older women can step out of the home more easily and can communicate with men, even in remote areas. In some communities, this arrangement was made prior to the LCEP-2 project intervention.

Based on interviews that I had with the social organizers, the majority of CDCs in my study area opposed establishing literacy centers and apprenticeship training for women. The degree of opposition varied from village to village, depending on the culture and norms of the village. The vision of bringing women out of their homes, equipping them with literacy skills, training them in a trade in a workshop, and supporting them to start a business went against village norms. These norms focused on the traditional roles of women including remaining at home, cooking, and taking care of children and the elderly. Thus, this was the starting point for social organizers to negotiate from in their efforts to make the male members of the CDCs gender-friendly, a battle that many rulers in Afghanistan have struggled with.

*CDC was the gateway. Without their permission, we were not allowed to talk directly with women in most villages. We first talked with CDC members and got their approval after several rounds of discussions. Then we went and talked with households. After that we were able to enroll students. We had a one-month deadline to mobilize communities. (Female Social Organizer [1], interviewee)*

*One CDC chairmen told me: Our women can't learn. It is not the time for them to learn. They are too old to learn. They have children and they have to take care of their children. If we send*

*women to attend literacy centers, who should do the work at our home?* (Male Social Organizer [2], interviewee)

To break down gender barriers and improve women's access to the LCEP-2 learning opportunities, social organizers used their soft power to persuade tribal and religious leaders, including using their pre-existing knowledge of communities, informal networks, and religious rhetoric. Social organizers also used their strong negotiating skills to convince CDCs and religious leaders in the villages to create a more gender equal society. In the interviews, they referred to a variety of tactics that they used to challenge the village thinking, including using various religious messages such as verses from the *Quran* and *Hadith* (sayings of Prophet Mohammad).

*I first listened to opposing voices and their concerns. I then told them sayings of our prophet in support of women participating in learning programs. I told them: Do you know what the prophet says with regard to education? Then I said the quotes from our prophet: "To acquire knowledge is binding upon all of us, whether male or female." He also said: "He who travels in the search of knowledge, to him God shows the way of Paradise.* (Male Social Organizer [3], interviewee)

In addition to directly quoting from holy texts, the social organizers also told me that they used religious storytelling as another way to inspire change in the villagers. According to them, this was a powerful technique that they highly regarded. Social organizers generally had many such stories memorized and available to use when appropriate. They told me that they used them for large gatherings of community leaders and villagers to make people think critically about their traditional values that were, in fact, in conflict with their religious values.

*In one of the initial meetings with a CDC in a village, a CDC member told me that it is shame for us to allow women to go out and wander around in the market. I told him the story of Bibi Khadija, wife of Prophet Mohammad, who was a businesswoman. I asked him if what you are saying has Islamic basis, then why was the wife of our prophet a businesswoman? When I told him this story in the presence of other CDC members, he sat in a deep silence.* (Male Social Organizer [3], interviewee)

*In most communities, people think it is a shame to give the name of their wives, mothers, and sisters in public. No man would do this. It was a problem because many people in the villages thought that if they allowed women to go to the centers, their names will be disclosed to men. I told them: If disclosing women's names is a big shame, then why are women's names mentioned in Quran and in all other Islamic related books? I mentioned the name of a number of women that were listed in Quran. When I did this, they laughed, embarrassed.* (Female Social Organizer [1], interviewee)

Social organizers explained that they not only relied on religious messages and stories, but they also provided communities with examples of female role models who played an important role in the history of Afghanistan and in neighboring Muslim countries.

In interviews, social organizers and lead trainers noted that in some villages, it required strong and lengthy negotiation for social organizers to win what they wanted. In these cases, members of the CDCs put forward some conditions that needed to be met in order for them to allow women to attend the literacy and apprenticeship programs. They asked that the social organizers allow them to select the teachers for the female literacy centers and to select the place for the female literacy centers as well. They wanted to see the curriculum for literacy courses before they began, and they wanted men from the program to stay away from the female learning centers. Another condition that they required was that they did not want any photography of their women in the village. According to the interviews with the social organizers, of all these conditions, the curriculum material was key for them.

One of the areas in which concession-making became more difficult was over the selection of the literacy teachers for the learning centers of both women and men. Selecting teachers for these centers was an important issue for both sides because teachers were viewed as the most important position in the program. From the social organizers' point of view, they did not want to lose their influence over the village teachers' selection process because they wanted this position filled by someone who was open to new information and who could learn from the program's teacher development opportunities, which would in turn benefit the community. The information provided in the trainings encouraged teachers to use a democratic classroom process, something that was foreign to most rural Afghanistan communities. In rural communities, engaging learners in learning activities and critically reflecting on issues, were processes that were completely absent in the traditional learning process.

### **Box 1**

#### **Perceptions of a Social Organizer**

Jalal is an educated social organizer. He has a bachelor's degree in science. He attended several community mobilization trainings conducted by different organizations. He said that in the trainings, he learned many new teaching methods such as discussions, group work, role plays, and games. He started mobilizing his own community by creating a youth group. The youth group now supports the community in different areas. The most recent community service project they launched was planting trees. Jalal said that after completion of every community service project, the youth sat together to discuss what went well and what went wrong. Jalal said, "This activity has improved youth confidence and leadership skills."

Jalal indicated that in his 10 years of work, he had talked with many community leaders and religious clergy in Afghan villages about different projects. The majority first opposed any NGO or government activities focused on women's emancipation. Jalal added that there were many reasons for their opposition. For example, community elders told him that sexual harassment of women by men makes them reluctant to send women outside of their homes for learning. Others said that they needed women at home to raise their children and cook for them. Many people believe that it was not a good idea to allow women go out and work in areas where men were involved.

Jalal said that identifying the underlying assumptions held by people who were not interested in programs for women was important. He learned about these assumptions by asking questions. Then he convened a large gathering of all major stakeholders in the village and organized his speech to convince them that the participation of women in learning activities would benefit their families and the community in general. For example, he told the community leaders that if women were not educated, there would be no female doctors. "Will you allow your wives to be seen by a male doctor?" In Afghanistan, most families prefer a female doctor to examine their wives. He also said, "Wouldn't it be good if both men and women earn money for the family. If two persons work and make money, your economic problems will be solved." He also explained that literacy and general education would develop women personally. He talked about the importance of literate mothers and their impact on children. In his community mobilization sessions, Jalal also shared success stories from other villages that he was mobilizing.

In our conversation, Jalal also described the huge impact on community leaders when he referred to verses from the *Quran* or told religious stories that supported a wider view of the appropriate place of

women in the community's life. He said that religious messages make people think about their current practices.

Jalal thought that community mobilization was the most important work in helping to develop Afghan communities because it gives voice to marginalized people and helps people think about the actual dangers of the patriarchal norms.

At several points in their interviews, social organizers explained that they went back and forth on the issue of selecting teachers. CDCs pushed social organizers to select their Mullahs as literacy facilitators for the female and male literacy centers, a request that most social organizers approached with caution. Age, openness, and some level of formal education were important teacher qualifications from the social organizers' point of view. They were such important factors that in many cases social organizers preferred to hire young women with only a sixth-grade education to run the female literacy centers over an older male leader.

According to social organizers, the final agreements concerning the selection of teachers that were made in the communities varied from village to village. In most communities, women were hired to run the female literacy centers, the majority of whom had a low level of education. In some communities, due to a lack of female teachers, Mullahs were hired and were then provided with extensive training by lead trainers in the program and were supervised and mentored by social organizers in the literacy centers.

Based on interviews with the social organizers, the process went much more smoothly as soon as the members of the CDCs became allies of the social organizers. Social organizers noted that CDCs announced the program to villagers through Friday prayer or they asked their representatives to go and talk with households about the new program. The Friday prayers were a good option because most people in the villages attended these prayers. From this point onward, CDCs became an important partner of the social organizers. They took the lead in the villages after prayers to announce the program and talked about its benefits for the villagers. Villagers were able to ask questions about the program and its benefits and social organizers and CDC members responded to the questions or concerns of the villagers. Female social organizers met with the female executive governing bodies and their representatives in the majority of cases in the house of a community leader to spread the word about the program for women.

There was even a formal agreement that outlined the responsibilities of the parties involved. CDCs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the project in the presence of social organizers. The MoU articulated the responsibilities of the program and the responsibilities of the CDCs. Based on the MoU, the CDCs were responsible for providing space in the village for the learning centers and to solve problems at the village level while the organizers were responsible for providing books and any other necessary learning materials for the literacy and apprenticeship training. CDCs were also responsible for identifying appropriate trades and for selecting the trainees and monitoring the apprenticeship process. CDCs selected apprentices from the literacy centers on the basis of motivation, attendance at literacy class, and interest in the skill being taught.

According to the social organizers, it was important to work with the village Mullah right from the beginning. They went to mosques to meet the clergymen in person right away in order to get their confirmed support and often invited them to their meetings with the CDCs. Social organizers provided a copy of the curriculum to Mullahs so that they could understand what topics would be covered in the learning programs. As previously stated, some Mullahs were hired as the literacy teacher. Social organizers also invited Mullahs as guest speakers at the literacy centers where they talked about topics that questioned the customary norms of the community.

All social organizers noted that the Mullahs' buy-in was very crucial for the smooth implementation of the LCEP -2 that targeted the majority of women in the villages. In general, development programs face considerable challenges when there is tension between the Mullah and the NGOs. This has been a major issue in Bangladesh where Islamic organizations, clerics, and mosques see NGOs as a threat to their aims and goals because NGOs work in areas that are considered to be the strongholds of these organizations, and its members want to continue to have influence there. In her book entitled *The Microfinance and Discontents: Women in Debt in Bangladesh*, Karim (2011) explored the antagonistic relationship between clergy and NGOs in local communities. She stated that Islamic organizations accused NGOs of teaching atheism to women, converting rural populations to Christianity, and teaching children to dance.

My research confirmed that social organizers were critical in the empowering process of women within the geographical scope of this study. The social organizers were helpful in shifting forces that created barriers for women to participate in capacity-building opportunities outside of their homes.

*It was the work of social organizers that resulted in increased women's participation in community development activities. The program with extensive support from the social organizers established women's literacy centers which brought many women out of their homes and trained them in basic literacy and numeracy skills. It helped them get new information and discuss their problems. In the literacy centers, women were encouraged to form saving and investment groups and education committees. Forming different women's groups was essential to put an end to the isolation of women in rural areas and to give them the opportunity to practice their literacy skills.* (Lead Trainer [2], interviewee)

In my research, it was the social organizers who initiated the empowerment process for women. Social organizers worked with the CDCs and the households to bring women into the literacy centers, which was then followed by their entry into apprenticeship trainings. According to the social organizers, program managers, and lead trainers, the literacy centers improved the confidence of women and enabled them to negotiate gender issues in their family. The social organizers, lead trainers, and senior managers that I interviewed believed that it was often really difficult for them to wait for women's activism in villages where strong patriarchal norms or traditional community structures were dominant.

*Women would have never started the empowerment process by themselves if they had not received support from male and female social organizers. Social organizers worked with tribal and religious leaders and paved the way for their participation in the literacy classes, apprenticeship trainings, and saving and investment groups.* (Lead Trainer [1], interviewee)

Based on the interviews, mobilizing women in conservative areas required considerable negotiation and bargaining with community leaders. Yet more often, the community mobilization phase has been viewed incorrectly by donors and other high-level stakeholders as an overly simple process. Community mobilization, which is much more of a non-quantifiable abstract activity, has been given little emphasis in high-level discussions and agendas centering on women's empowerment programs. High-level stakeholders and project designers place high value on service delivery or on information pertaining to the program's implementation phase such as number of students enrolled, number of teachers trained, and number of centers established without paying attention to the difficult context in which the projects must operate. Often the local staff is put into a box, requiring them to report only on certain high-level indicators.

In the remaining section, I have highlighted the impact of LCEP-2 empowerment model on women's social and economic lives in Afghanistan.

**Box 2:****Women See Income as the Only Solution to their Problems**

Zeba is a woman who participated in different roles in the implementation of LCEP-2. She worked as a social organizer in the LCEP-2 project. In her village, she served as a deputy chairperson of the female executive body of the local Community Development Council (CDC), and she also ran a small tailoring enterprise from her home. As a deputy chairperson of the CDC, she regularly met with women in the village to talk about their issues. She indicated that women in her village had several serious problems: illiteracy, lack of jobs, domestic violence, and limited mobility. She mentioned that solving those problems required resources that were not available in the village because the majority of villagers were poor and had limited or no education and skills.

Zeba said that most women in her village were forced to stay at home. The majority never went to school and were forbidden to work or to join institutions or participate in activities outside the domestic sphere. Any talent and potential they might have could be expressed only through domestic activities. But she added that this did not mean that they were ‘empty heads.’ A lot of learning happened in their environment. In their homes, they gained new knowledge and skills from their mothers, mothers-in-law, and their peers. Women who had never gone to school and could not even write their names or a letter could tell you the time by looking at the sun. At the same time, she emphasized that this knowledge did not help them gain what they wanted: work that could give them income. Having an income was the most important thing for them.

Zeba said that when the LCEP-2 project came to her village, the social organizers had great difficulty getting women to the centers. In fact, until the last minute, the CDC did not want to establish literacy centers for women or allow them to join the program because they thought that the centers would teach Western democracy to their pupils. However, when the social organizers said that they were establishing literacy centers and apprenticeship training for both women and men in other villages, the CDC agreed to establish the center with some conditions. The main condition was that the center had to be in the community leader’s house, a condition that most people in the community trusted. They also asked social organizers to share a copy of the program’s curriculum with them and the social organizers agreed to this. The CDC members and the social organizers established four literacy centers—two for men and two for women.

Zeba went on to explain that when women joined the centers, some men tried to convince them to withdraw by telling them, “You can’t learn. You are wasting your time.” But women went anyway. In fact, according to Zeba, the women were very active and loved their centers. They viewed literacy learning centers as an opportunity to talk with other women about their daily lives. She added that women demonstrated greater progress than men in this program. They are very happy with what they had learned. “Before establishing literacy centers, women were mainly at home, busy with housework. When the literacy centers were established, women went regularly.” She added that the centers reduced stress among women in her village.

According to Zeba, the majority of the 100 students who enrolled in the literacy centers joined the saving and investment groups, but only 10 of them were selected for apprenticeship training. Male students were taught carpentry, mechanics, and electrical work. Four students were female. They were chosen to learn embroidery and tailoring from her. Her workshop was at her home in the village, and she often brought work home for them from the nearby city.

After five months, the training program was completed, and the women started working at home. But most of their clients were women from the village, so the former students couldn't make enough sales to produce the income they needed. In addition, by this time, Chinese computerized embroidery machines dominated the market. They worked faster and better than ordinary embroidery machines. But they cost from \$800 to \$1,000, far too much money for Zeba and the recent graduates of the apprenticeship classes.

Although there was a saving and investment group in the village from which some women took a loan to start a small business, Zeba showed reluctance to engage in this. She said, "\$1,000 is a lot of money to buy computerized embroidery machine. What if my business does not go according to what I think. How should I pay that back?"

As a social organizer, Zeba also mentored the female executive members of her community CDC. She was the first mentor for women in her village. She provided support for women in conducting basic needs assessments, problem-solving, decision-making, and the formulation of community development plans, areas in which she had received training. She said that mentorship was a good learning experience for female CDC members. Women liked it because it gave them the confidence to apply new and practical ideas to CDC affairs.

She said that the project ended in 2013. After that no other NGO came to their village to support women except UNESCO, which also established literacy centers for women. She indicated that women still regularly came to her requesting economic empowerment programs that provide them modest income.

## Section Two: LCEP-2 Holistic Approach to Empowerment

Lead trainers and managers explained that besides working with community institutions, the social organizers also played a key role in the implementation of empowering strategies including literacy, apprenticeship trainings, and saving and investment groups for marginalized women in the villages. Social organizers worked with an array of community-level stakeholders, such as CDCs, village literacy teachers, and local micro-entrepreneurs. Social organizers continually monitored the participation of women in the program. When a problem such as a high dropout rate of women or any other issue was raised, social organizers went back to the CDCs and other influential stakeholders to resolve the issue.

In the literature review for this study, I found that many reports, articles, and guides recommended that a skills development program should follow a holistic approach. By holistic approach, they meant that program designers should integrate skills training with other activities such as literacy, saving and investment groups, etc. that would provide an enabling environment for women. Johanson and Adams (2004) suggest that it is crucial to combine basic literacy training with apprenticeship training because doing so will increase the productivity of apprentices in the workplace and will help women and men to succeed as micro-entrepreneurs. Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Mwangi (2002), who have reviewed different approaches used by organizations to deliver literacy and skills development training advocates for an integrated model, rather than two separate components. They explain that an integrated model motivates learners and sustain learning

Lead trainers and project managers all spoke highly of the holistic approach that the LCEP project used to empower communities. The perception of mid- and high-level staff was that the program's holistic approach, in which literacy was integrated with productive skills, was a motivating factor for women. Women wanted to learn skills. Under the productive skills component, literacy students formed Self-Help

Saving and Investment Groups (SHSIG). These groups were encouraged to save money for small investment purposes. Members of SHSIGs were selected to participate in apprenticeship training in small craft workshops in their villages in order to prepare them to work in local enterprises or to start their own business in that trade by using the saving in their SHSIGs with little or no support from outside sources.

Although social organizers were in favor of the idea of integration, they critiqued the apprenticeship and saving and investment component of the project. They said that the integrated empowerment model that the LCEP-2 project implemented was successful in terms of social change in the community. In terms of economic empowerment, however, it produced mixed results. The majority of women within the geographical scope of this study faced several problems, of which mobility and access to market were key issues. They raised serious concerns about the saving and investment groups, a component that is highly praised in the reports of the project. Social organizers said that the saving and investment groups did not work in most communities because the treasurers in the saving and investment groups used the group savings for his or her personal needs.

The remaining sections shed light on the social and economic impacts of the LCEP-2 model on women.

## Social Empowerment

### *Creating a Positive Self-Image*

The application of the LCEP-2 empowerment model in the Afghan villages examined in this study changed the way the village's women thought about themselves. Social organizers highlighted that before entering literacy centers, the majority of women thought that the home was their only domain and that housework, raising children, providing care for the elderly, and cooking and cleaning were their main responsibilities. However, the apprenticeship and literacy program changed this view by giving them a basis for the belief that they could learn new skills and work for the development of their communities.

*The majority of women we targeted had never gone to school. They had never experienced the joy of being in a class. Learning and working outside their homes was forbidden for most of them because of the cultural norms. Apprenticeship and literacy assisted them significantly to develop a positive self-image and to grow personally. (Female Social Organizer [3], interviewee)*

### *Boosting Confidence in Women*

The program boosted confidence in women. Social organizers, lead trainers, and a CDC's female member explained that women in the literacy centers discussed a variety of issues with each other and with their class facilitators including topics such as child marriage, lack of schools for girls, lack of technical skills, lack of jobs, illiteracy, and female health concerns. Facilitators were trained by pedagogy specialists on how to run an adult literacy class. These vertical and horizontal communications among women on important issues through storytelling, group discussion, and role plays helped women discuss their major problems and explore solutions. For some sessions, the literacy teacher and social organizers brought in a role model to talk about how she had dealt with the issue they were discussing. In addition to a problem-solving approach, the curriculum also focused on leadership skills. For example, women were taught about attributes of courage and confidence, about skills such as decision-making and public speaking, etc. After gaining an understanding of how these skills would benefit them and how to build them up within themselves, they began to voice their opinion in the community and pushed their CDCs to include them in the community development planning exercise.

### *Community Engagement*

Social organizers and lead trainers explained that under the auspices of a female CDC, women began to form several committees that provided women with a platform from which to voice their opinions and explore opportunities for getting resources from NGOs to address their immediate needs. Women formed education committees in each village that were responsible for the overall management of the literacy centers and girls' education. Some women became part of the female executive body of the CDC. Many social organizers stated how the literacy centers prepared women for these new social roles of public speaking, leadership, negotiation, and follow-up on issues with the CDCs. For instance, when a new NGO came to a community to do an assessment, the women members of the CDCs, along with the members of the education committees and the saving groups, talked with the NGO's representative, personally articulating their needs and requesting that they address them. Formerly, only men interacted with key NGO representatives, telling the women what to tell the NGOs.

### *Taking on an Advocacy Role*

As a result of the presence of these educational programs in their villages, many women began to advocate for changes in their families and in their wider communities. The first such issue was girls' education. Several social organizers stated that for most women, it was the first time they had ever attended any kind of educational program in their villages. They explained that most of them have never gone to school because of issues such as poverty, customary norms, and long distances to school. Women were really excited when they first learned how to write their name and then learn the meaning of it. But at the same time, they expressed their frustration on why they were not allowed to go to school. They questioned the state system and the community norms that created barriers for girls to attend schools and made efforts to remove barriers to a girl's right to receive an education. At the family level, they pushed their husbands and anyone who prevented their daughters from going to school for a reform in this area by giving them reasons for the importance of education for girls. At the community level, literacy students met with mothers and encouraged them to send their daughters to school. They also celebrated important events such as International Women's Day, Teacher's Day, and Mother's Day during which they talked about the importance of women in the social, economic, and political arenas.

*We saw lots of changes at the family level for women who went through our program. For example, in one of the provinces, we did an assessment of enrollment in schools. Enrollment in school was very low. After the LCEP-2 program, the enrollment increased and most of those who were enrolled were the daughters of our apprentices who were running small businesses from their homes and were paying for the cost of their daughters' education. Payment was not the only problem that prevented these girls from attending schools; customary norms were a major issue. After the LCEP-2, women were more vocal with respect to girls' education, both within their family and in their communities. (LCEP-2 Senior Staff [2], interviewee)*

### *Demographic Variables*

Demographic variables played a role in the empowerment of women. According to social organizers and lead trainers, women who were seniors (45 years of age or older) had difficulty in learning reading and writing skills. They usually undermined their ability by saying that they were too old to learn, something that seniors often say in Afghanistan. Their main motivation for attending the literacy centers was to meet other women and obtain new information related to a variety of topics including health and entrepreneurship. However, these same women were very good in the apprenticeship training programs in tailoring, embroidery, and a variety of other skills because they had had prior experience in these areas

and because unlike the literacy training program the apprenticeship trainings were more practical and hands-on in nature.

As stated earlier, due to their age, this group of women had fewer restrictions placed on their mobility and they enjoyed several other freedoms in their villages as well, all of which served as an advantage for them that the younger women did not have. However, in contrast, the younger women were more passionate about their ability to attend the literacy program and were very keen to learn and apply new things in their lives. They wanted to continue their education and complete school. After completing the literacy center programs, a number of them joined accelerated learning programs funded by other NGOs in their communities. Nevertheless, there were more limitations on younger women and their behavior in the public space. Younger girls were not allowed to go out without a Mahram, which is a male blood relative who accompanies younger women when they go out.

Social organizers brought to my attention another common issue for the younger female students. There were examples of young women who were the most competent learners in the literacy centers and trainees in the apprenticeship program with big dreams for their future, but who got married early. A few married men from their own village, and because their in-laws lived in the same village they were allowed to continue and complete the program. However, most of the women who got married moved to their husband's home, in most cases in another village. Their husbands and new families did not allow them to attend the program. Although the female CDC chairwomen, female social organizers, and female literacy teachers utilized different strategies to bring those girls who got married back to the literacy and apprenticeship trainings, not all of them could because the beliefs about the traditional place for Afghan women is deeply rooted in the structure of communities and will still need long-term efforts to change it. I was told that the social organizers and female CDC chairwomen had several meetings with individual families in an attempt to convince them to send their brides to literacy centers. However, the family's responses were usually that these were new brides and should not be seen by strangers. Social organizers even involved the community Mullahs in advocacy roles, and while their involvement did help to bring back a few girls, even their support could not convince all the families.

Another barrier to a commitment to girls' education as well as their personal and professional development was and still is the common practice of early child marriage, which is found in most remote areas in Afghanistan. When they get married, they do not continue schooling and are not allowed to seek other professional development opportunities. According to Amnesty International (2011) almost 80 to 90 percent of marriages in Afghanistan occur by force and the majority of those marriages involve girls below the age of 16.

#### *Limited Access to Apprenticeships*

Social organizers explained that in each village, the LCEP program established four community literacy centers, two for men and two for women. In each class, there were 25 students—so overall 50 men and 50 women. For each gender group, five places were allocated for the apprenticeship trainings. This meant that almost 90% of the women who started as literacy students and members of saving and investment groups were not selected for apprenticeship training due to budget constraints. The program used several criteria to select 10 participants from a pool of 100 in a village. Participants were selected by CDCs and social organizers based on their motivation, attendance rate in the literacy class, and their attempts to save regularly in the saving and investment groups. Several social organizers explained that in some villages, this created a rift between those who were selected and those who were not selected for the apprenticeship training, which was one of the most important motivating factors for women to attend the literacy and saving and investment groups in the first place. Those who were not selected constantly questioned the selection process and a number of them dropped their saving and investment groups' membership.

*Those women who did not meet the criteria made negative comments about the programs in some villages that I was responsible for. They told people that the program selected those who have money and connection. We don't have both of these. That is why we were not selected. (Female Social Organizer [1], interviewee)*

## Economic Empowerment

There is a general trend in the literature that demonstrated that entrepreneurship is one of the best strategies for encouraging the empowerment of women (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002). Many scholarly works highlighted the fact that entrepreneurship improved the status of women in their family and community (Tiwari, 2007). However, women faced several gender-based obstacles when they attempted to start a new business or expand their current business activities. These obstacles were a lack of access to financing, a lack of business networks, an unequally large share of family responsibilities, and limited mobility and cultural experience (ILO, 2008). This study found that Afghan women who wanted to start small businesses faced major challenges, of which patriarchal beliefs and access to markets were major ones.

The literature also stated that while apprenticeship training programs worked well in creating new businesses in African countries in general, this did not always include its women participants. According to the literature, women often did not benefit from apprenticeship training because there were several logistical, cultural, and economic obstacles (ILO, 2012). This study also found mixed results for women who were trained in apprenticeships. Women who had previous connections were more likely to be successful in starting businesses while those women with no network or connections had trouble in sustaining their business or were making very little money from it.

Yet, the high-level stakeholders that I interviewed were positive about the continuing application of apprenticeship training in Afghanistan for women in both rural and urban areas. They stated that apprenticeship training provided the shortest pathway to self-employment and income-generating activities. They cited the fact that the duration of an apprenticeship training period was between four and eight months at which time the participants would have learned a trade. After this time, apprentices were encouraged to start small businesses. The second reason that the high-level stakeholders provided in support of apprenticeship was that it was helpful for women to learn the other skills that the training offered them that were important for business administration such as customer service and bookkeeping.

*In apprenticeship systems, trainees worked in the workshop along with master craftswomen. They dealt with customers. They saw different customers coming to the shop ordering different designs. Apprentices learned what customers in a tailoring business wanted. (LCEP-2 Senior Staff, interviewee)*

When asked about what challenges the program faced in apprenticeship, the management team highlighted poor marketing and a lack of policy support from the government as major issues. They said that the women entrepreneurs had difficulties marketing their goods.

In contrast to the senior staff comments, social organizers were more modest in their perceptions regarding the application of apprenticeships for women in communities. They said that the apprenticeship programs worked smoothly in most urban communities but in rural communities there were some problems that they encountered with women apprentices, where the availability of master craftswomen and cultural barriers were major issues in addition to what the high-level stakeholders raised regarding the marketing of goods.

*One major limitation was that there were not sufficient and skilled master craftswomen in remote areas. Some of them that were available were far away from villages where we wanted to train*

*apprentices. Female apprentices were not allowed to walk long distances in order to attend apprenticeship trainings in a female-run workshop. In these villages, we trained women in livelihood development skills using short-term workshops, often one or two weeks long. (Female Social Organizer [3], interviewee)*

Both the female and male social organizers highlighted another challenging issue in the apprenticeship training programs: a lack of balance between observation and the imitative responses by the attendees. In some apprenticeship training, the balance was not there. The master craftswomen did not allow their apprentices to try practicing an observed task until very late in the process. This was an issue because without practice, true learning did not happen or was limited.

Social organizers and lead trainers mentioned that in areas where there were no master craftswomen, the program used a different strategy—livelihood generation. Livelihood generation activities differed from apprenticeship training both in terms of duration and in terms of delivery mode. The livelihood training lasted from between one and two weeks and was provided by resource persons from the villages or trainers from outside the villages. Expert trainers would go to villages on a pre-organized schedule to train a group of women in a specific skill such as backyard gardening, poultry production or beekeeping, greenhouse maintenance, and food production. The main purpose was to help people produce food for their own needs. However, there were a number of women who started businesses from these trainings.

Below is a brief analysis of the pluses and minuses of specific apprenticeship trainings that were integrated with literacy programs in this study. These were retrieved from the interviews with the social organizers, apprentices, and lead trainers.

#### *Women and Tailoring*

Social organizers and lead trainers explained that in apprenticeship workshops, the majority of women were trained in home-based skills. One of the skills that most women were trained in was tailoring. The majority of the women who mastered this skill used it to address their own and their family's needs by sewing clothes with different designs for themselves and their family members. As a result, the family did not have to pay for an outside tailor.

According to social organizers, some women, after their graduation from the tailoring course, bought sewing machines and started a tailoring enterprise. Although the income was not significant for most of them, it was a good start for the women in these communities. The women used their new income to address their own needs and their children's basic needs such as paying doctor's fees for themselves and buying stationary for their children. Those small amounts of income gave these women an opportunity to avoid having to go to their husband or other family members to get money, allowing them a certain amount of independence.

Social organizers added that there were a number of women whose tailoring enterprises boomed as a result of prior connections they or their husbands had with mid-level garment retailers in the city. According to the social organizers, these women had a good income and, as a result, gained greater respect within their family and communities. People talked positively about their products. They were involved in the decision-making process at the family level and often in the community.

#### *Handicraft Business*

Another area that became more lucrative for women was the handicraft business, although it did not generate a great deal of income. According to social organizers and lead trainers, women had always been

the main producers of traditional handicraft products in villages. They were trained in making hand-sewn embroidery for Afghan clothes (Khamak Daozi), making hand-sewn traditional clothes for brides (Gande Afghani), and making traditional ornaments from stones. These products have been very marketable in Afghanistan and in foreign markets. In my internet search, I came across many websites that sold these clothes in both the United States and Canada.

A senior LCEP-2 staff stated that Khamak Daozi and beadmaking were two very important skills in the Afghan context. Many large retailers look for professional Khamak Daozi and beadmakers because a large number of Afghan women and men prefer to wear these types of clothes. They are used especially by the bride and groom and those who attend wedding parties. Thus, there was a high demand for these two types of products. However, the work requires a lot of effort and the income is low. Professional Khamz Doazi make only around \$60 to \$100 dollars per month.

### *Food Processing and Livelihoods*

In areas where there were no female-run workshops and home-based female businesses, women were trained in livelihood development skills such as beekeeping, food processing, backyard gardening, pickle-making, jam-making, animal husbandry, and poultry production. Women who were trained in one of these skills used their skills to address their own family needs by producing food. A few of them sold their products to customers. In urban areas, some women who received training in livelihood development had started small businesses.

### *The Issue of Middlemen*

Both female and male social organizers revealed that one major problem that existed in the handicraft business for women was that there were a large number of middlemen who bought handicraft products from women cheaply and then sold them in national markets at a high price by themselves or sold them directly to a large retailer. Women did not have connections with large retailers and they did not know what larger retailers wanted in terms of design. This lack of connection and information about design cost these women a lot.

*Middlemen were major problems. A woman who makes a handmade embroidered cloth sells it for \$30, which is a very low price for this work. However, the same product in Kabul costs \$100. (LCEP-2 Senior Staff, interviewee)*

### *Business and Work Balance*

Middlemen were not the only thing that contributed to the low income of these women. There were two other reasons that women received only a modest income from the hard work they were doing, according to the majority of social organizers. The first major reason was that they also worked at home. They took care of their children and other family members and that took most of their time during the day. They could only work on their handicrafts in the little free time that they had. The second reason was that they didn't have appropriate market information about the designs that were in demand. They made products with the designs that they were familiar and comfortable with. Only a very limited number of women had market awareness and the majority of those women were in urban areas. This was a major reason that most of them were receiving a low return for their product.

### *Community Resistance*

Another reason why some of the participants in the apprenticeship program were successful after the program ended and some were not had to do with community acceptance or resistance. The rural communities that participated in these programs had a high resistance to women's participation in the marketplace. Thus, the majority of businesses in rural areas were home-based.

*When the apprenticeship program ended, some young women who wanted to start a business faced strong resistance of their husbands. Their husbands said that it would be shameful that a woman works outside of home. They told their wives that they are women and it is not their business to go out and work. They said that it is the job of men to work outside and make income in order to feed their wife and children. (Female Social Organizer [2], interviewee)*

*We started the apprenticeship process but one program cannot do everything. We trained women in different skills but we couldn't help them a lot in marketing. Some of them found a market in the city on their own but not all. When we reached that phase, the program ended. There should be on ongoing support until the nascent female entrepreneurs reach their maturity. (Male Social Organizer [1], interviewee)*

However, in urban areas there were a number of successful businesses run by women who made use of a group approach, which is discussed later in this section.

A final general reason for a failure of parts of the apprenticeship training had to do with insufficient time. The apprenticeship trainings began when the literacy learning programs were halfway through their cycle. For this activity, social organizers did not have sufficient time to work with traditional institutions and to mentor nascent entrepreneurs. Instead, social organizers were busy with the implementation of activities, visiting learning centers and providing support to literacy teachers in the communities.

### *Marketing Issues for Women Entrepreneurs*

Social organizers, lead trainers, and senior LCEP-2 staff mentioned that marketing the new entrepreneurs' products was a major issue for the majority of women in both rural and urban areas because of the patriarchal beliefs surrounding women that is dominant in the Afghan society. Women, especially younger ones, are not allowed to go to the bazaar and sell their products. While marketing is an important institution in any economy, it is a male-dominated one in Afghanistan. Even in most urban areas, women are rarely seen in the market as sellers.

Although social organizers worked with communities to improve women's access to the market, this access was a challenge throughout the program for women, especially in rural communities. In contrast, in urban areas, some women did come to the market to sell their products. The participation of urban female entrepreneurs was high in the women's market, a market where only female entrepreneurs and customers can go—men are not allowed there. However, rural women entrepreneurs did not use this opportunity because they were far away from urban centers and they had no access to that had this market reliable transportation. Even if there was available transportation, they were not allowed to go into the city bazaar and sell their products because it was seen as immoral for women to do so by the majority of households.

*In rural areas it is really difficult for women to step out of their villages. Stepping out of the village is another step in their path to empowerment. We did not have sufficient time to work with communities in addressing barriers that stop them from going out of their villages. This needs more effort as there will be a lot of push back from local leaders, religious clergy, and male*

*household members. I think the best way is to start with communities that are ready for this kind of change. For most communities, this is a radical change. (Male Social Organizer [2], interviewee)*

*Men say it is shameful for women to go to market for business purposes. The first major barrier that they face is within their family. Their families do not allow them to go to the bazaar and do business. Even if a family allows a woman to go to the market for business purposes in remote areas, the community will question their behavior and will consider it inappropriate. They will talk negatively about that woman. (Female Social Organizer [3], interviewee)*

**Box 3:**

**Narges and her pickle-making business:  
a struggle with marketing**

Narges was 40 years old. She was married and had five children. She lived in a semi-urban community. Narges had never gone to school because her father did not allow her. She was a housewife. Her husband worked as a cook in a small restaurant. However, he didn't make a sufficient income to support his family.

When the literacy program came to their village, Narges' husband was reluctant to send her to the center, although Narges, who heard about this center from one of her close friends, wanted to go there. Fortunately, when her husband heard that the class would be in their neighborhood, he allowed his wife to attend it. Facing many challenges, she managed to go to the center. She had difficulty learning the alphabet, but slowly she was able to write and read basic sentences.

In her village, the program offered livelihood trainings in poultry production, pickle and jam making and mushroom cultivation. She was selected for the training, although as previously stated, not many were. Narges was trained for one week in pickle, jam, and tomato paste production.

After one week, she produced 10 cans of pickles with the 250 Afs that she had saved before. However, no one was interested in buying her pickles. The social organizer who had supported the implementation of the program in her village visited her one day. Narges complained that she had no customers and no one in the village was interested in buying her product. In response to this conversation, the social organizer met with a community leader and asked her to encourage people to buy Narge's product. Right after this discussion, the community leader bought a bottle of pickles and paid her 50Afs.

The social organizer bought three bottles of pickles from her. She took one bottle to her office and gave it to her colleagues to eat with their lunch. Everyone liked the taste of the pickles and wanted to buy more themselves. They asked for the address. The social organizer explained, "Since no one was buying her pickles, I told my colleagues. 'Fifty Afs is not a lot of money but it will make a difference for Narges. When you are going to her village or passing her village, buy her pickles.'" The social organizer added that "when I went home and opened one of the bottles of pickles that I bought from Narges, I was really amazed by the good taste of her pickle. My family liked it and I became one of her customers."

When the social organizer visited Narges two weeks later, she had sold all of her 10 bottles. Most of them had gone to the social organizer's colleagues and she made some profit after selling all 10. She was happy. After a few weeks, her husband provided her with a thought while they were eating

dinner. Her husband told her that he would take a few bottles of the pickles to the restaurant where he worked and would ask the restaurant manager if he would buy them. This was the turning point in her business. The restaurant manager liked the pickles, offering them for free to his customers. The aim was to attract more customers. The restaurant customers liked them, and the restaurant became one of Narges' biggest clients.

Her husband also had good connections with other restaurants and wedding halls. He helped her with marketing her pickles to those wedding halls. Many restaurants and wedding halls began to buy pickles from Narges. Her production and income significantly increased since she now had bigger and more prosperous clients. Narges began making an average of 25,000 Afs per month. Her daughter started helping her in her business.

The social organizer told me, "One day, I saw her husband and talked to him about Narges' business. Her husband said, 'Narges has done something that I have never been able to.'"

### *Marketing Strategies Used by Women*

The women in the villages used different strategies to market their products. As referenced above, several social organizers said that in communities, especially conservative ones where women were not allowed to go to the market, they pursued a group approach to marketing their products. A group of women put their products together and assigned a male relative, trusted by the group, to take their products and sell them in the city either directly to customers or to mid-level retailers in the city. In return, the man received his transportation fee and payment for his service for the day. Another approach was to depend on middlemen to market their products. Middlemen visited villages and bought the handicraft products made by women without any pre-orders or received orders and designs from large retailers to give to women in the communities to make. Some women established women's business associations in urban and rural areas. These associations had exhibition centers where many women entrepreneurs brought different types of handicrafts to sell. Obviously, exhibitions in remote areas did not attract many customers but these exhibition staff had connections with larger women's exhibition centers in the city.

### *Start-up Costs*

Women pursued different ways to fund the startup cost of their businesses, which varied from business to business and from village to village. For some businesses, the startup costs were low and did not prevent women from starting small businesses. To fund these low startup costs, some women had saved the monthly stipend of \$20 that they received when they were apprentice. For example, one woman bought a teapot and six matching glasses for 700 Afs. She decorated this set with beads and sold it for 1200 Afs, which was enough money for her to expand her business and purchase to two undecorated sets.

However, there were several other trades that had high startup costs and the women trying to start businesses in these trades were not able to fund them. For instance, a good sewing machine cost \$200, an amount of money that these women did not have. Although there were saving and investment groups in their village, most women were reluctant to take a loan because they were afraid that their businesses would fail and they would not be able to pay the installments. Some women pooled resources and started a joint business, which was a successful model for many apprentices in Balkh province.

To conclude, the experiences and stories that social organizers, senior LCEP-2 staff, lead trainers, and apprentices shared with me demonstrated that the social organizers were successful in improving women's access to literacy and apprenticeship trainings in areas where patriarchal norms confined the

role of women to the home and its domestic chores. The secret behind this achievement was that these social organizers were influential people within these communities, and they were able to use their influence to mobilize the community and allow women to join the literacy and apprenticeship classes. They used different negotiation tactics as well as religious messages and stories to challenge the patriarchal norms, often with successful results. However, the necessity of community mobilization has often been neglected by the higher-level stakeholders. Instead, high level stakeholders have directed their attention to program implementation without considering what needs to come beforehand to achieve a successful implementation.

With respect to the empowerment model that the LCEP project used, there was strong evidence that empowerment model had a positive impact on the social lives of the village women but in terms of economic empowerment, the apprenticeship program produced only mixed results. While it worked well for some women, it did not work for many of them since in the end it was difficult and even impossible for the women who lived in the smaller villages to market their products. The majority of the apprentices in this study lived in villages where there were no large markets and no way to connect with the larger ones in the city.

The next section provides a detailed conclusion of this study.

## Conclusion

Based on data analysis, this study resulted in several important findings concerning the women's empowerment programs in villages in Afghanistan. These findings covered areas of personnel, the pre-implementation strategies and the techniques necessary for their success at that stage, improvements to implementation polices, including the inclusion of other community members, and suggested changes to some of the program activities.

### Personnel

Social organizers are the interlocutors of the communities. They understand the social structure of villages extremely well and have prior experience in implementing a variety of programs in those communities. Program designers and policymakers should note that social organizers can be an excellent asset for them at all levels including the design of a new project or the formulation of new policies. The gaps between policy and practice will be reduced if there is close and meaningful communication between social organizers and programs designers.

### Community Mobilization

Based on extensive interviews with social organizers, lead trainers, and senior LCEP-2 staff, it is crucial to include community mobilization prior to program implementation and ongoing in order to better insure the success of any women's' empowerment program in areas where patriarchal norms and institutions are dominant. Without a successful community mobilization phase, women's empowerment programs will have difficulty in smoothly implementing the program's activities. An increased understanding of the importance of having the backing of the general community, particularly the male population in villages, before and during the program's implementation would be a better guarantee of the program's success. This would require the allocation of sufficient funding in the design stage to include this vital mobilization step.

### Influential Community People as Social Organizers

Who conducts the process of community mobilization matters considerably to the overall effectiveness of this process in rural Afghanistan. Hiring influential people (men and women) from the community to fill the role of social organizer is a good strategy for gaining the acceptance and support of the communities and for initiating the empowerment process for women. Choosing this category of people to begin the process has several advantages. They have deep knowledge of the community's social structure and they have informal networks already in place. Their ability to use their influence to attain community support from people who might otherwise be opposed to the program's implementation better ensures its success. One very crucial point is that there must be a capacity-building program in place for training the people chosen as social organizers. For the time being, short-term trainings would be useful. However, in the long run, there should be a much more organized institution to prepare men and women for the social organizers' role in Afghanistan.

### Use of Religious Materials and the Power of Storytelling

Using religious messages and materials has great power in community mobilization in Afghanistan. It not only helped increase the participation rate of women in the program but also made people think about their current practices towards women. All the social organizers interviewed for this study spoke highly about using these strategies during the community mobilization phase. How religious messages are delivered in these communities is crucial. If social organizers deliver them in a "dry" way, the delivery

will have little impact. The social organizers that I spoke with explained that they used a more powerful delivery. Their goal was to make their audience think about and reflect on their inner feelings. The main method that most social organizers used to accomplish this was storytelling, which proved to be a very successful tool to help the social organizers successfully break the gender barriers.

#### Working with Men

In order to change the status of women's empowerment in Afghanistan, it is crucial to work directly with men and the patriarchal institutions in order to open up learning opportunities for women in areas where traditional norms restrict their activities. In this type of context, programs that use a distributive negotiation style in their communication with men are more successful in improving women's access to public space. A win-lose mindset will not work. Both sides (the project staff and traditional institutions) need to find common ground and be willing to relinquish their demands on things that are less important to them. Coming to an agreement on the more deeply embedded issues concerning women's rights requires more negotiating time and resources. Ignoring men or underestimating the power of patriarchal institutions can put both the program and its potential female beneficiaries at a high risk. There must be enough time for social organizers to work with men right from the start and throughout the program.

#### Empowering Strategies and their Impact

The apprenticeship training program had mixed results for the women who took part in this program. Apprenticeship programs have worked in geographic areas where there was an enabling environment. An enabling environment includes not only the availability of female-run workshops, trainers, and tools, but also the factors created by the presence of macroeconomics. In urban areas, for example, the women who took part in this program had more access to different types of trades and markets. The quality of their training was much higher than in the rural communities. To improve upon the success already in place in these areas, the skills development program could introduce new skill areas such as mobile phone repair and other non-traditional skills. In rural areas, most of the apprenticeship training involved tailoring, embroidery, and handicrafts. According to the data results, handicraft was an area that had the potential to grow but because it is a trade that requires more time and energy, the pay back is much smaller, offering the women only a modest income. The majority of women in rural areas who completed the apprenticeship did not have any easy way to start their business due to patriarchal beliefs and the overall challenging economic situation of the country.

#### The Power of Connection in Marketing

Connecting nascent micro-entrepreneurs with larger retailers is crucial for the sustainability of new businesses. In the LCEP-2 project, the female apprentices who had good connections either in the villages or outside of that managed to start successful businesses. Future programs should focus on how to establish these types of connections between entrepreneurs in the villages and large and mid-size retailers. This would be particularly useful in the handicraft field, for which there is already a potential market. By connecting with larger retailers whose customers are willing to pay more money for purchases, the problem of low financial return would be better addressed.

#### An Alternative to Apprenticeship

In areas where the apprenticeship program is not workable, livelihood development trainings are an effective and useful strategic choice. Informants spoke highly of the successful results of teaching women skills that focused on back-yard gardening, poultry production, beekeeping, and animal husbandry. These skills trainings were shorter and the relocation of trainers to the villages was more easily accomplished.

Some of these businesses have a great potential for prosperity if local women who work with animals, chickens, and honeybees are connected with larger retailers in the city. This is an area that future programs should pay considerable attention.

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## Annexes

### Annex 1: Interview Questions

#### **Interview Question for high-level stakeholders**

1. What is your opinion about the role of social workers in the program?
2. What is your opinion about apprenticeship training as an approach to skills development strategy for women in Afghanistan?
3. In your opinion, what worked well and what didn't work in apprenticeship trainings for women? Why it didn't work? Could you please explain in what conditions it worked and in what conditions it didn't work?
4. What were the program (apprenticeship training) expectation for the impact of the program on women? Could you please explain if those expectations were met? If they were not met, please explain why?
5. What was the process by which women were enlisted? What is your view about their selection? What were the challenges in recruiting women for the apprenticeship training?
6. What would you recommend to improve apprenticeship training for women in Afghanistan?

#### **Interview Questions for mid-level stakeholders**

1. What is your opinion about the role of social workers in the program?
2. What is your opinion about apprenticeship training as an approach to skills development strategy for women in Afghanistan?
3. In your opinion, what worked well and what didn't work in apprenticeship trainings for women? Why it didn't work? In what conditions it worked and in what conditions it didn't work?
4. What were the program (apprenticeship training) expectations for the impact of the program on women? Could you please explain if those expectations were met? If they were not met, please explain why?
5. How the apprenticeship training changed the life of women (high confidence, networking, feeling empowered, speak in public and etc? Are they satisfied with the changes? What do people in their communities think about those changes?
6. Did participants moved to income-generating activities as a result of their participation in apprenticeship training? Please explain what conditions were in place that help them to income generating activities?
7. Who selected women for apprenticeship trainings? What were criteria for selection? What do you understand about these criteria? How did you learn about them? How did you implement them? To what extent they were implemented?
8. What would you recommend to improve apprenticeship training for women in Afghanistan?
9. Do you want to add any final comments about the apprenticeship training for women?

#### **Interview Question for Apprentices**

1. What is your opinion about the role of social workers in the program?

2. When did you start your apprenticeship training? How long did you spend in a local workshop to learn the trade you had chosen? Was the timeframe for training reasonable? If the answer is no, Why?
3. Who selected the trade for you? Is this an apprenticeship of your choice? Did you enjoy being and apprentice in that trade? If the answer is no, Why?
4. How were you selected for the apprenticeship training? Were you approached by someone?
5. What changes have you noticed in your life and in yourself as a result of participating in the program? How do you feel about it? Did it change your circumstance? What dose people in your community think about those changes?
6. What did you like most in your apprenticeship in the local workshop? What did you like least in your apprenticeship training in the local workshop? Why was your experience like in the apprenticeship training?
7. How was the business in your workshop? Did you have sufficient customers? Do you think you had enough work in the workshop to learn the trade?
8. What other skills did you learn from your local master craftsmen or other senior apprentices that can help you to run a workshop by your own in the trade you have chosen? Ex problem solving skills, customer service skills, book keeping and etc.
9. Have you moved to income-generating activities as a result of your participation in apprenticeship training? If yes please explain where do work? If not? Please explain why?
10. Do you want to add any final comments?