

NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL - INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM) PARTNERSHIP

Reversing Marginalisation and Improving Participation of Women and Girls in Urban Displacement and Out-of-Camp Contexts

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION STUDY

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Photo 1: The research team at the NRC Office in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As part of a collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), NRC has contextualised and applied the IOM/Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) protection assessment toolkit for the urban and out of camp displacement (UDOC) setting of eastern Afghanistan. This report outlines and analyses the findings of the assessment, and makes recommendations for further action and programme development to enhance women's participation and protection in this context.

In Afghanistan, NRC is at the forefront of piloting new approaches in integrated protection programming through community-based approaches, including through adapted camp management methodologies to address the needs of displaced communities *outside* of camps, where the vast majority of displaced Afghans are situated (in both dispersed urban displacement and informal settlements). Specifically, its innovative UDOC approach aims to improve access to protection services, humanitarian assistance, and durable solutions for displacement-affected communities by establishing and supporting mechanisms to enhance communication with communities, community engagement and mobilization, and coordination of services. These mechanisms include community centres, neighbourhood committees, and outreach teams, and they are designed to promote the inclusion of marginalized groups in the management of their displacement situation and development of durable solutions.

Afghan women in general are a marginalised group, facing cultural discrimination; moreover, those in states of forced displacement are even further excluded from community management mechanisms and structures (*with which NGOs and local authorities primarily engage*). In addition, most NGO field staff tend to be males, which further hinders women and girls' – particularly female-headed households' – access to services due to communication challenges that are a result of cultural practices. Women themselves are generally excluded from labour and business opportunities due to a combination of restrictive culture and lack of education – particularly among refugee-returnee women, of whom 93% are illiterate.¹ Additionally, women in Afghanistan are particularly vulnerable to GBV and forced marriage,² where cultural constraints mean that such incidents are under-reported and referral pathways are lacking.³ It is assumed that women and girls are exposed to such threats at a greater level while in displacement.

The findings presented in this report are a result of an assessment that NRC has undertaken using the toolkit developed by IOM's pilot initiative carried out in partnership with the WRC. The toolkit was designed for Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) agencies to identify impediments and challenges affecting women's participation in camps and camp-like settings, opportunities to strengthen women and girls' participation, including in camp governance structures, to enable them to voice their safety concerns, and support the identification of responses to strengthen participation and mitigate risks affecting them, including risks of being exposed to GBV. NRC piloted this toolkit in Iraq during 2017⁴, and now through this partnership with IOM, NRC has adapted the toolkit for the out-of-camp context in Afghanistan. This report outlines the findings and recommendations from application of the toolkit.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH LOCATION: SHEIKH MESRI VILLAGE SETTLEMENT

NRC's UDOC programme in eastern Afghanistan is implemented in ten different urban and peri-urban areas, and one of these areas was selected for the research study. The area is a large village/settlement called Sheikh Mesri located in the hard-to-reach district of Surkhroad of Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. This settlement accommodates large numbers of both conflict-induced internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees from Pakistan. At the time of writing, displacement figures from IOM's displacement tracking matrix were only available from June 2017. These figures indicate that at that time 26% (around 40,000 individuals) of the population of Surkhroad district were displaced (IDPs or returnees), and there were around 8,165 displaced individuals (3,010 IDPs and 5,155 returnees) in Sheikh Mesri settlement – this figure has likely increased significantly in the last 12 months due to more arrivals from Pakistan and also internal displacement from the conflict-affected areas of Surkhroad.

NRC's UDOC project has been operating in this location since the beginning of 2017: running a community centre, a mobile team to conduct outreach among community members, and supporting five neighbourhood committees. As well as being an area that is quite isolated and with few services and little humanitarian assistance available, it is also a settlement with a notably restrictive culture regarding women's participation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the research:

- (1) To identify barriers and opportunities for women to:
 - a. Contribute to decision-making and problem-solving in the community;
 - b. Voice their safety concerns, ideas, and questions.
- (2) To learn about women and girls' current perceptions of safety risks in their community;
- (3) To inform NRC's programming in improving women's participation and/or address self-identified safety risks.

Tools used:

The toolkit developed by IOM is based on a qualitative research methodology, using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with female leaders and non-leaders (including adolescent girls), male leaders and

¹ NRC Labour Market Assessment, Nangarhar Province, 2017

² Nearly half of female respondents in a community protection assessment conducted in May 2017 reported prevalence of sexual violence.

³ NRC Camp Management staff in Nangarhar Province consistently report challenges in identifying humanitarian partners to whom they can refer SGBV cases to.

⁴ Report available on request

non-leaders, and a safety mapping activity with women (leaders and non-leaders). In addition, the research includes individual interviews with stakeholders working in the area.⁵

NRC conducted the majority of the data collection for this activity in Sheikh Mesri from 12 - 18 July 2018. In total, 121 community members participated in the study (77 female; 44 male) in 15 separate groups. Of these, eight groups were committees ('leaders'), six groups were other community members (non-leaders), and one group was adolescent girls (non-leaders). The table below summarises which groups were consulted using which tools, and with how many participants.

Tool	Number of times used	Number of participants
FGD with women leaders	5	40
FGD with women non-leaders (including adolescent girls)	4	30 (10 returnees, 13 IDPs, 7 host community)
FGD with adolescent girls (non-leaders)	1	7 (3 returnees, 1 IDP, 3 host community)
FGD with men leaders	3	24
FGD with men non-leaders	2	20 (mixed IDPs and returnees)
Safety Mapping with women leaders	5	40 (same participants as FGD)
Safety Mapping with women non-leaders	5	37 (same participants as FGD)
Key Informant Interviews	2	2 (NRC Community Mobiliser; director of NGO 'NCRO') - male.

Participant selection:

The male and female 'leaders' that participated in this research were women and men who are already participating in NRC's neighbourhood committees in the area. Three male and two female committees were selected and trained in 2017, while three new female committees were selected a few weeks before commencement of field research. 'Non-leaders' participating in the research were primarily identified and invited to participate by NRC-employed Community Mobilisers to work in the Community Centre and neighbourhood of Sheikh Mesri - they are residents of the neighbourhood and familiar with its residents. In addition, some participants were community members who were visiting the Community Centre on the days of the research, and were invited to participate.

Research Team:

The research team consisted of seven female and four male Afghan national staff from the Camp Management - UDOC programme and M&E teams - all fluent in the local language, Pashto. Prior to data collection, the team received a two-day training in Protection Mainstreaming and Gender, a half day training on Participation, and a day and a half training to introduce and practice using the tools. *Please refer to Annex 3 for the training agenda.*

Changes to the toolkit:

Upon review of the toolkit by NRC's Camp Management Specialist to adapt it to the out of camp and Afghan context, the following changes were made:

- Language was adjusted throughout the toolkit to reflect the change from a camp to out of camp context;
- Terminology was changed to ensure sensitivity to the delicate cultural considerations of the Afghanistan context;
- Additional steps/ questions were added to safety mapping component of the toolkit to reflect out of camp environment;
- Changes were made to questions in the Key Informant Interview (KII) tool according to the kinds of KII available for out of camp contexts;
- Changes were made to questions in the focus group discussion (FGD) tools reflecting out of camp context, and taking into account the nature of the pre-existing structures.
- The mapping activity was simplified a little to reduce the different questions and steps, and using fewer different colours/ stickers - this change was made following the first field test of the tool, where

⁵ Note: Five key informant interviews were planned for the week commencing 30 July 2018, however, a complex attack on the Department of Refugees and Repatriations in Jalalabad on 31 July meant that all NRC operations and movements in the city had to be halted. Although the team have subsequently been able to conduct two KIIs, they could not conduct the remaining three since the offices of the selected key informants have been closed since the mentioned attack. It is not yet clear when their operations will resume, so the findings of this report will be based primarily on the insights taken from the community itself, as well as the two interviews that were done.

staff struggled to remember all the different steps, and community members also found it hard to follow the process.

Please refer to Annex 1 for outline of lessons learned relating to data collection tools and Annex 2 for the amended toolkit.

FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS ON PARTICIPATION

Role that female and male leaders play in their community:

Both male and female committee members played a significant role in inviting and bringing vulnerable women and men to the Community Centre to receive information and referrals from NRC – particularly new arrivals (IDPs and returnees from Pakistan). Some of the women also reported that they give women information about how to access their rights (e.g. through claiming civil documentation such as the *tazkera* – Afghan’s national ID card) and services (e.g. local clinic). One of the women’s committees also reported that they are involved in solving family disputes at the village level⁶. The new female committee members struggled to identify any specific role they play – demonstrating the crucial importance of providing capacity building trainings and regular follow-up with committee members to empower them to participate in their community.



Male committee members interpreted their role in a slightly different way than female committee members – seeing themselves as a key interlocutor between the community and service providers working in the area, with the NRC Community Centre providing the platform for this interaction. By contrast, women’s committees did not emphasise having a coordination role with any agencies other than NRC; this is despite the fact that one of the key informants in this study – a male director of an NGO – stated that women’s committees should play a role of connecting the community with organisations and helping to select beneficiaries. Even if senior male NGO staff recognise the need for contact with women, this will not be achieved so long as the staff of these organisations continue to be dominated by men.

One of the supported male committees is comprised of pre-existing community leaders (*Maliks*). They are a powerful group of people in the community (normally invited into their role by authorities or pre-existing leaders),⁷ and see their role as representing the interests of their community, bringing peace, and referring problems to external organisations and giving them access to the area. As with other committees (both male and female), they also recognise their role in bringing people to the Community Centre run by NRC.

Recommendation: Ensure that female Committees are given adequate training and awareness on issues critical to them and their community to empower them to participate.

Recommendation: Proactively seek out female staff from Service Providers and link these to the female committee members in order to empower them in the coordination role.

Recommendation: Advocate for more female staff among humanitarian and development agencies, as well as government authorities.

Problem-solving and decision-making in the community:

⁶ Note: notes from data collectors do not specify what kind of ‘family disputes’ are existing – this merits further investigation.

⁷ As mentioned by a key informant from local NGO ‘NCRO’

All of the women committee members reported that women's problems are solved by women – though they did not specify what kind of problems are 'women's problems'. One committee particularly emphasised that women's problems are solved by elderly women, while another mentioned that there is a new girls' *shura* (a local community committee), and they have managed to solve some disputes with the support of elderly women. Interestingly, one of the male committees as well as NRC's male Community Mobiliser also mentioned the role of the girls' *shura* in solving problems, as well as that middle aged and/or elderly women sometimes play in decision making. The latter point was also supported up by the director of NCRO, and both he and the Community Mobiliser mentioned that literate women with an understanding of the context were better able to participate in decision-making, as well as relatives of *maliks*. The Community Mobiliser also mentioned specifically that NRC's support for women's shops was giving female committee members an opportunity to make some decisions.

"I am elderly and I help solve the problems. If I leave it to the youth, they will be in conflict with each other and they will fight".

Elderly female committee member

Newer female committee members did not feel that they had any role in decision-making, and felt that this was the sole preserve of the *maliks*. They were unhappy about this situation, stating that no NGOs had asked their opinion on anything, and that *maliks* were preventing access to NGOs by the rest of the community, e.g. by insisting that NGO meetings and trainings take place in their homes. The new committee members requested for a training to improve their capacity and allow them to solve problems and make decisions, and they also referenced the existing women's committees who were already playing this role – this supports the *recommendation* above regarding the importance of training for female committees, and the *recommendation* below regarding the links between old and new committee members.

One of women's committees gave an interesting example of a problem they had attempted to solve: with NRC's support, the women's committee took a petition to the Ministry of Education to advocate for more female teachers. Prior to going to the Ministry, they took their petition first to the elders and then to the *maliks* for signature/authorisation – demonstrating the fact that even if women are involved in problem-solving, they may still require endorsement of men for legitimacy. The women reported that being in an NRC-supported committee gave them credibility, which enabled them to approach the *maliks* and elders for endorsement of their petition. Their efforts were unfortunately hindered by attacks on the Education Ministry by the Islamic State (*Daesh*), which meant they have not yet been able to return to follow-up on this issue.

Even if the more established female committee members felt they could play a role in some decisions, they still reported that most decisions would be made either by elderly males or (if not solved by elders) by *maliks* and/or Imams – non-leader women agreed with this. Women's preferred decision-makers were generally the elders rather than the *maliks* since both female leaders and non-leaders alike felt that the *maliks* were influential but not accountable ("we don't trust the *maliks* at all", "they are only working in their own interest"), and complained that since they cannot afford to pay bribes to the *maliks*, the *maliks* will not solve their problems. The *maliks* do not involve women in decision making, nor others in the community – with widows and people with disabilities particularly excluded from decision-making. As such, the women do prefer to try and solve problems by themselves or with the elders.

The male committees were much more assertive about their role in decision making, particularly the *malik's* committee, who stated that "*of course, we are making decisions by following the rules of the Afghan culture, Islam, and Afghan government*". The non- *malik* male committee noted that they worked with the *maliks*, village elders, and youth committee to make decisions. NRC's male Community Mobilizer working in Sheikh Mesri emphasised the important role of the *maliks*, as well as a new *shura* comprised of young men – citing an example of a problem this *shura* solved whereby they had the district authorities transfer a male doctor from the clinic because his "behaviour was not good with girls and women". All the male committees mentioned the role of the *jirga* (gathering of male leaders/representatives) to solve problems/conflicts between families – and many of the examples of problem-solving that they gave pertained to conflicts between families. One of the examples given related to a widow, whose brothers-in-law were arguing over who would marry her – after intervention of the *jirga*, the woman was given the authority to decide which one (if any) to marry, and she took the decision not to marry either of them. Both the examples cited above demonstrate that the male decision-makers can have a very significant impact on the decisions, lives, and safety of women.

Non-women leaders were asked if they thought that men would support a greater role for women in decision-making and problem solving in the neighbourhood - they almost exclusively answered that men would not support this due to the culture and men's 'big egos', which makes them think they do not need advice of women. NRC's male Community Mobiliser and the NCRO Director also agreed that one of the biggest barriers to women's greater role in decision-making and problem-solving was the attitude of both male *shura* members (*maliks*) and heads of household. The NCRO Director also specifically mentioned an example from 6 years ago of a female UNHCR social worker who - despite (or perhaps because of) being an influential person in the community was killed by her brother because of 'cultural issues'. This highlights the sensitivity of women's empowerment activities in such communities, and the imperative to ensure a 'Do No Harm' approach. That said, the Community Mobiliser suggested that "50% of men are likely to support women", and that women could play more of a role by visiting the NRC Community Centre - providing they travelled there with a *mahram* (chaperone) which would thereby make their visits acceptable to men in the community. Two of the female groups of respondents, as well as the NCRO Director, also seemed optimistic that the attitude of men about women's participation could change with awareness-raising activities.

"Men think that women are only meant to be in the home, not to take part in any decision."

Female non-leaders

Recommendation: Consider how to minimise the harmful influence of maliks and to influence the way in which they perceive and engage with women.

Recommendation: Consider how to enhance the role of elderly women in the community for problem solving, particularly with regards to domestic/family issues.

Recommendation: Facilitate meetings and exchange visits between female committees (new and old; active and less active) to encourage learning and to inspire the new or less active committees.

Priorities of women and men:

Interests of women and men converged in some areas but differed in others - for example, women were interested in having literacy and vocational skills training, and to 'decrease the negative thinking of men', while men were interested in shelter, job opportunities, and improving the road conditions (both the physical surface and the security - citing thefts along the road). Both men and women were interested in education - including for girls (but only with female teachers) and improved access to healthcare. Both women and men and men's groups were quite perceptive in guessing the priorities of the other group. Of particular significance is the fact that both women and men acknowledged the priorities of appropriate work or income-generating opportunities for women (i.e. that which can be done from the home) as well as education for girls.

	According to women	According to men
Women are interested in...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools and education for girls in the neighbourhood (1 committee and 4 groups of non-leaders); Health care, including more/better access to clinics and hospitals, and medicines (especially for women's health problems) (1 committee); Vocational skills/handicraft training for women - especially for slightly older (uneducated) women, since they cannot work outside but they could work from their own homes (5 committees; 4 women non-leaders); Literacy skills training in their homes (4 committees); Poultry farms (1 committee); Shops to purchase and sell items (2 committees; 1 group non-leaders); Decrease the negative thinking of men (1 group non-leaders). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailoring and other vocational training courses (3 committees); Poultry farms or other working opportunities (2 committee); Maternal health facilities; Female teachers in the schools to send daughters to school (3 committees).
Men are interested in...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Education, including for girls but only if there are female teachers (1 committee); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shelter (1 group non-leaders); Job opportunities (2 committees, non-leaders);

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek employment opportunities (3 committees); • Renovation of the roads (1 committee); • Literacy courses (2 committees). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoiding forced marriage; • Avoiding child labour; • Fixing the road (2 committees, 1 group non-leaders); • Education (2 committees); • 24/7 clinic with ambulance service (1 group non-leaders); • Parks for children; • Reducing thefts on the roads.
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Representation of needs and interests:

Once again, much of the discussion focused on the role of *maliks*, and while some committee members expressed satisfaction with the *maliks*, there were also complaints about some unscrupulous *maliks*, such as one who is “mostly sharing the NGO assistance among his relatives and friends, and mostly the IDPs and poor people are not considered to receive the NGO assistance”. Male and female non-leaders also agreed that *maliks* were the main decision-makers, and they did not feel that the *maliks* truly represented the interests of poor people. Most NGOs identify and distribute assistance through *maliks*, so this observation is extremely worrying. The men also mentioned that those people in the community with ‘connections’ are better able to have their needs represented.

One of the female committee members gave a specific example of how vulnerable IDP families have not been well represented: she claimed that the previous day there had been a meeting at the *malik*’s house with an NGO. The *malik* pretended it was to present the IDPs needing help (around 50 men/20 women who arrived the previous week), but instead he only brought his relatives, so the new IDP families are still in need, and they cannot receive help because they cannot pay the *malik* to be included on the assessment lists. Other women committee members agreed that those who are not represented do not manage to receive assistance or services. Male committees seemed less aware of any families not represented – indicating the importance of including women in community representation structures, since they appear to be more perceptive of ‘excluded’ families and individuals.

Women non-leaders felt that, due to cultural constraints against their gender, they could not voice their concerns to anyone other than their husband or male head of household – if they did, their relatives/the community would cause them problems and make them feel ashamed, and even damage their relationships with men. One adolescent girl gave an example of trying to claim her inheritance, while her brothers yielded to her request they forbade her from coming to her father’s house.

With regards to raising their voice to decision-makers, women said that “*maliks don’t listen to our problems and local authorities don’t listen to our problems*”. Just one committee and one group of non-leader women said that only older women could voice their concerns to *maliks*, but most women said that they cannot speak to *maliks* since the *maliks* will not be confidential. Women assume that the *maliks*’ opinion is that women should only voice their concerns to their head of household/husband; some of the women also said that the *maliks* are scary and use aggressive language, and the NGO key informant mentioned that some *maliks* are armed and therefore women would not want to raise concerns with them. Again, this emphasises the importance of finding ways to reduce the potentially harmful influence of *maliks*, as well as to influence the way in which *maliks* engage with and are perceived by women; reference the *recommendation* above.

Male non-leaders mentioned that women are able to raise their concerns at NRC’s community centres, and women non-leaders said that the capacity of the female committees should be increased since they are a good way to raise concerns; men also expressed support for women’s committees as an avenue for women to raise their concerns. Female non-leaders (including adolescent girls) asked for more training and awareness sessions in the community centre – including awareness of men – to help improve the situation for women, and men’s support for women.

When asked what would be the benefit of giving women more of a voice in the neighbourhood, female non-leaders mentioned that there is a lot of domestic violence, and that if even just one woman raised her voice it would give the rest of the women confidence to speak out. Interestingly, some of the male non-leaders had a similar opinion, saying that giving women more of a voice would mean that “*violence and conflict against women and girls will be reduced, and will make a change of peace in their life, current problems against women will be solved*”; they also suggested that women’s psychological problems might

be reduced. While it is not exactly clear the causal mechanism between women speaking out and a reduction in violence (especially given the above fears of women that speaking out will harm them), it does suggest that further empowerment of women might help to improve women’s status and thereby safety in the community. Another group of female non-leaders said women raising their voice would help to decrease disputes among families, and would allow women to contact NGOs and government institutions to be able to advocate for their needs – such as handicraft programmes, girls’ literacy, etc. Some of the male non-leaders agreed with this observation, stating that *“if women could voice their concerns, it would help them to convince NGOs/government to provide activities – e.g. tailoring or poultry”*.

Recommendation: *Ensure provision of safe and private spaces for women to raise concerns directly to service providers, in order to protect them from potential ‘backlash’ by men who may prefer them not to do so. Consider options of (a) opening new spaces only for women and/or (b) having women-only days or times at the existing community centre.*

Recommendation: *Undertake more awareness-raising with men (perhaps through male committees and maliks) on the need for women to be able to express their needs directly to service providers.*

Women’s participation in the community:

Women’s committee members complained that they are not invited to the *maliks’* houses – though this seems as much (or more) to do with their social status in the community at household level, rather than their status as women. E.g. they claim that meetings in *malik’s* houses are ‘secret’ – they are not invited or they do not hear about them. Women non-leaders also felt that their participation was limited by the predominance and ‘selfishness’ of *maliks* in decision-making; though it is also important to note that men non-leaders felt the same way about *maliks* as a barrier to wider community participation.

“There was no clinic in the area, so we went to the NGO that NRC introduced us to. Being in the NRC committee gave us credibility, which made the men support us in playing this role in the community”

Women’s committee member

However, there are some structures or spheres in which women and girls are participating: the female committees; and the youth council. The latter is comprised of educated youth, who made the youth council themselves and want to challenge the *maliks*. This initiative is independent from NRC, but started following establishment of NRC committees and includes some of the NRC committee members (youth females). The women (both leaders and non-leaders, and adolescent girls) expressed support for NRC’s female neighbourhood committees, which they felt gave them a role in the community – particularly in raising awareness among other women and bringing newly returned/displaced families to receive support. They felt that being in the NRC committee increased men’s support for women’s problem-solving role in the community, and they asked that NRC create more committees/committee members.

However, the women also indicated that they would like to participate more, but are prevented from doing so by cultural limitations – for example not being able to meet with NGOs or institutes representatives, and also by lack of facilities and economic foundation. They suggested that NRC could help improve participation through provision of small projects to build skills such as handicrafts or poultry farming, and they all supported the initiative of creating women’s shops to improve women’s economic participation and situation. They also said that receiving training in, for example, legal rights, helps them to play a role in their community. In addition, they suggested that supporting more female teachers in schools would allow more girls to be educated and therefore subsequently to play a role in the community.

Men were also asked about women’s participation in the community. They mentioned that only elder (older) women can go to the bazar due to the security situation, and that there are no special places for women and girls to gather; as such they also expressed support for NRC’s women-run shops projects to improve women’s access to women’s spaces and markets – both for buying and selling. They also agreed with women’s suggestion of providing vocational training for women (specifically: carpet weaving, tailoring, making pickles/preserves).

Women were asked if they thought that men would support their increased participation in the community. They believed (correctly) that men would be supportive of schools for girls, and also women’s committees and training for women so long as the trainers/facilitators are women. However, some of the women said that men’s concern for their safety limited their ability to participate, for example, one of the committees was prevented by males from following up with the Ministry of Education after Islamic State (*Daesh*) launched a complex attack on the Ministry building. Similarly, the male Community Mobiliser recognised

that that security situation limits women’s ability to participate, and he also mentioned that the presence of the Islamic State (*Daesh*) and the Taliban prevents women and girls from “raising the important concerns”.

Recommendation: Continue to support women’s committees and include more members (perhaps through re-election of existing committees).

Recommendation: Create neighbourhood level women’s spaces that improve women’s economic inclusion (both in terms of buying and selling goods).

Recommendation: Provide vocational skills training for women to allow them to start income generating opportunities from within their homes.

FINDINGS: SAFETY MAPPING

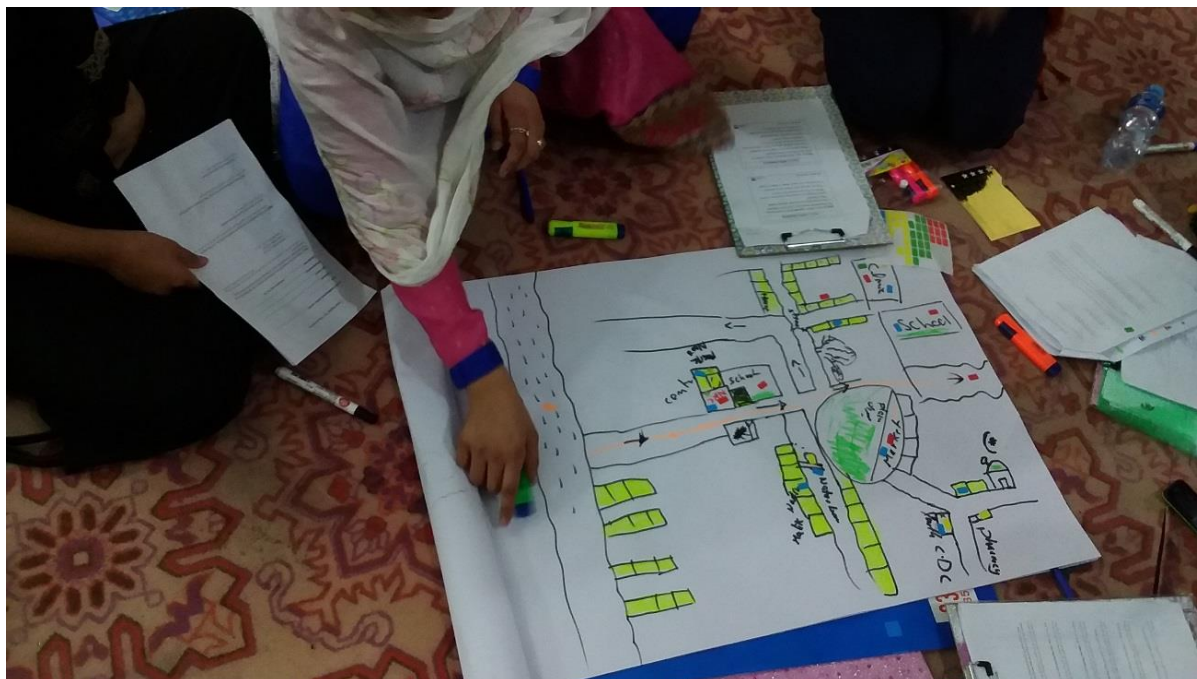


Photo 3: Women’s Safety Mapping

Women and their homes:

Women were asked how much time they spend in their homes, and all of them said they spent all or the majority of time in their homes; one female committee member even joked “*all the time until we die!*”. The male NGO key informant suggested that women feel unable to leave their homes due to fear of attack by the Taliban and/ or the Islamic State (*Daesh*). Nevertheless, most women reported that they would occasionally leave the house to go the clinic/hospital, to collect water or fire wood, to go to the bazaar, or to go to special events such as weddings. Almost all of the women agreed that they were able to visit their relatives in nearby houses. Most committee members also mentioned that they would come to the community centre for meetings, and one committee mentioned they could go to the madrasa and schools. In general, committee members expressed greater freedom to move around the neighbourhood than non-committee members – it is not clear whether this is because they are committee members, or rather that they became committee members because of their relative ‘freedom’ compared to other women in the neighbourhood.

Inside the home, women’s time is spent on domestic tasks – cooking, cleaning, sweeping, sewing, washing, and ‘looking after children and husbands’. Women were asked how they feel about their homes, for which most of them mentioned they were happy and felt more comfortable inside than outside the home, but some mentioned that poverty and ‘domestic issues’ make them feel unhappy, and committee members especially mentioned that they would feel better if they could have a job or income-generating opportunity.

Women and work:

Participants marked a few places where women are working – namely, the clinic, school, and NRC’s community centre; a few women mentioned that there are some women doing tailoring inside their homes. However, most work places were for men, including the main market place in Sheikh Mesri, and outside of the village – in the city of Jalalabad. When asked why women were not working as much as men, the participants referred to two main reasons: (1) the women are uneducated and do not have the skills, and (2) cultural issues – men do not encourage the women to have skills or to have an economic role in the community. Most of them felt, however, that if they could have an income-generating opportunity that they could do from the home, this would be acceptable – this is backed up by men’s responses in their FGDs, where they expressed support for the idea of women’s vocational training to allow them to work from home. In particular, the women felt that skills training in – for example – handicrafts would be appropriate for older women who are uneducated/illiterate; though they emphasized the importance of literacy and education provision for girls and younger women. Please refer to the *recommendation* regarding provision of skills training for women.

Access to schools:

Most women felt that they could not visit the schools in the area: even if their children were facing problems at school, they could not go to see the teachers because of “cultural issues” – i.e. the teachers are male and women cannot meet with them; this was also recognised as a problem by the male Community Mobiliser. Access to schools for girls was a significant issue due to lack of female teachers. Many women also mentioned that since the only school with female teachers is far away, girls do not feel comfortable going because it means walking across open areas where there are no houses, and they are afraid of kidnapping. Another committee mentioned that for boys and for younger girls there are no issues going to the school, but adolescent girls feel uncomfortable because “people will talk” and boys will tease the girls – especially if they have to walk at the noon shift since the streets are quieter (and less safe) at that time.

Recommendation: *Advocate with relevant stakeholders for improved provision of girls’ education by increasing the number of female teachers available in local schools, and ensuring the girls’ shifts are timed to reduce the risks they face in walking to school (i.e. not during the mid-day prayers when streets are quieter).*

Influence of mosques:

The women felt that the *imams* at the mosque play an influential role in the community and particularly on children (as they teach children), and they seemed generally positive about this role. They mentioned that *imams* play a role in solving disputes, and also guiding other community leaders in their decision making. In the Friday sermon, the *imam* speaks about women and men, including about sex and about clothing – the women seemed to approve of the messages given by the *imam*, and felt it was a good way for both women and men to learn about women’s rights.

Recommendation: *Consider how mosques and religious leaders could be engaged to improve attitudes towards women and their participation/role in the home and community.*

Social gathering spaces:

Women reported that they are gathering together at weddings and special events, when collecting water and fire wood, and when at the clinic. Some women meet at the *maliks’* houses, or they visit each other in their houses (especially if someone is sick). However, most participants reported that older (elderly) women and young girls have more freedom to visit different places in the neighbourhood than younger women and adolescent girls. Women’s committee members meet when they come to the NRC community centre for meetings, trainings, and events – where they can share their problems together. Adolescent girls felt that all women could go to the community centre (*as opposed to other places in the community*), but some women (both committee members and non-leaders) said they need separate women-only spaces in their neighbourhoods to serve as a space for women to come together and share their problems. The women felt that there were some restrictions for women (particularly girls) to come to a mixed community centre where men were present, and that it would be easier to take permission from husbands to come to a female-only space. This underlines the need for NRC to consider additional community spaces for women and/or women-only hours/days at the existing community centre, as well as NRCs supported community project to open women’s shops at the neighbourhood level – reference *recommendations above regarding community spaces and women’s shops*.

Men also reported gathering for special events such as funerals, weddings or *Eid* parties – at which host community, IDPs, and returnees all gather together; they also get together for communal work activities

(‘*ashar*’). They also mentioned that young men gather quite frequently in each other’s houses and in parks/open spaces to talk and discuss about life and work, and sometimes to play cricket.

Feelings of safety and insecurity:

Women were asked about their perceptions of safety in their neighbourhood. However, it must be acknowledged that for many women the most dangerous place is likely to be in the home, but talking about this is extremely difficult and unlikely in group settings. Moreover, it is also worth noting that perceptions of safety and security are skewed by a lifetime of experiencing violence (threat, actual or perceived risk).

Women reported that they feel safe in their homes, in the clinic, and in the NRC community centre (for the committee members). However, many of them mentioned that there are open spaces on the outskirts of the village with empty ruined buildings, and these (and the roads running past them) are unsafe places where there are kidnappings of both women and men – they say these areas would only be safer if the buildings were inhabited. At night, women say that nowhere is safe (besides their own homes), neither for men or women: it was also reported that someone was kidnapped from the mosque once. In general, women seemed to feel unsafe due to the general situation of insecurity in the area – this was also reflected by NRC’s male Community Mobiliser. Women suggested that additional checkpoints would improve this security, as well as electricity to allow for well-lit streets.

When asked to mark where they could go for “help, support, and information”, most women mentioned (a) the *malik*’s house and (b) the NRC community centre; a few also mentioned schools and the clinic. It is interesting that despite all the negative feelings towards *maliks* (as described above), women would still go to *maliks* for help and support – this is presumably because of the power and influence that *maliks* have to solve problems. Referring to the community centre, the women said they could come here for information on services and assistance, to find out about how to get legal documentation (e.g. *tazkera*), and for training. They found out about the centre through NRC outreach staff, leaflets, the *maliks*, and word of mouth in the community. Women gave mixed feedback on how accessible the community centre is for women – some felt that any woman could go there; others mentioned that only older women or committee members could go; and some mentioned that women with disabilities could not go. Reference the *recommendation* regarding the need to provide another option besides mixed-sex community centres to be available in the community for women.

Women were also asked where they would go “in case they are hurt or have experienced violence”. Most of them said that there was nowhere to go - they would just stay in their homes or perhaps visit relatives. Others mentioned they could go to the clinic, to the police, and in a couple of cases to the *malik*’s house. With regards to the clinic, women and men both agreed that it was insufficient for the needs (providing only basic services), and women felt afraid that in case of a more serious problem (particularly relating to pregnancy and childbirth) they would die for not being able to reach the city quickly enough. One group of non-leader women mentioned they could come to NRC’s community centre in case they had been hurt or experiences violence. However, female participants mentioned that cultural barriers might prevent women from seeking help from the police or from NRC’s community centre; moreover, both the male key informants suggested that for sensitive issues (e.g. inheritance or violence) women would not be able to speak to anyone about their problem. As for the services they could get from these places, they said that it would mainly be information or perhaps a referral to a government institution.

Recommendation: Investigate options for improving electricity and therefore improved lighting to the streets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research indicate that the role and safety of women (both host community and displaced) in Sheikh Mesri is primarily hindered by (a) cultural practices and (b) the general context of violence that affects both women and men and men. At the same time, the findings indicate that even in this restrictive context, there is still space for an improvement in women’s participation, and that in time (and with complementary initiatives), this might also improve safety and achievement of their rights. Specific findings are grouped below as per the research objectives stated in the methodology section above. The 14 recommendations provided throughout this report are also now listed under the relevant research objective.

(1) Identifying barriers and opportunities for women to contribute to decision-making and problem-solving in the community and voice their safety concerns, ideas, and questions

Barriers relate principally to the dominant cultural practices of the area, in which men (and particularly the community leaders, *maliks*) are considered the main influencers and decision-makers in the community. Women felt that men would not want them to play a more significant role in solving problems or making decisions in the community. Moreover, many IDP and returnee women face the additional intersectional barriers of exclusion on the basis of socio-economic or displacement status – meaning that they would not know about meetings or gatherings at the *maliks*’ houses since they would not be invited or told about them (not because of being female, but because of their family status). Men and women from among both the ‘leaders’ and ‘non-leaders’ groups had a negative perception of *maliks*’ role in the community in general, stating that they did not represent the true interests of the poor, but rather of their own friends and families.

Regarding their ability to voice concerns (about safety or other issues), most women did not feel comfortable to do so – claiming that others in the community would shame them for this, and that it might even harm their relationship with men. In particular, they felt uncomfortable raising concerns with *maliks* (the most powerful decision-makers) since they did not trust that their concerns would be kept confidential, nor that *maliks* would accept to hear concerns from women as opposed to male heads of household. This is concerning considering it is clear also that men and women do have different priorities and needs, and those of women will not be heard unless they have a safe space in which to voice them.

Opportunities for improving women’s participation and ability to voice concerns do nevertheless exist. Female committee members already recognised their role in the community in identifying and referring vulnerable cases, and raising awareness among women – this is in large part due to their position and training as committee members. However, while male committee members and *maliks* self-identified as playing a key role in coordination and liaising with service providers, female committee members did not emphasise this role, and mentioned the barrier of not being able to meet with the (predominantly male) staff from NGOs and authorities. However, they also mentioned that having the backing of NRC gave them legitimacy among male community/family members to coordinate and solve problems. As such, there is an opportunity to improve women’s participation if more female staff are recruited to such organisations, and then female committees are subsequently linked to them. In fact, given the differences in priorities between men and women, it is essential to (continue) advocacy efforts regarding improved representation of women in NGOs and authorities, as well as to caution against the typical (so-called ‘community engagement’) practice in Afghanistan of only consulting with *maliks* and/or male heads of household. Without these changes, women’s priorities will not be systematically heard.

Another important finding is that elderly women were recognised as having a special role to play in resolving certain ‘family disputes’, and as such there could be an opportunity to further engage them in a more formal way for solving problems – particularly those relating to women’s safety and GBV risks – in the community.

Although the IOM/WRC toolkit primarily focuses on women’s participation in governance and decision-making generally, the participants in this study consistently raised issues around participation in terms of livelihoods opportunities and access to markets. This is quite likely a result of the study taking place in an out-of-camp setting where income-generating opportunities are a significant concern for all vulnerable displaced households, and where the main markets are located far away from the residential areas. Despite the predominant cultural belief that women should not work outside of the home, both men and women also emphasised the need to develop income-generating activities for women to do inside the home. Moreover, both groups affirmed the idea of providing women’s only shops to give women better access to markets (both for selling and buying).

Recommendation	Who could follow-up
(1) Proactively seek out female staff from service providers and link these to the female committee members in order to empower them in the coordination role.	NRC Camp Management UDOC
(2) Advocate for more female staff among humanitarian and development agencies, as well as government authorities.	NRC Camp Management UDOC, and NRC Advocacy
(3) Consider how to enhance the role of elderly women in the community for problem solving, particularly with	NRC Camp Management UDOC

regards to domestic/family issues.	
(4) Consider how to minimise the harmful influence of <i>maliks</i> and to influence the way in which they perceive and engage with women.	NRC Camp Management UDOC in collaboration with other NRC thematic sectors, and through advocacy at the Afghanistan Protection Cluster and inter-cluster coordination.
(5) Undertake more awareness-raising with men (perhaps through male committees and <i>maliks</i>) about the need for women to be able to express their needs directly to service providers.	NRC Camp Management UDOC
(6) Provide vocational skills training for women to allow them to start income generating opportunities from within their homes.	NRC's Livelihoods and Food Security programme and/or other relevant service providers in the area
(7) Create neighbourhood level women's spaces that improve women's economic inclusion (both in terms of buying and selling goods).	NRC Camp Management UDOC

(2) To learn about women and girls' current perceptions of safety risks in their community

Women referred to a number of general safety risks that they felt were present for both men and women (as well as children) – in particular, they pointed to some open spaces where there were risks of kidnapping. They felt that nowhere was safe at night (in part due to lack of electricity for lighting and lack of security checkpoints) besides their own homes, but at the same time they implied (if not stating explicitly) that there is a big problem with domestic violence. They raised some specific concerns regarding the safety of girls (particularly adolescent girls) on their way to schools, and the long distance to a school with female teachers was stated as one of the main barriers to girls' education. In addition, women did not feel comfortable visiting schools due to the presence of male teachers (and absence of female ones).

Both women and men suggested that if women were better able to voice their concerns and play a stronger role in the community, this would thereby reduce domestic violence. However, some women also felt afraid of raising their voice, and many of them recommended that awareness raising is needed for them to achieve their rights. They recommended that the *imam* is a good avenue for this, since he is already providing sermons which include information on sexual relations between husband and wife, and about women's rights (for example to inheritance).

Recommendation	Who could follow-up
(8) Advocate with relevant stakeholders for improved provision of girls' education by increasing the number of female teachers available in local schools, and ensuring the girls' shifts are timed to reduce the risks they face in walking to school (i.e. not during the mid-day prayers when streets are quieter).	NRC's Education programme and/or other relevant service providers in the area. Note: this is an issue that NRC Camp Management- UDOC programme is trying to solve through ongoing coordination and advocacy efforts with the Ministry of Education and other service providers.
(9) Consider how mosques and religious leaders could be engaged to improve attitudes towards women and their participation/role in the home and the community.	The Afghanistan Protection Cluster and/or SGBV sub-group
(10) Investigate options for improving electricity and therefore improved lighting to the streets.	NRC UDOC in coordination with authorities and local service providers

(3) To inform NRC's programming in improving women's participation and/or address self-identified safety risks

While the above findings and recommendations already suggest changes and additions needed in NRC's programming, there are also specific findings pertaining to the mechanisms already established under NRC's UDOC project (Neighbourhood Committees and Community Centres). The study has provided both affirmation of and suggestions for improvement in how these mechanisms can improve women's participation and safety.

Participants from all groups in this study (women and men, leaders and non-leaders) affirmed the value of NRC-supported women's committees in improving women's participation – both in terms of providing an

avenue for female community members to raise their voice in general, as well as empowering the female committee members to solve problems and advocate on behalf of their community. NRC's support for these committees gives their members legitimacy and a mandate to take action in the community with the backing of men, which they might not otherwise receive. Moreover, the training and capacity building provided to the committees seems crucial in giving them the confidence and skills to participate meaningfully. This affirms the role of the women's committees established and supported through the UDOC project, and drawing on the experience and guidelines of the CCCM Cluster.

With regards to NRC's Community Centres, findings suggest that these provide a space for women to receive information and advice, and to meet to discuss their problems. However, a number of participants' in the study report that not all women are able to visit the community centre, indicating a need to adapt or provide additional/new spaces.

Recommendation	Who could follow-up
(11) Continue to support women's committees, and include more <i>members (perhaps through re-election of existing committees).</i>	NRC Camp Management UDOC
(12) Ensure that female committees are given adequate training and awareness to empower them to participate.	NRC Camp Management UDOC
(13) Facilitate meetings and exchange visits between female committees (new and old; active and less active) to encourage learning and to inspire the new or less active committees.	NRC Camp Management UDOC
(14) Ensure provision of safe and private spaces and avenues for women to raise concerns directly to service providers, in order to protect them from potential 'backlash' by men who may prefer them not to do so. Consider options of (a) opening new spaces only for women and/or (b) having women-only days or times at the existing Community Centre.	NRC Camp Management UDOC

Annex 1: Reflections on and recommendations for use of the Toolkit

The toolkit is useful for identifying challenges for women's participation and suggestions on how to improve their participation, and has provided important reflections to inform the updates and revision of NRC 2019 Camp Management strategy and programme design with regards to out of camp community engagement.

However, there were a few challenges in applying the toolkit to the out of camp context and/or to the particularly delicate cultural context of Afghanistan, which makes discussions about SGBV extremely sensitive and challenging to elucidate honest and open reflections from community members on these issues. Specific reflections in this regard are as follows:

- (1) For the out of camp context of Afghanistan, the questions explored in the toolkit were not able to provide a clear insight into how women's participation could address their safety and security. It is likely that in a camp environment there is a clearer logical link between women's participation and addressing safety challenges, since it is a 'closed' environment with agencies mandated to design and improve the camp environment in order to protect its inhabitants – so it follows that including women in the design and improvement process will also allow them to advise on changes that should be brought. However, outside of the camp environment, and in a context like Afghanistan where most safety and security issues are due to a combination of (a) cultural attitudes and (b) the general insecure environment (not specific to women), it is much more difficult to link women's participation to improved safety. In this study, a few respondents implied that if women could speak up more in the community, this might reduce domestic violence, however most women felt that speaking up would only endanger them more. When discussing security concerns, women were not able to identify specific actions that they or NRC could take to improve their safety. As such, for the out of camp context, the toolkit is more useful in raising safety/security concerns that need to be addressed through external coordination and advocacy with duty-bearers – particularly authorities.
- (2) The safety mapping component of the toolkit is good for highlighting community level safety issues and risks. It however does not allow a qualitative exploration of domestic/household-level safety issues – at least in the context of Eastern Afghanistan, where most community members do not feel comfortable to talk openly about these issues and/or take them as a given – not something that can be changed. In Afghanistan, domestic violence is a major problem, and so having another tool to sensitively explore the issue of domestic violence among displaced communities would be quite useful – though would likely need to be applied by a specialist GBV responder, rather than Camp Management field staff.

At the outset of this project, NRC intended to use the toolkit to identify a community-led project that could be implemented with and by women. While the current components of the toolkit (i.e. FGDs, safety mapping, and KIIs) are able to highlight challenges/problems regarding women's participation and safety, and also to suggest some solutions, they do not provide a participatory method for designing, planning, and implementing a community-led solution (in the form of a community project) to respond to these issues. An extra step needs to be taken to enable community-based planning and implementation of response activities – specifically enabling the participation of women in designing and implementing their own solutions to issues they have raised pertaining to their participation in their communities, and/or their safety. These tools do exist already, and as such it is not necessary to create something new to be added to the toolkit, but rather to draw on complementary tools. It is recommended that the IOM toolkit is used as a **first** step – i.e. to identify the key issues and priorities and some initial suggestions for solutions. In particular, the toolkit has a unique role to play in highlighting the subtle (or indeed obvious) differences in priorities and interests between men and women – particularly in a context where these are systematically overlooked or neglected. The next step should then be to identify and train female leaders, and to guide them through the process of problem identification, prioritization, and analysis; followed by development of an action plan and (if necessary) proposal and budget in order to come up with a workable community project proposal. NRC has such tools within its existing UDOC toolbox, and these can be shared with IOM upon request.

Annex 2: Adapted Toolkit (see attached files)

Annex 3: Training Agenda for Research Team

Day 1	
Time	Topic
9am – 3pm	Protection Mainstreaming
Day 2	
Time	Topic
9am – 12:30pm	Gender and Gender Based Violence
1:30pm – 3pm	Safe and dignified referrals
Day 3	
Time	Topic
8:45 – 9:45	Introduction to the project
9:45 – 10:30	Importance of participation
10:30 – 10:45	Break
10:45 – 12:15	Methodology: Focus Group Discussions and facilitation skills
12:15 – 13:15	Lunch break
13:15 – 14:15	Methodology: Note taking
14:15 – 15:00	Methodology: Informed Consent
15:00 – 15:30	Closing and planning for field work
Day 4	
Time	Topic
8:00 – 8:45	Organising the field work
8:45 – 10:15	Introducing the FGD tool
10:15 – 11:15	Break
11:15 – 12:15	Practicing the FGD tool
12:15 – 13:45	Lunch Break + organising the field work
13:45 – 14:45	Introducing the safety mapping tool
14:45 – 15:45	Practicing the safety mapping tool
15:45 – 16:00	Debrief and wrap-up