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## THE SADA SAYS 'WE WOMEN HAVE OUR RIGHTS'

A Gender Analysis of an ICT Initiative in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

**Ami Sengupta, Esther G. Long, Arvind Singhal and Corinne L. Shefner-Rogers**

**Abstract** / This study analyses Voice for Humanity's (VFH) *Sada* initiative to promote women's rights, citizen participation and civic education during the Afghan parliamentary elections in 2005. A qualitative assessment was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how Afghan women, in particular, utilized the *Sada* device. This research, positioned within current literature on information communication technology (ICT) and gender, views the *Sada* device – a solar-powered digital audio player (similar to an MP3 player) – as an ICT. Universally, women have unequal access to ICTs, yet the findings of this study suggest that projects such as this one in Afghanistan can play a powerful role in promoting women's rights. The findings reiterate that information dissemination, spurred by a suitable technology, can lead to family and community dialog. Such dialog, coupled with a more enabling environment for women's concerns, can contribute to women's empowerment and realization of women's human rights.

**Keywords** / Afghanistan / democracy / edutainment / empowerment / gender / human rights / information communication technology / *Sada* / women's rights

*I listened to Sada with my family and decided to vote and learned that we have equal rights. I put it on and my four brothers and three sisters along with my mother and father gathered around it and listened. (Niloufar, a 19-year-old woman from Parwan province)*

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right 'to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (Article 19), social, ethnic and gender inequities limit universal access to information. These inequities are more pronounced for women in general, and for women from developing countries in particular (Gurumurthy, 2004; UNDP, 1999). In spite of claims that the world has become a global village, information communication technologies (ICTs) have emerged as an 'invisible barrier . . . embracing the connected and silently – almost imperceptibly – excluding the rest' (UNDP, 1999: 63).

In this article, we analyse Voice for Humanity's (VFH) *Sada* ICT initiative in Afghanistan, which consciously reached out to both men and women, while paying astute attention to women's needs and interests in Afghanistan's traditional and

patriarchal context. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we examine both men's and women's perceptions of the technological device and patterns of its adoption and use. We focus our assessment on how women received *Sada* and the manner in which they shared the device with their family and friends. We also chart how the technology spurred dialog and contributed to transforming and challenging gender norms in Afghan society. Ultimately, our research makes a case for how women's access to information can challenge and contribute to transforming gender structures in society.

## Information Divides, ICTs and Gender Equality

### *Information Inequities*

The term ICT includes audio and video media, the Internet and telecommunication channels such as telephone, fax and cellular phones. ICTs have revolutionized the very nature of communicating, connecting people and making communication easier, cheaper and faster. However, within the information economy most of the benefits of ICTs are reaped by prosperous countries and by those people 'with the orientation, skills, income and time to access' them (Gurumurthy, 2004: 17). This uneven access is dependent on 'historically layered patterns of financial constraint and cultural and social variation' (Zook et al., 2004: 156).

Consider these global statistics: Asia has 56.4 percent of the world's population, but only 35.7 percent of Internet usage, while North America has 5.1 percent of the world's population, but 22.2 percent of the world's Internet usage (Internet World Statistics, 2006). Although these figures are changing continuously, in 2004 the number of Internet users in the G8 countries alone was comparable to the total number of Internet users in the rest of the world combined (ITU, 2004). Uneven access to communication technologies has historically also been racialized and gendered. For example, in 2000, 90 percent of white South Africans, compared to 12 percent of blacks, had a telephone connection at home (Rathgeber, 2000). Even in the US, Internet access has been lower among black and Hispanic than white households (Lieb, 2005). While there is a dearth of sex-disaggregated ICT statistics (Bisnath, 2005), evidence suggests that women have also had significantly lower access to ICTs, just as they have had less access to all other development resources (Boserup, 1970; Hafkin, 2002; Sengupta, 2001). Technology is perceived as a male resource, requiring skills that women often do not have or are not given a chance to develop (Hafkin, 2002; UNDP, 1999). However, wherever women have used ICTs, knowledge gain and increased self-esteem have been observed (Gurumurthy, 2004; Hafkin, 2002).

We hold that technology is not gender neutral and that gender and technology are dynamic cultural processes that impact the diffusion of technologies and individuals' differential access to technology (Boserup, 1970; Gurumurthy, 2004; Hafkin, 2002; Rathgeber, 2000). Technology is affected by local contexts, histories and cultural norms and 'women's empowerment in the information society requires a constant examination of how gender relations as a dynamic cultural process are

being negotiated and contested, in relation to the technology environment' (Gurumurthy, 2004: 5).

### *ICTs and Gender Equality*

ICTs are an increasingly powerful tool for sustainable development. They are a means of development and not an end in themselves, and prove efficacious in bridging social isolation caused by either geographical remoteness or spatial segregation. Women's organizations are recognizing the powerful role that ICTs can play in furthering women's empowerment (Hafkin, 2000). Scholars point out that it has been 'widely acknowledged that the new ICTs have the potential to democratize national and international systems to an extent that no political movement has achieved' (Rathgeber, 2000: 17). Of course, not all ICTs are equally appropriate for all contexts. For instance, telephones may be better suited than computers for non-literate communities and people who belong to oral cultures (Rathgeber, 2000).

ICTs have been widely used in the last decade as an influential means of disseminating information about women's rights at both the global and local levels (Gurumurthy, 2004). There is ample evidence that wherever ICTs have been used by women they have led to significant knowledge gain and increased self-esteem, ultimately altering gender relations. While projects reflect the empowering aspects of technology, they also suggest that when women have access to technology they tend to share it with other women, thus 'promoting both a multiplier effect and becoming role models' (Hafkin, 2002: 14).

Furthermore, information can facilitate empowerment and serve as a tool for women to learn about their rights. In instances where ICTs have been used to enhance women's civic participation, they have played an important role in informing women about the electoral process and enabling them to make informed choices. ICTs also enhanced interaction and dialog among women and contributed to promoting civic awareness (Khasiani, 2000). If information is the first step in a process of change, then, as Momo states, 'Sensitizing women and promoting their access to ICTs would give them the means to assert their emancipation, as well as the wherewithal to ensure their economic independence' (Momo, 2000: 169).

### *Increasing Women's Access to ICTs*

Though ICTs have immense potential to foster gender equality, they can potentially also further alienate women who have less access to equipment and lack the proper training to equally reap the benefits of the information revolution (Bautista, 1999). Bautista reminds us that rural women's access to ICTs in Asia and other developing areas involves a complex mesh of situational constraints such as widespread poverty, low status, illiteracy, lack of training, financial limitations and language accessibility.

Heavy demands on their time and financial constraints further restrict women from accessing ICTs (Gurumurthy, 2004; UNDP/UNIFEM, 2004). Reports showed that: (1) women are underrepresented in all forms of ICT initiatives; (2) younger women have more opportunities to access ICTs than older women; and (3) access

to and training in basic skills are inadequate for women to equally use ICTs (UNDP/ UNIFEM, 2004). In many cases, women have not accessed ICT facilities such as tele-centers because they have limited mobility and lack the financial resources to pay for the services (Gurumurthy, 2004; Rathgeber, 2000; Schreiner, 1999).

Several other factors may also prevent women from accessing ICTs in traditional or rural settings. Cultural norms tend to deter women's access and use of technology and women are less likely to own the means of communication such as radios and mobile phones. Furthermore, women may be uncomfortable using community-based information facilities in the presence of men. Women may have free time in the evenings or at night when the facility may not be open and it could be dangerous or culturally unacceptable for women to travel to the center after sundown (Gurumurthy, 2004).

In order for ICTs to meet the information needs of rural women they must contain information that is appropriate, comprehensible and relevant to low- and non-literates. The initiatives must consider women's time constraints and should be culturally and contextually sensitive (Rathgeber, 2000). Women have multiple identities (e.g. class, race, caste, ability) and in order to address gender inequalities, ICT planners need to be cognizant of these intersecting and overlapping identities (Gurumurthy, 2004). Most importantly, these ICTs need to be available and easily accessible to women (Rathgeber, 2000).

## The *Sada* Project

Voice for Humanity (VFH), a non-profit organization based in Lexington, Kentucky, delivered civic and voter education to Afghans prior to the 18 September 2005 parliamentary elections.<sup>2</sup> VFH distributed 41,000 solar-powered digital audio players in 21 provinces, provided replacement content chips to 5000 previously distributed players in southern Afghanistan, and also reprogrammed other existing players with updated content. Some 20,500 pink-colored digital audio players (called *Sada*, or 'voice', in the *Dari* language), were given to women through provincial women's centers of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA); the remaining 20,500 silver-colored *Sadas* were distributed to men via the provincial governor's offices.

The *Sada* content, produced in Afghanistan by Afghans, consisted of 15 hours of civic education material that promoted peace, national unity, democracy, civic engagement in the parliamentary election, human and women's rights and related rural development and health issues. The format for both the *Dari* and *Pashto* versions of the chip was a mix of dramas (many borrowed from the archives of radio studios such as the BBC World Service), songs, interviews with Afghan government and religious leaders and local voices, and round table discussions. Chapters<sup>3</sup> included a radio studio recording of a mobile theater troupe's election comedy, and a section with Frequently Asked Questions about the election.

Each recipient received a *Sada* – a 'poor (wo)man's' MP3-type player – that featured: (1) a small speaker for group listening and a three-tiered content navigation system; (2) a removable content chip; (3) two sets of rechargeable batteries; (4) earphones; (5) a solar charger the size of a small paperback book; and (6) a hand

crank as an alternative power source. The distribution teams in each province provided training sessions in how to use the *Sada*, and the device came with a help button that played audio instructions. There was no written manual because the device was intended for non-literate and low-literate audiences.

Although the *Sada* project was intended for both men and women, particular care was exercised to reach out to Afghan women. Women in Afghanistan were notably excluded from public society during the Taliban regime, and continue to have less access to employment, health care, education and information than men. According to the National Human Development Report for Afghanistan (UNDP, 2004), Afghan women face 'the feminization of poverty, serious malnutrition, exclusion from public life, gender-based violence, rape, lack of basic health facilities, illiteracy, forced marriage and routine denial of justice' (UNDP, 2004: 5). In terms of access to information, men tend to control the radio listening in each Afghan household and ration radio use to conserve battery power (Skuse, 2005).

## Understanding Women's Use of *Sada*

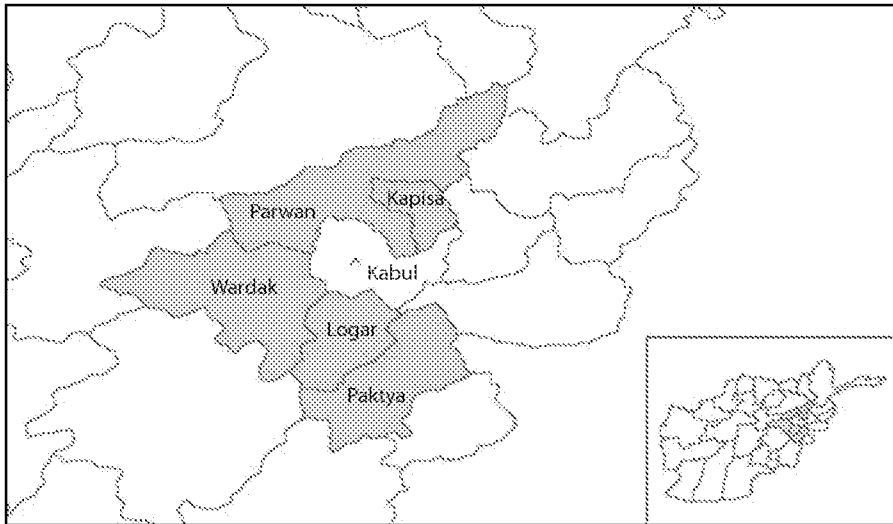
This qualitative research study was conducted from 9 October to 18 October 2005, three weeks after Afghanistan's parliamentary elections. We sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how listening to the *Sada* affected women – particularly their perceptions of, and participation in, the elections and how the information received through the *Sada* affected gender norms. Since the purpose of the research was not to generalize our findings or to measure the impact of the *Sada* initiative, a purposive sample of *Sada* users was undertaken (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2005). To this effect, we interviewed men and women who were users and diffusers of the *Sada* device. The women were interviewed about their usage pattern of *Sada*, and the men were asked about how they observed changes in their family as a result of women using the *Sada* device. The scope of the research did not seek to understand the perception of the non-users and hence those individuals were not contacted. Data were collected from *Sada* users, trainers and distributors in Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa, Paktya and Logar provinces (see Figure 1).

We conducted nine focus group discussions (five with women and four with men) to determine perceptions of women's use of *Sada*. We also conducted five in-depth interviews with women. In all, data were collected from 115 people, of whom 83 were female and 32 were male. Interviews were conducted with *Sada* users from both *Dari*- and *Pashto*-speaking regions, with *Shura* council members and with the Ministry of Women's Affairs provincial women's center directors.

Field research occurs in naturalistic settings and takes into account social contexts, which can affect research practices. In this research, we could not travel to the remote regions of the country due to the volatile security situation. This limited our selection of the research participants and sites. Furthermore, being cognizant of the local cultural practices, we were unable to interview female *Sada* users in their homes as female translators are scarce and we were mostly accompanied by male translators. In practice, the research participants were invited for interviews by local project implementers. That is, a director or other staff member

FIGURE 1

### Provincial Map of Afghanistan Showing the Five Research Sites



Source: Voice for Humanity.

of the provincial women's center in each province invited *Sada* listeners to a central location to meet with the research team for interviews.

## Adoption and Impact of *Sada*

On 15 October 2005, the women's center in Parwan province organized a meeting in Kalacha village of women who had received the *Sada* device. Nine people – three of the present authors, three staff members of VFH's Kabul office and three people from the local women's center, including Farishta our translator – entered a walled compound in Kalacha hoping to meet a dozen women for a focus group discussion. Surprisingly, 45 female *Sada* listeners of varying ages awaited us. The entire group was visibly happy to have visitors who wanted to talk with them about *Sada* and we ended up conducting an unusually large group discussion. We then hoped to conduct an individual in-depth interview with Niloufar, a 19-year-old woman from that village. Politely, our translator thanked the other women for spending time with us, suggesting that they may want to return to their homes to prepare *Iftaar*, the daily feast that follows the *Ramadaan* fast. However, the women asked if they could remain to listen to the interview. They wanted to hear more about *Sada*. As researchers we reminded ourselves of the importance of respecting participants' feelings, and the women stayed. This small event spoke volumes about how the women valued the *Sada* device.

Analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts helped to shed light on four key aspects of *Sada's* adoption by the Afghan listeners: (1) patterns of women's access to and use of *Sada*; (2) engaged learning about civic rights and responsibilities; (3)

favorable attitudes about women's role in Afghan society; and (4) decision-making and actions as a consequence of listening to and discussing the contents of *Sada*. Each major theme and the supporting subthemes are explained in detail in the succeeding sections.

## Patterns of Women's Access and Use of *Sada*

*Listening to Sada brought us light and brightened our eyes. Before this we were in the dark. This brought us brightness, not just for me but for my family and other women. (Shahjahan, staff member, Paktya province women's center)*

### Accepting *Sada*

At the time of the fieldwork, women had been listening to *Sada* for approximately six weeks. Although the Afghan parliamentary elections were over, women continued to listen and relisten to the programs. Women found the information very easy to understand and the language to be accessible. As Bibi Gul, one of our respondents from Logar province, noted: the programs were in 'our language, very simple'. The dramas were unanimously the most enjoyable part of the *Sada* content for both women and children. The humorous parts of the program, particularly the jokes, were memorable for most listeners.

Our respondents noted that *Sada* was easy to use after the initial training. They had no difficulty operating *Sada* because 'the switches were color coded' and the 'chapters were clearly defined'. They found the help button useful in navigating through the contents of the program. Respondents shared that they loved the *Sadas* as they did not have to pay for the batteries: 'The beauty is that we don't have to spend money for it. Now we use God's sunshine. We don't have the 15 Afghans to buy batteries.' In comparison to the radio that had 'far too many songs', the respondents noted that the *Sada* had information that people could use. Further, with *Sada* there was no difficulty of signal reach or poor reception even in remote areas. One male listener from the mountain province of Paktya emphasized how 'the device talked to them even while sitting on top of a rock'. Some women, particularly the younger ones, noted that they had the *Sada* playing in the background while they completed their household chores.

The content of the *Sada* did not seem to offend Afghan cultural and religious beliefs, even though it challenged prevailing social norms by promoting women's equality in a patriarchal society. The many purposive references to the Koran in the content added to its acceptance. Several women expressed that hearing verses of the Holy Koran in the introduction convinced them that *Sada* contained 'good' information.

Surprisingly, no instance of family or male resistance to the women's rights messages was reported. Most women told us that the men in the family did not oppose their listening to *Sada* or talking about its contents. One village elder noted, 'We agreed with the messages about women's rights and they were within Islamic norms and Afghan laws.' A respondent from Wardak province captured the general



sentiment of our respondents: 'Everyone was happy. Even the husbands were happy and all family members were interested in listening to the program.'

### *Collective Listening*

After women underwent training on how to use the *Sada*, they took their devices home, explaining to the family what it was, how it worked and what kind of information it contained. Then they sat around the device and listened to its contents with their family, including the children. Male relatives (husbands, brothers, fathers and fathers-in-law) often joined in, and this collective listening led to discussions about the program content. According to the quantitative survey carried out in conjunction with this qualitative assessment, each *Sada* was listened to by an average of 48 people, most of whom listened to *Sada* in a private home.

Participants' stories revealed how the *Sada* created a collective space for learning about and discussing civic and human rights. Some typical responses included: 'Four or five people sat around together . . . and we listened to it. Then our neighbors heard the *Sada* and came and joined us. At other times we invited them to listen. If it was around dinner time, we forced them to stay on for dinner.' Another respondent noted: 'We listen with family and sometimes we invite our relatives and cook food and arrange a get together.' A female *Sada* listener, who did not have her own device, noted that when her neighbor heard something useful on *Sada* she 'calls other women and says "come and listen to this, it is very good and important"'.

Gender affected *Sada* use. Women typically listened to *Sada* with other women in their family compound, while men tended to listen in public spaces with other men. One female respondent told us that when her son took the *Sada* with him when he went to the bazaar, people would gather around him, intrigued by the talking device, and would collectively listen to it. We noted that while the women felt free to share it with other women, children and male members of their family, men typically shared the device only with other men.

Some exceptions to these gendered patterns of usage were noted. Jamila, a tailor in Kapisa province, told us that she played *Sada* in her shop for her customers. Sobira of Kapisa said that the male masons working in her house became curious about the *Sada* and asked her to show them how it worked. As Sobira played it for them, a crowd of young neighborhood boys gathered around to listen. Sobira believed that men and boys learned a lot from *Sada*, particularly about the upcoming parliamentary elections and their civic rights and duties.

### *Enthused and Excited Children*

Although *Sada* was intended for people of voting age, children were also active listeners. They enjoyed listening to it, turning it on while they completed their homework or household chores. Several children took the *Sada* to school and shared it with friends. In Paktya province, a woman told us that while women were using *Sada* prior to the parliamentary elections, children were using it more after the elections were over. She noted that her children enjoyed listening, particularly

to the dramas, and added, 'even when they sleep they listen to *Sada*'. Another woman respondent noted, 'My son listens to *Sada* all the time. I listen whenever I have the time. . . . When my son listens to it, he doesn't trouble me.'

Rozia, who had not received a *Sada*, told us that she heard about it from her children. They saw the neighbor's children listening to *Sada* and went to their house to join them. When they came back, they excitedly told Rozia about the new 'radio'. As children have more mobility in villages than most women, they were able to go around to peoples' houses and hear the *Sada* with relatives, friends or neighbors. However, children's use and appropriation of the *Sada* may not be gender neutral. In several families that we came in contact with, the *Sada* was currently in possession of one of the sons. For instance, Shahjahan, who has five sons and four daughters, told us that her *Sada* was with her 13-year-old son – who keeps it with him and takes it to school.

Our respondents' narratives revealed the rich and varied experiences associated with the *Sada*'s access and use. *Sada* was readily accepted by both women and men and shared widely with other community members. It was particularly interesting to note the children's unabated enthusiasm for the *Sada*. Further, by creating a space for collective listening, the *Sada* encouraged collective learning.

## Engaged Learning about Civic Rights and Responsibilities

*We learned that women have rights in life, that women aren't just women, or just wives but that they have human rights. They can participate in society, can have education, find a job, choose a partner and not go into a forced marriage. (Faiza, a Sada listener in Kapisa province)*

Our data suggest that *Sada* provided our Afghan respondents with information that they perceived as relevant and useful. Shabad Khan, a government administrator in the mountain province of Paktya, highlighted the useful role of *Sada* in a country characterized by a rugged landscape and a high rate of illiteracy: 'In a rural province surrounded by mountains and where most people live in the mountains, the *Sada* was very useful. . . . They cannot read or write. . . . It was enlightening.' Zura Ahmad, a woman in her sixties who recently began going to school, noted that *Sada* was like a school where one took courses to learn about women's rights, the elections, the parliament and civic rights and responsibilities.

## Women's Rights

For some of the female respondents, *Sada* represented their first exposure to information about women's rights and human rights. Learning about their rights represented an important first step toward their own empowerment. As one respondent from Wardak province explained:

*Before, everything men said we would accept. If they said vote for a certain person, we would. Or if he said you should not go to the school, we accepted. But now we understand our rights and know whom we should vote for and how important education is. We learned a lot and now can discuss these things with our brothers, husbands, and fathers.*

When asked why messages about women's rights were important to them, one *Sada* listener and distributor from Paktya replied that it was important for the women 'to know about their rights, to know that they have equal rights [to] men, and that they have the freedom to participate in creating their own future'. This rights-centered information was especially important given the patriarchal context and culture of Afghanistan. As Mariam, a female respondent from Logar, noted: 'Women should be able to go to school. We should be able to educate our children. Women should have the ability to make decisions about themselves, their families, and their homes.' However, Mariam was also quick to point out that learning about their rights, and talking about them, was only the first step on a long journey for gender equality: 'We have our rights but I can never take decisions pertaining to my rights. I can never decide to do or not do certain things. My father and other family members tell me what to do and what not to do, whether it is about working or getting an education.'

Our interviews suggest that knowing about their rights increased the confidence of several women respondents. Discussion participants talked about protecting their own rights as well as their intentions to promote the rights of other women. As one woman from Wardak noted: 'Now we understand our rights through *Sada*. So when we see any women in trouble we can go and discuss things and tell them that this is the right way. And these are our rights.' For several women, knowledge of their rights enabled them to demand their rights. As Shayla, a woman respondent from Logar, explained, 'We heard about women's rights from *Sada*. In the program they talked about how we have freedom. We want our freedom and we want to work outside the home.' The very act of expressing one's demands indicates empowerment.

Several women *Sada* listeners understood their rights as a means for political or social equality, and as a platform that would lead to family harmony. As Marijan Awami from Parwan noted: 'Women's rights are important for living [happily] at home, interacting with your husband, and taking care of your children.' Other women commended *Sada* for providing guidance on improving the health of their families on a daily basis. Several women felt more empowered in the domestic sphere by learning more about personal hygiene, cleanliness and nutrition. As a woman listener in Wardak noted: 'When we listened to the *Sada*, we learned about the importance of elections for women, and also about hygiene of the house, and family health issues.'

### *Parliamentary Elections*

Most of our respondents had heard about the parliamentary elections but were unclear about how to enact their civic roles in a responsible manner. The *Sada* explained and clarified the electoral process to them. Niloufar, a young woman from Parwan who resumed her studies after the Taliban regime fell, emphasized the important role of *Sada* in clearing her doubts about the elections:

*When I heard the Sada I realized we all have a right to vote. And that we can vote for men or women. We came to know that we can give only one vote and that all people can vote –*

*whether he has a big job in the government or is a normal person. We learned that we should vote for whoever we feel can do the most to improve our lives.*

Within a few weeks the *Sada* facilitated people's learning about civic and human rights. Through its engaging content, the *Sada* proved to be a valuable source of information about the parliamentary elections, women's rights and other social topics. Increased knowledge and comprehension of their rights and responsibilities spurred various women to question traditional gender norms.

## **Favorable Attitudes about Women's Role in Afghan Society**

Our interviews with *Sada* listeners suggest some perceptual changes in the general attitudes of Afghan men toward women, and a somewhat increased consideration for women's welfare.

### *Increased Consideration for Women*

Several women spoke about how their husbands and fathers, after listening to *Sada*, became more open minded about what women could or could not do. According to Nigor, a woman in her late thirties from Logar province: 'After listening to the [*Sada*] program the men gave us permission to go outside our homes and to do things that we wanted to do. Right now I came here [the women's center] alone, I couldn't have done this before.'

After listening to *Sada*, Shafiqua, a young woman from Kapisa who had never been to school but now is enrolled in tailoring classes, told her father: 'I have the right to work.' Further, she noted: 'And he [my father] let me come here to the [women's] center to learn and to work. . . . Before he wouldn't let me go out of the home to find work.' Mushtari, a widow and mother of several children, was previously not allowed by her in-laws to go out of the house and work. When Mushtari made her in-laws listen to *Sada*, she noted: 'They let me go out and find work to bring money for my children. . . . he [my father-in-law] permitted me to work because he wasn't able to bring [in] food or money or take care of our other necessities.'

When we asked women in Kalacha village in Parwan how men reacted to their listening to and learning from *Sada*, they noted: 'They were happy. They said it is good that you have many rights and that you can go out and work. However, they always say that men's rights are more [important]. They don't agree that we have equal rights. They don't fight about it but say we (the women) have fewer rights.' In essence, the women's narratives revealed that men were not resistant to women gaining a little more freedom or mobility; however, they were still not 'equals' in their eyes.

### *Delaying Marriage*

Our respondents noted that there seemed to be a marked change in attitude among both Afghan men and women with respect to early and forced marriages of young girls. As one mother from Logar stated:

*The most important thing is that we have learned how and when we should get our daughters married. We now understand that she should be the proper age – 18 years. After learning all this we decided that we should get them married only after they finish their education.*

This sentiment was echoed vociferously in all five study provinces, even among the older generations of men and women. One older man in Paktya told us that he now realized that marrying young girls was wrong and the proper age for girls to get married was between 18 and 21 years. Several mothers told us that after hearing *Sada's* program on forced marriage, they realized it was a detrimental social practice.

### **Girls' Education**

After listening to *Sada*, some parents became more favorably disposed to sending their female children to school. A female respondent in Logar province noted that her family listened to *Sada* together, and her husband had changed many of his views: 'Before hearing the program he would not have given me permission to go out alone, but now he lets me, this is a big change for us.' She added, 'He allowed our daughter to go to school.' A *Sada* listener in Wardak said, 'I learned about education for the children. I am uneducated and my father and mother did not allow me to go to school. But we now understand the importance of education and we will educate the children.'

Eighteen-year-old Swabira from Wardak province noted:

*When I was in class four, my father said that girls did not need to go to school and he took us out of school. . . . Now my parents and my family have begun to understand the rights that women and girls have. They now say 'please go to school and learn something' [but it is too late for me to start].*

In essence, our data suggest that *Sada* played a catalytic role in altering prevailing attitudes about women, particularly with respect to early and forced marriages of young women, and to their right to employment and education. These powerful testimonies signify shifts in people's perceptions, attitudes and intentions, and suggest that listening to the *Sada* programs may have paved the way for meaningful behavioral and social change within and among the sexes.

### **Enhanced Participation, Dialog and Action**

*After hearing the Sada I told my husband you all [men] have done a lot of bad things to us, but you can't do it anymore. My husband laughed and said from now on I can do anything I want. (Zura, a Sada listener from Parwan province)*

### **Women's Participation in the Electoral Process**

In terms of engendering women's participation, the September 2005 parliamentary election in Afghanistan was historic with regard to women's participation. Women candidates contested in the elections for the first time, and a monumental effort was made by the Afghan government to encourage Afghan women to vote. Shahjahan,

who works in the women's center in Paktya, and helped distribute *Sadas*, reported that their team reached out to women living in remote districts and villages, conveying to them the important election messages contained in *Sada*, including how these women's participation was essential to gain *azaadi* (freedom) for women. Choked with emotion, Shahjahan recalled the high female voter turnout in her province:

*All the women were so happy on election day. When we saw women going out to vote it looked as if they were going somewhere special for sightseeing, or for an important occasion. . . . on the day of the elections, the entire area was blue because of all the women wearing blue chadoris [veils]. It was like a women's army.*

One consequence of women's exposure to *Sada* was their increased likelihood to vote in the parliamentary election. Almost all of our respondents voted; a few women could not vote because their voting card was issued in a town other than their current place of residence. Our women respondents expressed happiness about being able to vote, crediting *Sada* as an important influence: 'We went to the voting center and voted. *Sada* helped us decide to vote. . . . We didn't know we could vote before.' A male respondent in Parwan emphasized that *Sada* helped convince several men to allow their wives to vote. With a proud, beaming smile, he announced: 'Not just my wife, but all the women in my village voted.'

### **Family and Community Dialog**

Collective listening to *Sada* spurred dialog in several Afghan families and communities on social issues ranging from forced marriage to the right of women to work outside the home. After learning about their rights, several respondents talked to male family members about enacting these rights. In Parwan, several women said that after listening to *Sada* they 'talked to the men and told them we need to take part in elections'.

Collective listening led to dialog and consciousness-raising about women's civic rights and responsibilities. Shahjahan, a *Sada* trainer and distributor in Paktya province, noted: 'The main point we discussed was choosing a good and useful candidate. It was very important that we chose a woman to represent us because women know the needs of women more than men.'

Countering the practice of early marriage and forced engagements was a consistent theme in our interviews. Several young girls' and women's narratives suggested that after listening to *Sada* they gained confidence to speak up against forced engagements. Daughters typically had no say in deciding whom they would marry, and rarely spoke up against this oppressive practice. However, after listening to *Sada*, many young women felt empowered to raise this delicate issue with their parents. Huma, a young woman in Wardak province, told us:

*I discussed with my father whether or not I should get engaged to an older man or to someone who is not educated. [For this] I am grateful to Sada. . . . Before getting Sada we could not discuss such things with our fathers. If father said he would give us to an elder person we would be quiet. After listening to Sada, everybody – our father, mother, brothers – understood our human rights. When he said he wanted to get me engaged to a person who is not*

*educated and about 40–45 years old, I told him I would not like to be engaged to this person. I said I would like to be engaged to someone who was educated and younger.*

Niloufar, from Parwan, provided a powerful account of how *Sada* helped her delay her marriage. She noted: 'I told my family that I would not have an early marriage. I was engaged five years ago but after listening to *Sada* I told them I would marry only after finishing high school.' Her intended mother-in-law was present during the interview and told us that she agreed with and respected Niloufar's decision to postpone marriage.

Discussion about social issues is both a form of empowerment and a precursor to behavior change. As a female *Sada* distributor in Paktya poignantly stated: 'I was so excited when I heard *Sada*. The programs enabled me to talk with the people, and it made me brave to go and talk about things with people and participate in society and community activities.'

Our analysis suggests that *Sada* facilitated dialog, participation and action. Empowered by information, women participated in the elections in large numbers, becoming active agents of change. At the household level, women increasingly found the courage to speak up and, where possible, negotiate their rights. By receiving relevant and timely information, women were motivated to participate as equals with men in both public and private realms. Clearly, women's use of *Sada* led to widespread dissemination of knowledge of women's rights and civic responsibilities, raising possibilities for gender transformations in other aspects of social and community life.

## Revisiting ICTs, Gender Equality and Empowerment

Close observation of VFH's *Sada* program in Afghanistan, and a careful reading of our respondents' interview transcripts, suggest, unequivocally, that gender was a key concern during all stages of the *Sada* project. Concerted efforts were made to ensure that women would personally receive the *Sada* device, and that the content would be useful to Afghan women. Focusing the *Sada* project solely on women may have caused male alienation and resistance to the messages. By providing the same audio content to both men and women, VFH proactively neutralized potential resistance from men. Women respondents acknowledged that they were happy that their husbands and male relatives listened to the messages about women's empowerment and were sensitized to the issue of women's empowerment.

The VFH project planners were sensitive to the nature of gender relationships in Afghanistan and took into account the possible repercussions of distributing *Sadas* only to women. Different colored *Sadas* were distributed to men and women as a means of ensuring that women received equal numbers of *Sada*. The color-coding helped to prevent men from taking women's *Sadas*; a male seen with a pink *Sada* would be considered inappropriate, and others would know that he had taken what was supposed to belong to his wife. The women's players were distributed through women's networks (i.e. women's *shuras* that were formed by the MOWA and housed at the provincial women's centers). If devices had only been distributed

through men's networks, it would have been much more difficult to reach a large number of women. Finally, training sessions were held to ensure that women were able to operate the technology.

Projects like the *Sada* program in Afghanistan, which adopt a gendered approach to knowledge, attitude and behavior change, can effect incremental changes in social structures (Moser, 1989; Rathgeber, 1990, 1995). Empowerment has been interpreted in multiple ways ranging from oppressed groups gaining power over their oppressors, to oppressed people organizing and taking collective action. We conceptualize empowerment as the process through which people are able to more fully participate in decisions that affect their lives (Papa et al., 2006; UNDP, 1995). Empowerment is both the end result and the process through which people gain more control over their lives and have the information, awareness and confidence to make decisions for themselves. The narratives of our men and women respondents suggest that the *Sada* played a facilitative role in empowering Afghan women.

We believe it is useful to understand the relationship between information and women's empowerment. With this in mind, we assessed how *Sada* impacted Afghan women's empowerment through the dissemination of information, drawing largely upon the Women's Empowerment Framework developed by Sara Longwe (UNICEF, 1994). According to this framework, empowerment takes place in the following stages: (1) welfare, (2) access, (3) awareness-raising, (4) participation and (5) control. People become more empowered as they progress through these various stages. We observed that *Sada* facilitated empowerment in varying degrees at every level (Table 1).

In sum, relevance and effectiveness are two indicators to gauge any project's overall strength. Our qualitative and gendered analysis of VFH's *Sada* project in Afghanistan suggests that *Sada* was highly relevant to women's needs and was a highly effective medium for reaching rural and largely uneducated Afghan women. *Sada* entailed no material costs for these women, could be listened to while engaging in household tasks, and did not require women to leave their homes. Given Afghan women's poor financial status, heavy household burdens and restricted mobility, the *Sada* was uniquely positioned to reach out to its desired audience. Though ICTs have been used extensively to promote women's rights, these efforts have been mostly Internet based, thus benefiting only literate women (Gurumurthy, 2004). *Sada* is therefore an unusual instance where an innovative and appropriate ICT has been used to further women's rights.

In the future, there may be possibilities to move beyond positioning the women as mere recipients of information, enabling them to have more control and ownership over the disseminated information (Gurumurthy, 2004; Wilkins, 1999). By recognizing the diversity that exists among Afghan women, and by incorporating messages that question the existing social norms and the deeper causes of women's inequality in both public and private spheres, the project could further enhance its transformative potential (Rathgeber, 1990).

Information dissemination has been criticized by some because it views women as passive beneficiaries (Melkote and Steeves, 2001). VFH's *Sada* project reaffirms the role of information dissemination in gender and development initiatives. The



TABLE 1

**The Levels and Characteristics of Empowerment Associated with *Sada* Use Among Afghan Women**

| Levels of Empowerment    | Characteristics of Empowerment  | <i>Sada</i> and Empowerment  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Welfare</b>           | Addresses basic needs of women (e.g. food, medicines), but does not address structural causes (e.g. patriarchy). Women are looked upon as passive beneficiaries.  | Recognized women's need for information. Promoted women's rights as equal rights.  |
| <b>Access</b>            | Women have equal access to resources (e.g. education, credit, information). Equal access enables access to other resources (e.g. credit leads to better health care), resulting in improved overall well-being. | Ensured equal access to information by purposively distributing <i>Sadas</i> (equally) to both men and women. Information through <i>Sada</i> enabled women to ensure their access to other rights such as education, employment and voting. |
| <b>Awareness-raising</b> | Encourages gender equality through information. Here the root causes of inequality are recognized (e.g. higher domestic workload is due to social norms).   | Contributed to awareness of women's rights including the right to vote, education, work, freedom of movement and decisions about marriage without questioning the root causes of gender discrimination.                                      |
| <b>Participation</b>     | Involves mobilization of people and resources, and includes the ability of women to make decisions alongside men. Organizing and collective action among women leads to empowerment.                            | Engendered collective listening followed by group discussions at the community and family levels. Led to decisions about voting. Enhanced the ability for women to make decisions regarding their marriage.                                  |
| <b>Control</b>           | Women are empowered to take action and demand equal rights. They embody the ability to make decisions for themselves and their family.  | Women voted in the elections. Women joined the workforce (e.g. tailoring). Women decided to educate their children, especially girls. Increased decision-making regarding marriage for girls.  |

respondents' voices provide ample support that information served as a catalyst for Afghan women to realize other societal rights, thus contributing to empowerment.

Several field-based constraints and contextual realities limited our research endeavor. Our inability to speak to women in their homes meant that we had a somewhat biased sample of 'progressive' women who frequented the women's centers. These women were likely to be more motivated, independent and aware of their rights than women who did not leave their family compound. Several of

these women were also beneficiaries of various women's development programs implemented through these centers (e.g. adult literacy classes and sewing classes), so they may have been influenced by other 'catalysts' in conjunction with the *Sada* project. Our respondents also included *Sada* trainers and distributors who may have had more favorable attitudes toward the project. In addition, the device was new to the listeners and their positive comments may have been related to the novelty of the device. Also, research participants tend to respond more positively to 'outsiders' and 'guests' such as ourselves. Furthermore, the provinces in which we worked were reported to be more secure and progressive than some other provinces in which *Sada* was distributed. This meant that the research participants were possibly more favorable to the *Sada* messages than listeners who lived farther from Kabul in areas with continued armed conflict and stronger Taliban influence.

Additionally, multiple large-scale civic engagement campaigns addressing women's rights and civic responsibilities such as the national campaign spearheaded by the UN sponsored Joint Election Management Body (JEMB) that reached out to an estimated 1.3 million people were concurrently underway in Afghanistan, therefore making it difficult to isolate the impact of the *Sada* initiative on audience members' knowledge and attitudes (Shefner-Rogers and Singhal, 2005).

Finally, this study took place during an era of tremendous social change in Afghanistan, the first period of relative stability, peace and freedom among the younger generation. The new government also officially sanctioned women's right to vote, work and go to school, which was a major change from the previous regime. Thus the context was rife for positive change, particularly with respect to women. Many of the study participants expressed optimism in the new regime and hoped for a better future and so were perhaps predisposed to social change in general and as a result were more receptive to the messages provided in the *Sada* devices.

Overall, VFH's *Sada* initiative in Afghanistan exemplifies how information dissemination using a suitable technology can lead to family and community dialogue, which in an enabling environment, can lead to gender-sensitive decisions, actions and transformation.

## Notes

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2. VFH's *Sada* Project was funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID).
3. The pre-recorded content on the *Sada* was divided into chapters and subsections within chapters. The listeners could navigate through the content using the 'chapter' button to select which topic or subtopic they wished to listen to.

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