

**Women's Use of the *Sada* in Afghanistan:
Dissemination, Dialogue, and Transformation**



by

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Executive Summary

The present report analyzes how gender concerns were incorporated into the design and implementation of Voice For Humanity's (VFH) *Sada* initiative to promote civic education during the Afghan parliamentary elections in September, 2005. A qualitative assessment was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of how Afghan women, in particular, utilized the *Sada* device before, during, and after the elections.

Our assessment focused on four key aspects of *Sada's* adoption in Afghan society: (1) patterns of women's access and use; (2) engaged learning about civic participation and the electoral process; (3) favorable attitudes about women's role in Afghan society; and (4) enhanced participation and actions by Afghan women as a result of listening to and discussing the contents of the *Sada*.

The *Sada* proved to be a useful vehicle for Afghan women to gain relevant information that served their present needs while promising them more equitable futures. Women considered *Sada* as a source of information that helped them know, discuss, negotiate, and in some cases demand their rights. Overall, the messages and the device were well received by the women as they found the device simple to use, the language easy to understand, and the content culturally appropriate.

Our analysis suggests that the *Sada* positively impacted Afghan women's participation in the parliamentary elections, and increased their repertoire of decision-making in domestic and other spheres. The *Sada* proved to be a source of valuable information on women's rights and civic responsibilities. In addition, the *Sada* provided an impetus for collective listening, engaged learning, and family dialogue. Children, especially, took to the device becoming its avid listeners.

A gender analysis of *Sada's* use in Afghanistan indicates that women's concerns were purposely mainstreamed into all aspects of VFH's project. Notwithstanding Afghan women's poor financial status, heavy household burdens, and restricted physical mobility, the *Sada* emerged as a vehicle that facilitates empowerment. Our analysis includes ample evidence of Afghan

women who, after listening to the *Sada*, began to challenge and resist existing social norms and, where possible, demand a more equitable social order.

In sum, VFH's *Sada* initiative in Afghanistan represents an exemplar of how information dissemination, spurred by a suitable technology, the *Sada*, can lead to improved family and community dialogue. Such dialogue, coupled with a more enabling environment for women's concerns, can lead to gender-sensitive decisions, actions, and transformation.

Introduction

On October 15, 2005, the Women's Center in Parwan Province organized a meeting in Kalacha village of women who received the *Sada* device a few weeks prior to the Afghan parliamentary elections in mid-September. *Sada*, the *Dari* word for "voice", is a digital audio player, pre-recorded with 15 hours of engaging content on civic education, human rights, and other development issues. Eight of us, including two of the present authors (Sengupta and Shefner-Rogers), four staff members of Voice for Humanity's (VFH) Kabul office, and Farishta, our translator, entered a walled compound in Kalacha hoping to meet a dozen or so women for a focus group discussion. To our amazement, a large group of 45 women – all *Sada* listeners – awaited us. The women's cohort included teenagers, young mothers, and middle-aged and senior women. It also included several widows. The group was visibly happy to have visitors who wanted to talk with them about the *Sada*. Since the entire group was keen to speak with us, and had patiently waited for our arrival, we decided against breaking them into smaller groups, or speaking to only a few of them. We ended up conducting an unusually large group discussion.

Several hours later, after the large group discussion was over, we hoped to conduct an individual in-depth interview with a remarkable nineteen year old woman who had been engaged for five years and faced imminent marriage. However, after listening to the *Sada*, she convinced her parents to allow her to complete high school before marriage. So, politely, our translator thanked the rest of the 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 stay back and listen to the interview. They wanted to hear more about the *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.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present qualitative report is to gain an in-depth understanding of how women in Afghanistan utilized the *Sada* device before, during, and after the Afghan parliamentary elections. We focus our assessment on how women received the *Sada* and the manner in which they shared the device with their family and friends. Further we analyze the learning that was facilitated by *Sada* and the conversations and subsequent actions that were

spurred after listening to *Sada*. In so doing, the present report also analyzes how gender was incorporated into the design and implementation of VFH's *Sada* initiative during the Afghan parliamentary elections. We highlight how gender norms in Afghan communities were questioned, maintained, or altered through the use of the *Sada* device, and also how women's access to the *Sada*'s content helped challenge and, in part, transform the gender structures in the Afghan society.



Ms. Haqman, Women's Center Director, Wardak Province, with a list of female *Sada* recipients.

Project Background

Between August 21 and September 15, 2005, just prior to the Afghan parliamentary elections, VFH distributed 41,000 new *Sada* players and 5,000 new chips (for previously distributed *Sada* players) in 23 Provinces of Afghanistan. These *Sada* devices were distributed in equal numbers to men and women of voting age. The primary purpose of the 15-hour *Sada* content was civic education, aimed at motivating higher voter turnout through informed and knowledgeable political participation. Since women were a primary target for the program, VFH partnered with the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) which distributed the *Sada* devices to women in all 23 Provinces through the Women's Centers at the provincial level and the *shura* councils at the village level. Prior to the *Sada* distribution, the Women's Centers conducted training sessions to ensure that the women could operate the devices.

There is global evidence that information and communication technology (ICT) initiatives have benefited women less than men. Women have not had as much access to information technology as men -- as has been the case with all other development resources (Boserup, 1970; Hafkin, 2002; Sengupta, 2001). Furthermore, technology is perceived as a male resource, requiring skills which 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 a boost in self-esteem have been noted (Gurumurthy, 2004; Hafkin, 2002). VFH's Afghan *Sada* project overcame two major barriers to women accessing ICTs by: (1) purposive distribution of half the *Sada* devices to women; and (2) providing women training on using the device appropriately. Hence, by incorporating gender strategically into the planning and implementation of its Afghan initiative, VFH was able to circumvent women's exclusion from information and technology.

Research Process

This qualitative research study was conducted some three weeks after (from October 9 to 18, 2005) the Parliamentary elections were held in Afghanistan to gauge how listening to the *Sada* affected women, particularly their perceptions of, and participation in, the elections.

Data was collected from *Sada* users, trainers, and distributors in five Provinces – Wardak, Parwan, Kapisa, Paktya, and Logar. The research team conducted a total of nine focus group discussions (FGDs) -- five with women's groups, and four with men's groups (to gauge their perceptions of women's use of the *Sada*). We also conducted five in-depth interviews (IDIs) with women. In all, data was collected from 115 people, of whom 83 were female and 32 male.

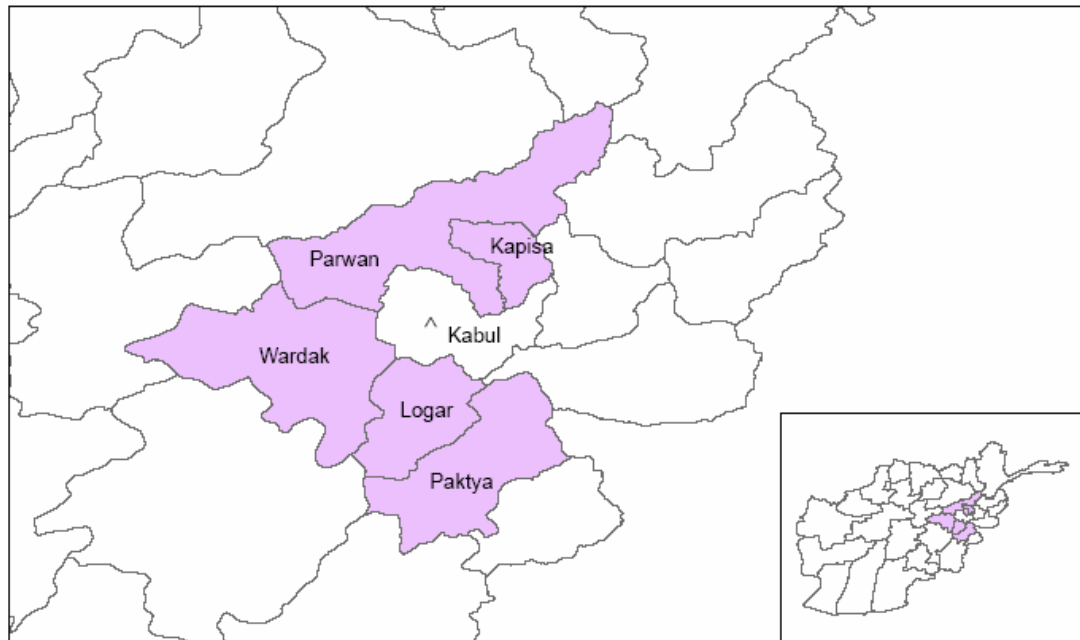


Figure 1. Provincial Map of Afghanistan Showing the Five Research Sites
 Source: Voice for Humanity, Lexington, KY.

Interviews were conducted with women and men *Sada* users from both *Dari* and *Pashtu* speaking regions. In-depth interviews were also conducted with some *Shura* council members and the directors of the Women's Center in the provincial offices of the MOWA. Since we had male translators for most of our field visits, we could only speak with women in groups at the Women's Center in those Provinces. We could not interview women in their homes on an individual basis. To overcome the necessity of speaking only to women who visit the Women's Center (the assumption being that these women are more motivated and empowered) we recruited female translators through the Women's Center in Parwan and Logar Provinces. This allowed us to hold a large group interview with women in a residential compound in Parwan (as discussed at the beginning of the report). Table 1 provides an overview of our data collection activities.

Table 1: Overview of Data Collection Activities.

<i>Province</i>	<i>Respondent Characteristics</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>No. of Respondents (Total = 115)</i>	<i>Method</i>
Wardak	Director of Women's Center	Female	1	IDI
	<i>Sada</i> Users	Female	8	FGD
Parwan	Director of Women's Center	Female	1	IDI
	<i>Sada</i> Users	Female	7	FGD
	<i>Shura</i> Members	Male	4	FGD
	<i>Sada</i> users	Female	45	FGD
	Community Members	Male	11	FGD
	<i>Sada</i> User	Female	1	IDI
Kapisa	Director of Women's Center	Female	1	IDI
	<i>Sada</i> Trainers and <i>Sada</i> Users	Female	9	FGD
Paktya	<i>Sada</i> Trainer/User	Female	1	IDI
	<i>Sada</i> Distributors	Males	3	FGD
	<i>Sada</i> Distributors and Community Members	Males	14	FGD
Logar	<i>Sada</i> Users	Females	9	FGD

The Adoption and Impact of Sada

Analysis of our transcripts from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions helped to shed light on four key aspects of *Sada's* adoption in Afghan society: (1) patterns of women's access 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 sub-themes are explained in detail in the succeeding sections.

Patterns of Women's Access and Use

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, Women's Center in Paktya Province.

When the present research was conducted, women had been listening to the *Sada* for approximately six weeks. Interestingly, although the Afghan parliamentary elections were over, women continued to listen and re-listen to the *Sada* programs.

Accepting Sada. 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. Many mentioned the humor associated with the coming of the "*parlman*" (a play on words between "parliament" and a similar sounding *Pashtu* word meaning "wrestler").

Our respondents noted that the *Sada* was easy to use after the initial training. They said that they had no difficulty operating the *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. Some of the *Sada* distributors, however, did note that a small number of women had difficulties using the device and required additional help in learning how to operate it.

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 *Afghanis* to buy batteries." In comparison to the radio, which had far too many songs, the respondents' noted that the *Sada* had information that people could use. Further, with the *Sada* there was no difficulty of signal reach or poor reception even in remote and rural 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. Mushtari, a very poor war widow with five children, from Kapisa, said she took her *Sada* home and listened to it on high volume to show her neighbors that she had a *Sada*. She added “I still listen to *Sada* very loud as it is a way to attract other listeners and to share the *Sada* content with others.”

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 *Sada*’s content added to its acceptance. Several women expressed that hearing verses of the Holy Koran in the *Sada*’s introduction convinced them that *Sada* contained “good” information.

Surprisingly, no instance of family or male resistance to the *Sada* messages were reported. Most women told us that their husbands and the other men in the family did not oppose their listening to the *Sada*, or talking about its contents. One village elder emphasized: “We agreed with the messages about women’s rights and they were within Islamic norms and Afghan laws.” A respondent from Wardak 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. We learned that after the women underwent training on how to use the *Sada*, they took their devices home, explaining to the family what a *Sada* 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 father-in-laws) often joined in, and this collective listening led to discussions about the program content.

A school-going woman from Parwan Province narrated how she listened to the *Sada* with family and friends:

I listened to the *Sada* with my family....and learned that we have equal rights. I turned the device on and my four brothers and three sisters along with my mother and father gathered around and listened. My

brother liked it the most. We talked about the village's problems and how we have no laws. I also took it to school and listened with my friends – they became so happy after listening to it. They liked the dramas and jokes and we talked about how our village has no clinics and problems with literacy. They wanted to hear it again, so I will invite them to my house to listen to it. They liked the dramas about the young girls being given away in marriage early.

Participants' stories, including the one above, reveal 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 woman *Sada* listener, who did not have her own device, noted that when her neighbor heard something useful on her *Sada* she "calls other women and says come and listen to this, it is very good and important."

Our data suggests that the *Sada* device quickly became a part of everyday life in most families. Homaira Haqman, Director of the Women's Center in Wardak Province, recalled how she saw a farmer listening to the *Sada* with his wife and children, and later using the solar charger to charge the batteries. One woman listened to the *Sada* in her front yard while putting out fruits to dry in the sun. Another woman listened to the *Sada* with other women while they cut potatoes. Men took the *Sada* to public places either in the village or in the provincial center and listened with other men. One female respondent told us that her son took the *Sada* with him when he went to the bazaar (market), and people gathered around him often, intrigued by the talking device, and collectively listened to it. From our participants' responses we gleaned that gender affected individual's use of *Sada*; women typically listened to *Sada* within the domestic sphere with other women, while men tended to listen to *Sada* in public spaces with other men. Further, we noted that while the women freely shared the *Sada* 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 *Sada* usage were noted. For instance, Jamila, a tailor in Kapisa, told us that she played the *Sada* in her shop and people dropped by to listen to it. Sobira of Kapisa Province shared

with us that the male masons working in her house became curious about the *Sada* device that was lying around, and asked her to show them how it worked. In a short time, many young boys from the neighborhood collected around the set, as they all listened to it together. Sobira believed that men and boys learned a lot from the *Sada*, particularly about the upcoming parliamentary elections, including their civic rights and duties.



Women listening to *Sada* at a Women's Center.

In areas where VFH did not have enough *Sadas* to distribute, trainers incorporated group listening during the *Sada* distribution. One trainer, who also had responsibilities from MOWA to provide orientation to Afghan women about the elections, said she played and discussed the content of *Sada* with groups ranging from 10 to 30 women. A male *Sada* distributor in Paktya Province explained to us how the two *Sadas* in his village had been shared among 30 households, each with about nine to ten members. He noted that everyone in the village had heard the *Sada* and "this led to a lot of interaction." People discussed various topics, including whom they should vote for and whether or not children (especially the girl child) should go to school. He noted that most *Sada* listeners "decided to make their own decisions and vote for whom they believed in." In another village, when the *Sada* distributor went back to check if people were still listening to the *Sada*, he was told that the device had been serially passed on to three villages.

Enthusied and Excited Children. The *Sada* was intended for people of voting age; however children were also active listeners and learners. They

enjoyed listening to the *Sada*, having it turned 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 lady told us that the women were using *Sada* prior to the parliamentary elections, but after the elections were over, the children used it more. She noted that her children enjoyed listening to the *Sada*, particularly the dramas, and added, “even when they sleep they listen to *Sada*.” Forty-year old Zirajan of Parwan Province took her *Sada* home and gave it to her children saying “look children I have brought you a gift today.” She showed them the *Sada*, explained what it was all about, and then they listened to it together.

Rozia, who had not received a *Sada* told us that she heard about the *Sada* from her children. Her children saw the neighbor’s children listening to the *Sada* and went over to their house to join them. When they came back, they excitedly told Rozia about the new “radio.” Another woman respondent noted that the children were “using the *Sada* a lot” and that they found the programs both entertaining and informative. She laughed freely as she remembered how much her children enjoyed the character *Kaka Jan* (meaning Uncle). As children have more mobility in villages than most women, “they go around to peoples’ houses and hear the *Sada* with relatives, friends, or neighbors.”

Another woman respondent, a widow, told us that her brother, who is a traffic policeman in Logar Province, brought a *Sada* home for her son. She noted: “My son listens to the *Sada* all the time. I listen whenever I have the time....When my son listens to it, he doesn’t trouble me.” Bibi Gul, a *Sada* distributor, told us that her nine year old daughter, a fourth grade student, “loves the *Sada*, particularly the dramas.” The woman giggled and added that her daughter “also loves the sound of the horses.”

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 presently with 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.

Barriers to Use. Our respondents were mostly women who were given the *Sadas* but also included some who did not get the *Sadas* and thus listened with others. Those who did not have their own *Sada* expressed a strong desire to have their own device so they would not have to keep going to the neighbor’s home to listen. Given the heavy household chores these women

perform, it is difficult for them to frequently visit others' homes to listen to the entire content of the *Sada*. Further, when women visit the *Sada* owners, Afghan custom warrants offering hospitality in the form of tea or a meal, and this, over the long run, may become a constraint on a *Sada* owner with meager resources. Further, women who worked outside of their homes (as school teachers, tailors, or office staff) noted that they did not have the time or the energy to listen to the *Sada* after a full day of work. As a working woman in Wardak Province noted: "I'm very tired after going home, I can't listen to anything."

Our respondents' narratives detailed the rich and varied experiences associated with the *Sada*'s access and use. The *Sada* was readily accepted by both women and men alike, and shared widely with other community members. It was particularly interesting to note the children's unabated enthusiasm for the *Sada*. The barriers to using *Sada* were few and were far outweighed by the power of the device to attract listeners with engaging and relevant information. 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.

We had decided to vote before but after listening to the *Sada* we understood *how* to vote and the process of voting, we learned the qualities we need in a candidate.

A *Sada* listener in Kalacha Village, Parwan Province.

Our data suggests that the *Sada* provided our Afghan respondents with information that they found to be 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 60s, who

recently began going to school, noted the *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 many Afghan women and girls, the *Sada* represented the first source of information on women's rights. Several respondents noted that before listening to the *Sada* they did not know about women's rights or human rights. They began to grasp issues of gender equality and women's rights after listening to the *Sada*. Knowing their rights represented an important first step toward women's 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.

A young woman, a school teacher in Logar Province, reiterated the importance of being aware of human rights, particularly for women:

Women have a lot of rights but nobody respects these rights. Men in particular do not give women these rights. So it is important that women have basic education and should be made aware of their rights. Also they should be able to choose their own husbands.



Women in Logar listening intently to *Sada*. Source: Paul Ryden

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 as men, and that they have the freedom to participate in creating their own future." This rights-centered information on the *Sada* was especially very important given the patriarchal context and culture of Afghanistan. As Mariam, a female respondent from Logar Province 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 even just knowing about their rights boosted the confidence of several women respondents. They talked not just about protecting their own rights but also about 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.

Interestingly, several women listeners of the *Sada* understood their rights not just as a means for political or social equality, but also as a resource that led to greater family well-being and harmony. As Marijan Awami from Parwan Province noted: “Women’s rights are important for living [happily] at home, interacting with your husband, and taking care of your children.” In this regard, several women commended the *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 of *Sada* 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.”

Another respondent in Parwan noted: “The most important program for me was about cooking vegetables and how they are good for health.” Women were especially enthusiastic about new learnings that they could implement without much fuss: For instance, how to keep the toilet more sanitary, or the importance of washing hands before preparing and consuming a meal. Women also noted how the *Sada* contributed to their children’s safety. One mother in Logar Province told us that her children had learned about the danger of land mines from the *Sada* as one of the messages on *Sada* warned the children to avoid touching unknown objects. This mother was very glad that the information on land mines had helped keep her children safe.

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 the *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.

A male distributor of the *Sada* emphasized that the device helped people understand the difference between provincial and parliamentary elections, and also the value of their individual vote. He stated that the Afghan citizens benefited from listening to the *Sada* as many previously “thought they could sell their votes. Through the *Sada* they learned that they could vote in secret and that no one but God would know whom they voted for.”

In essence, within a short period of time – 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 change in the general attitudes of Afghan men toward women, and a somewhat increased consideration for women’s welfare.

Increased Consideration for Women. Several women, including wives and daughters, spoke about how their husbands and fathers, upon listening to the *Sada*, had become more open minded about what women could or could not do. According to Nigor, a woman in her late-30s from Logar Province: “After listening to the [*Sada*’s] 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 the *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.” Similarly, 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 the *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 us food or money or take care of our other necessities.”

When we asked women in Kalacha Village in Parwan how the men, in general, reacted to their listening to and learning from the *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. 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, women were still not “equals” in their eyes.

We also noted some instances of Afghan men’s changed attitudes regarding women’s health, especially during pregnancies. Afghan women commonly deliver babies at home, but after listening to the message from the Minister of Women’s Affairs about the importance of taking women for deliveries to the local health facility, some husbands realized that women could develop pregnancy-related complications. Several women noted that their husbands were now open to the idea of taking them to the hospital, especially for deliveries.

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 Province 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 vociferously echoed in all the five Provinces we visited, even among the older generation of men and women. For instance an older man in Paktya Province 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 the *Sada*’s program on forced marriage, they realized it was a wrongful social practice. Another respondent, a young woman from Parwan Province, told us that after listening to the *Sada* she told her mother: “If you do this to me, I won’t know what work to do and how to react in my mother in law’s house. My mother said ‘it’s your happiness at stake so you decide. It’s in your hands.’” This sentiment was seconded by other young women: “Before we were not able to talk about such issues. Now the parents say if you want it, we’ll go ahead. If not we won’t.”

Girls' Education. After listening to the *Sada*, some parents changed their minds about educating their daughters. A female respondent in Logar Province noted that her family listened to the *Sada* together, and her husband 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 Province noted: "I learned [from the *Sada*] 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.

Abida, a 35 year old single woman from Parwan, who lives with her brother's family and is helping to raise her three nieces, argued with her brother after listening to the *Sada*, insisting on the education of all her nieces. Another man, a village elder in Paktya Province, agreed that it was important that both boys and girls be educated and commented: "Earlier on we didn't even have schools for boys. Today, 400 girls are going to school." Of course, such large-scale changes can not be directly attributed to listening to the *Sada* alone, but it does point to the catalytic role that the *Sada* can play in stimulating the community discourse about the importance of sending girls to school.

Our data suggests that the *Sada* played a important role in altering prevailing attitudes about women, particularly with respect to early and forced marriages of young women, and their right to employment and education. Considerable attitudinal changes in these realms were even observable among men. These powerful testimonies suggest shifts in people's perceptions, mindsets, and attitudes, indicating that the use of *Sada* may have, in part, paved the way for meaningful behavioral and social change.

Enhanced Participation, Dialogue, 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, this Afghan election was historic. Women candidates contested the elections for the first time, and a monumental effort was made to encourage Afghan women to vote. As a consequence of increased knowledge and awareness about the parliamentary elections, several of our women respondents took proactive steps, exercising their right to vote. Our data reveals multiple instances of women's participation in the electoral process. Almost all our respondents voted except for a very small number who could not vote because of unavoidable circumstances (e.g. traveling away from the town where their voter's card was issued). One of our respondents went to vote but as there was no separate voting booth for women, and since there were a lot of men already lined up, she returned. Shahjahan, who works in the Women's Center in Paktya Province 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 the *Sada*, including how these women's participation was essential to gain *azaadi* (freedom) for their lot. Choked with emotion, Shajahan recalled the high female voter turn-out 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. We did not want to ignore uneducated women so we decided to explain the importance of *Sada's* messages to these women. After they learned about voting they went and registered themselves. We worked with them and the day of the elections all the area was blue because of all the women wearing blue *chadoris* (veils). It was like a women's army.

Our women respondents expressed their happiness about being able to vote, crediting the *Sada* as being an important influence: "We went to the voting center and voted. The *Sada* helped us decide to vote....We didn't know we could vote earlier." Our women respondents were also grateful that their families, including their husbands, fathers and brothers, let them vote. A male

respondent in Parwan Province emphasized that the *Sada* helped convince several men to allow their wives to vote. With a proud and beaming smile, he announced: “Not just my wife, but all the women in my village voted.”

Family and Community Dialogue. Collective listening to the *Sada* spurred dialogue in several Afghan families and communities on various social issues, ranging from forced marriage of young girls to the right of women to work outside of their homes. After learning about their rights, several of our respondents talked to male family members about enacting these rights. For instance, in Parwan Province, several women told us that after listening to the *Sada* they “talked to the men and told them we need to take part in elections.”

Collective listening led to dialogue and consciousness raising about women’s civic rights and responsibilities. Shahjahan, a trainer and distributor of *Sadas* 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.” Shahjahan told us that that most women, including her, did not initially fully understand the concept of elections. However, after listening to the *Sada* she learned “how we should choose a candidate and vote. And after learning this I explained this to other women in the Province.”

A consistent theme in our interviews was countering the practice of early marriage and forced engagements. Several young girls and women’s narratives suggested that after listening to the *Sada* they gained confidence to speak up against forced engagements. Daughters typically had no say in deciding who they will marry, and rarely spoke up against this oppressive practice. The male head of the household usually decided whom the girl would marry, and even if the groom was an older man or one who was disabled, the girl had no choice but to accept. However, after listening to the *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 the *Sada*...Before that I could not discuss such things with the elders. Before getting the *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 the *Sada*, everybody -- our father, mother, brothers -- understood our human rights. Now I discuss these issues

with my family and my father. When he said he wanted to get me engaged to a person who is not educated and about 40 to 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.

A male respondent in Paktya Province told us about an incident in his village in which a young girl's engagement was transacted by her father to pay off a personal loan. As per tradition, the girl thought she had no choice but to comply. However, when she heard the *Sada*, she talked to her parents about it and refused to be given away. The *Sada* changed the course of her life.

Niloufar, a 19 year old woman from Parwan, provided a powerful account of how the *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 the *Sada* I told them I would marry only after finishing high school." Her fiancé's mother was present when we interviewed Niloufar, and she told us that she agreed with and respected Niloufar's decision.

As mentioned previously, in Afghan culture, girls do not find their own spouse, and find it extremely difficult to tell their parents if they have a fondness for someone. However, after listening to the *Sada*, some young girls felt emboldened to have a conversation on this topic with their parents. As 17-year-old Farishta from Parwan Province noted: "Now it is very easy to talk to our parents about whom we want to, or don't want to, be engaged to." Farishta's mother, who was also participating in the group discussion, seconded what her daughter said and told us that she would not force her daughter into a marriage against her wishes. However, she added that if girls chose their own spouse and there were problems in the marriage, the girl would bear the responsibility for that decision. This decision-making process not only increased the rights of the young women, but also the responsibility that comes from making decisions.

The *Sada* also spurred family dialogue on the issue of women working to supplement the family income. A respondent from Logar noted: "After listening to the *Sada's* program, I told my husband that I wanted to work either outside, or in the house as a tailor, or another trade that can be done at home. He told me that I could work inside the house."

Talk is often not only a precursor to change but in itself is a form of empowerment when previously "muted" selves gain a voice and are able to

talk. As a female *Sada* distributor in Paktya Province poignantly stated: “I was so excited when I heard the *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.”

In essence, our analysis suggests that the *Sada* facilitated dialogue, 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 enabled, in part, to participate as equals with men in both public and private realms.

Clearly, women’s use of the *Sada* led to widespread dissemination of women’s rights and their civic responsibilities, raising possibilities for gender transformations in other aspects of social and community life. Given the gender sensitive approach of VFH’s *Sada* program in Afghanistan, in the next section we specifically assess: (1) how gender concerns were mainstreamed into the project; (2) how the project facilitated varied levels of women’s empowerment; and (3) the effectiveness of the project in addressing gender needs.



Widows outside the Women’s Center in Kapisa Province

A Gender Analysis of *Sada's* Use

A gender framework situates women's needs and concerns within social relationships, recognizing women's lower status as a consequence of unequal power relationships between men and women. Gender also deals with the way a person's sex determines how they are socially valued and the culturally accepted roles they are expected to perform. Gender roles are recognized as socially determined, dynamic, and culturally situated, and therefore open to change (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1993; Oakley, 1972). Unequal gender relations affect social change efforts as men tend to control material and household resources including information (Kabeer, 1994; Gurumurthy, 2004; Hafkin, 2002). Further, the gendered division of labor, coupled with restrictions on women's mobility, prevents women from participating equally in social change activities (Gurumurthy, 2004; Rathgeber, 2000).



Male *Sada* listeners in Parwan Province.

A close on-the-ground observation of VFH's *Sada* program in Afghanistan, and a careful reading of our respondents' interview transcripts, suggests, unequivocally, that gender was a key concern during all stages of the *Sada* project. Gender concerns and women's needs and aspirations were brought to the center from the margins. Several measures were taken to ensure that women could equitably receive not just the *Sada* device, but also its messages. If the *Sada* had only been given to Afghan women, or if men and women had received different content on their respective *Sadas*, the overall effect may have been compromised and its usefulness questioned. However,

by providing the same content to both men and women, the *Sada* managed to pro-actively neutralize this potential conflict. Table 2 provides an overview of how gender was mainstreamed into the various stages of the *Sada* project in Afghanistan.

Table 2: Gender Mainstreaming in VFH’s Afghan *Sada* Project.

<i>Project Stages</i>	<i>Gender Mainstreaming</i>
Planning	Considered women as key beneficiaries of the outcomes.
	Considered the nature of gender relationships in Afghanistan and the potential impacts (both positive and negative) on gender relations of distributing the <i>Sada</i> to women.
	Focused on women’s rights without alienating men.
Design	Different colored <i>Sadas</i> for men (grey) and women (pink) ensured that the <i>Sadas</i> reached an equal number of men and women.
	Developed content that specifically addressed women’s needs and promoted gender equality.
Implementation	Partnered with Ministry of Women’s Affairs for training and distribution of <i>Sadas</i> .
	Organized training sessions with women to ensure that women knew how to operate the device.
	Involved both female and male distributors to ensure the <i>Sada</i> reached both groups.
Evaluation	A gender-sensitive evaluation, both quantitative and qualitative, was commissioned to assess the impact of the project on women.

Although the message content had a strong focus on women’s rights, male listeners became sensitized to these issues and enthusiastically supported women’s aspirations and rights. Traditional gender roles were in part transformed as more women asked for, and took on, income-generating activities both inside and outside of their homes. In a war-torn and resource-poor country, the pressures on men to support the family and fulfill traditional “masculine roles” become intensified, thereby strengthening and sanctioning women’s desires to contribute economically to their family. Further, by

promoting women's rights, VFH's *Sada* project addressed the power relations between Afghan men and women. Women, in part, claimed their rights at home, took part in community activities, and participated in electing their political representatives.

A gender framework, such as that observed in this *Sada* initiative in Afghanistan, ultimately empowers women while gradually changing 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, Singhal, & Papa, 2006; UNDP, 1995). Empowerment is both the end result and the process through which people gain more control over their lives and have 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.

This present research team believes it is useful to understand the relationship between information and women's empowerment. To do so, we assess how the *Sada* impacted Afghan women's empowerment through the dissemination of information, drawing largely upon the Women's Empowerment Framework developed by Sara Longwe, and widely adopted by UNICEF (1994) as an appropriate approach to assess the mainstreaming of gender in projects. According to this framework, empowerment occurs at five levels: (1) welfare; (2) access; (3) awareness raising; (4) participation; and (5) control. People become more empowered as they progress through these various stages. Table 3 summarizes the various levels of empowerment that the *Sada* facilitated.

Table 3: The Levels and Characteristics of Empowerment Associated with *Sada* Use Among Afghan Women.

<i>Levels of Empowerment</i>	<i>Characteristics of Empowerment</i>	<i>Sada's Facilitative Role in Empowerment</i>
1. Welfare	Addresses basic needs of women (e.g. nutrition & health), 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.
2. Access	Women have equal access to resources (e.g. education, credit, information). Equal access enables access to other resources (e.g. credit leads to better healthcare), 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.
3. Awareness-raising	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.
4. Participation	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.
5. Control	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 parliamentary elections. Women joined the workforce (e.g. tailoring). Women decided to educate their children, especially girls. Girls were allowed more say on decisions regarding their marriage.

Drawing upon the gender planning framework developed by Caroline Moser (1989, 1993), our analysis also revealed that the *Sada* addressed Afghan women's needs (comprised of strategic and practical needs) as well as their gender concerns. Strategic needs deal with women's subordination to men and their unequal social, political, and legal status. Addressing strategic needs challenge and transform the unequal relationship between men and women and promote equality. By providing access to information and encouraging women to vote, to be educated, and to join the paid labor force, VFH's *Sada* initiative addressed Afghan women's strategic needs. Practical needs are women's perceived immediate needs, such as earning an income, food, housing, and child and health care. These needs arise at the household level and deal with women's productive and reproductive roles. The *Sada's* content on nutrition, the right to work, and health addresses women's daily practical needs. Further, VFH's *Sada* initiative also addressed broader gender concerns by focusing on issues where gender discrimination and gender gaps have historically existed, such as in the realms of education, political participation, presence in the labor force, and health care.

Conclusion

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 clearly supports that the *Sada* was highly relevant to women's needs. The data strongly suggests that the *Sada* was also a highly effective medium to reach out to rural and largely uneducated Afghan women. The *Sada* entailed no material costs for these women, could be listened to while engaging in household tasks, and did not require women to travel out of 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.

The project's key strength is that the device is particularly well-suited to reach out to non-literate audiences. Though information and communication technology projects 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.

The gender impact of a communication project is not measured solely by the number of women the program reached but also by how the program

affected existing gender relations. Our analysis suggests ample evidence of Afghan women challenging and resisting existing social norms, and, where possible, demanding a more equitable social structure. Noticeably, VFH's Afghan *Sada* project went beyond the welfare stage of women's empowerment.

While the *Sada* content was gauged as being relevant, the format and sub-text of the content – such as the humor, the dramas, and even certain sound effects – left a lasting impression on the audiences. Clearly both the medium and the message were well received by adults, but children's enthusiasm and interest in the *Sada* suggests possibilities for children's programs.

Our data also suggests that engaging information, often referred to as entertainment-education (or edutainment), can play a key role in spurring interpersonal conversations and facilitate empowerment (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). To further augment the role of collective listening, future *Sada* content might consider incorporating epilogues at the end of segments to provide cues for reflection, discussion, and action by audience members. Epilogues, especially in the form of questions, enable listeners to more critically reflect on the messages, and to discuss them, thereby increasing the impact of the program.

In the future, there may be possibilities to move beyond positioning the women as mere recipients of information, enabling them to have more input, control and ownership over the disseminated information. 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 outcomes (Rathgeber, 1990).

Though information dissemination has been criticized by some because it views women as passive beneficiaries (Melkote & Steeves, 2001), VFH's *Sada* project reaffirms the role of information dissemination in gender and development initiatives. The respondents' voices provide ample support that information served as a catalyst for Afghan women to realize other societal rights, thus contributing to empowerment.

However, this research may have certain limitations. Our inability to speak directly to women in their homes forced us to speak mostly to women who frequented the Women's Center. These women are likely to be more

motivated, independent and aware of their rights. 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 as they had received it between four to six weeks prior to the study; hence their accounts could be colored by the novelty of the device. Lastly, multiple large scale campaigns have been concurrently underway in Afghanistan to address women's rights and civic responsibilities, therefore making it difficult to isolate the impact of the *Sada* initiative on peoples' knowledge and attitudes.

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

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Endnotes

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² Unless noted otherwise, photographs are taken from the authors' personal files and from VFH, Lexington, KY.